New Faces, Old Bones
by RLeeSmith

Summary

It’s true: Freddy Lives. And Ana Stark soon realizes that she can live with knowing that. The pizzeria has become her home, and Freddy and the other animatronics have become her family. But there are still plenty of other secrets left for Ana to discover, some of them buried below the pizzeria itself…and the worst of them wants to be found.

This is Part Four of a 5-Part Series.
For Part One, please read Girl on the Edge of Nowhere.

TRIGGER WARNING! This book contains strong adult themes, including adult language, drug and alcohol references, depictions of child abduction, violence towards children and adults, graphic gore violence and sexual content. You have been warned.

Five Nights At Freddy’s is the creation of Scott Cawthon. The characters of Freddy, Bonnie, Chica, Foxy, Mangle, Toy Freddy, Toy Bonnie, Toy Chica, Mike Schmidt, Jeremy Fitzgerald, Fredbear, Springtrap, Plushtrap, the Puppet, Balloon Boy, and the Purple Guy, as well as Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria, belong to him. Everything else is a product of my own imagination and no similarity to actual events, locations, or people is intended or should be inferred. Do not reproduce, repost or copy any part of this story without my permission.
“Hello, hello? Um, this is just a reminder about company policy concerning the safe room. The safe room is reserved for equipment and/or other properties not being currently used and as a back-up safety location for employees only. It is not a break room, it should not be considered a place for employees to hide…Um, you know…I always wondered what was in all those empty heads back there…”

∗ ∗ ∗

January 8, 1988

Snow fell over Mammon—fat, fluffy, white flakes to cover up the last dirty layer and make it all new again. Impatient children tried to play in it, slipping in slush and scraping their fingers on the crust of last week’s snow if they weren’t wearing mittens. Fathers and sons trudged around their yards, taking down lights and sparkly reindeer now, while these gently falling flakes could still be considered ‘good’ weather for it. Mothers and daughters kept busy on the inside, packing away decorations, maybe stirring pots of thick cocoa or fragrant cider in their kitchens to warm cold hands when the work and play was done.

Ana stood in the driveway with her arms hugged tight around the crinkly paper bag holding her clothes, watching it all and trying not to cry. Aunt Easter was late. She, who had never ever ever been late, who had sometimes been there before Ana was even out of bed, waking her with whispers and kisses, bundling her into her clothes and then out to the car where David waited, and they’d all go together up to the stone house on its high, lonely mountain and pretend they were a family until it was time for Ana to go home. That was how it should be, how it had always been. Something bad must have happened, if Aunt Easter wasn’t coming.

Was it her fault? She had spent the whole winter vacation at Aunt Easter’s, almost two weeks, but she didn’t think she’d been bad. She couldn’t always tell, but she didn’t think so. It had been a good visit, full of laughs and hugs, with a tree and lights and special dinner on fancy plates and opening presents on the floor while Aunt Easter and her friend sat together in one chair and watched them. She had cried when she had to go home again, secret tears into her pillow after David was asleep…had Aunt Easter heard her and gotten sick of her whining? David hadn’t been at school since Wednesday, or at least, he hadn’t come by the kiddie-garden playground at recess to see her. Was he mad at her too? What had she done wrong? Had she been messy, smelly, noisy, a bad girl, a stupid bitch, a rotten little shit? Whatever it was, she was sorry and would say so as many times as Aunt Easter wanted if only she had the chance.

Behind her, she could hear angry noises in the house Ana still thought of as new even though she’d been living there ever since coming home from the hospital in the summer. When the front door opened, she did not look around. Her mother didn’t always like to be ignored, but never liked to be stared at. After a long, tense moment, the door shut again, but only just long enough for Ana to sigh out her relief. Then it banged open and her mother’s feet came crunching out over the broken snow she had never shoveled.

“Come on,” she said, catching Ana’s arm.
Ana managed not to cry out—no one wanted to hear her whining—but she lost her grip on her bag and when she tried to grab it, the paper tore, spilling shirts and pants and underwear all over the driveway. She couldn’t stop to pick it up, either. She could only watch as her clothes soaked up the slush or blew away on the wind, knowing she’d be punished for ruining them later. Right now, her mother had her, urging her along with painful yanks and dragging her when she slipped on the ice that hid under the snow, and so Ana had to go.

Ana’s mother reached the car, opened the door, shoved Ana inside and slammed the door on Ana’s sneakered foot.

Caught by surprise, Ana stupidly let out a howl of pain. A few people taking down their Christmas stuff looked around, but they all went back to work when Ana’s mother opened the car door again and started punching, screaming at her to shut up, shut up, shut her stupid fat fucking face or she’d give her something to cry about. One kid in the next yard began crying, but his dad took him inside. Everyone else just kept winding up Christmas lights and putting them in boxes. The snow fell, muffling sound, covering everything that was dirty and broken in a pretty blanket of white.

At last, Ana managed to be quiet enough and her mother stopped hitting her and shut the door again. Ana uncurled and sat, dragging the seatbelt down to clip across her hips and holding it so her fingers had something to clutch and could not fly up on their own and try to cover her face when her mother got in the car. If she did that, her mother would only ask her if she wanted to get hit, is that what she wanted, and no, Ana did not.

Her mother got in and started the car. “Shut up,” she said, although Ana hadn’t said anything.

She drove. Ana’s pounding heart lurched when her mother made the first turn out of the cul-de-sac, then broke at the second turn and bled away. She did not know where her mother was taking her, but it was not to Aunt Easter’s house.

Ana sat and watched the snow fall through her window. The foot that had been slammed in the door throbbed, feeling hot and so much bigger than it was. The other foot ached with cold from standing in wet sneakers in the snow. She shivered once before the heater warmed up enough to blow hot air, attracting her mother’s eye, but managed to hold very still after that and eventually, her mother had to go back to watching the road.

They drove all the way through town, past the mall and Gallifrey’s, past the school Ana had just started attending and had already begun to dread, past the park where men took down the holiday lights and changed red and green bulbs in the streetlamps back to white. All the way out to the canyon, Ana’s mother drove, and still kept going, turning off the paved road onto one that was gravel beneath its blanket of fresh snow.

Finally, the car met with a closed gate blocking the road and Ana’s mother had to stop. There was a tiny house by the side of the road, just closet-sized, with a narrow window and no door, but it was empty. Beside it was a metal box on a post with buttons and a speaker, so that it looked a little like a radio and a little like a phone. Ana’s mother rolled down her window and pushed a button. As soon as a voice answered, Ana’s mother said to open the gate. The voice asked for a name.

“Oh, I guarantee I’m not on any fucking list, but you tell him it’s Melanie Stark and you open this fucking gate,” Ana’s mother said, slapping the steering wheel; Ana held very still and did not look at her.

The voice said it was sorry without sounding sorry at all and told her to come back when she had an appointment. It didn’t say anything for while after that, no matter how many times Ana’s mother pushed the button or shouted, but eventually, it did come on again to say that unless she
left, the police would be called.

At that, Ana’s mother started up the car and backed it up, but only just around the first corner. Then she drove off on the side of the road and got out. “Come on,” she said to Ana, but Ana couldn’t get out of her seat belt fast enough and her mother had to come back and get her. “Why can’t you ever just do what I fucking tell you?” she screamed, all slapping hands and hard-shoe kicks, but then she just walked away, saying, “Come on,” again.

Ana struggled through the snow in her mother’s footsteps and when they came to the gate, Ana’s mother picked her up and pushed her through the curly bars where they were widest-apart. It hurt a little, but Ana did not make a sound. Once her mother had climbed over, they kept walking.

They walked forever, like heroes in a fairytale, miles and miles uphill against the wind as it howled up from the canyon, blowing snow and chips of ice against Ana’s slap-hot face, and at the end of that climbing road, Ana’s mother just stopped. Ana raised her head and first only saw her mother, white-faced except where the wind had scraped her cheeks bright red, staring. So she looked too and saw a huge house like blocks of ice thrown all together, ten thousand windows and hardly any walls, all corners and slants and straight lines. There were no Christmas lights on the eaves, no Christmas trees in any of the windows, and that was fine; Ana looked and saw only a snowy desert stretching out forever, an empty world in which there had never been a Christmas.

Ana’s mother started walking again, giving Ana a yank to get her moving before dragging her to the door. She did not knock, just opened it and went inside, pulling Ana with her and not letting her even wipe her feet. She had to make a mess, leaving dirty snow to melt on the carpets and the floor as her mother pulled her along.

Ana’s first impression of the house was that it was cursed. She wasn’t sure yet if she believed in fairy tales and curses, but she had heard the stories and if curses were real, then the house was cursed. It seemed dark, although the lights were on. It seemed cold, although it was much warmer than it was outside. It seemed empty, even though Ana could hear voices.

And her mother could hear them too. She listened, turning in the empty hall, then pulled Ana with her to the stairs and up them. There were many doors, open and closed, many halls branching off in every direction, many echoes knocking on Ana’s ears as she ran at her mother’s side deep into the cursed castle. She saw someone at last, although maybe not a real person. He was dressed like a cartoon, all black and white, and he seemed as surprised to see them as Ana was to see him.

“You can’t be here,” he said, walking swiftly toward them. “I will call the police.”

Ana’s mother let go of Ana’s hand to push him out of her way, hissing, “You call them! You go right the fuck ahead. Where is he?” She opened the door the man had just come through, revealing another room with several men around a long table, except for one who was standing by the window. They all looked around at Ana’s mother, and some at Ana herself, and their faces were all the same frowning face.

“You can’t be here,” he said, walking swiftly toward them. “I will call the police.”

Ana’s mother let go of Ana’s hand to push him out of her way, hissing, “You call them! You go right the fuck ahead. Where is he?” She opened the door the man had just come through, revealing another room with several men around a long table, except for one who was standing by the window. They all looked around at Ana’s mother, and some at Ana herself, and their faces were all the same frowning face.

Ana’s mother stepped inside, pulling Ana with her, and looked around, but there was nothing to see. There was a huge TV on the wall, but it wasn’t on. There were no bookshelves, no plants, no furniture apart from the table and the chairs surrounding it, not even pictures on the dark wooden walls. Some of the men had briefcases or pads of paper, but they weren’t doing anything with them. The only things to attract Ana’s eye were the lamps arranged in a straight line down the middle of the table; they had long narrow necks and tall shades of a curious shape and color—a smoky pale yellow, but shiny with all sorts of pinks and blues hiding in the light. There was something carved somehow into the glass.
Ana moved closer, unnoticed by her mother or any of the men, to get a better look. Fruit. Grapes. They looked like bubbles floating there, and with the light and the yellow color and the shape and all, it reminded her of champagne commercials that had been all over the TV lately. The lamps even looked like the odd, tall glasses people in the commercials drank from. Ana had never seen glasses like that in real life, only on TV. Her mother mostly drank from bottles.

“Where is he?” Ana’s mother asked, looking at the men. “Where is the son of a bitch?”

Several men made angry-man sounds, but one of them said, “If you find him, tell him to get his ass up here. What?” he demanded as some of the others turned their frowns on him. “This is ridiculous! He can’t just hide from this! It’s not blowing over, it’s blowing up! My phone hasn’t stopped ringing all week!” Fumbling at his belt, he unhooked a small plastic box and tossed it on the table, saying, “If I turned that thing on, it would fucking explode! Does he even know the can of worms he opened with that stunt? Every goddamn mommy in town has a lawyer claiming her kid is traumatized for life!”

“Hey, you go to Disneyland and see Walt chop up Mickey with an axe—”

“Whose side are you on?”

“That’s nothing. We can handle that. What we have to worry about is the retroactive fallout. Right now, everyone who ever so much as stubbed their toe in that restaurant is talking to the press. And the Fitzgerald kid’s lawyers are throwing more and more bills at us even though the kid’s dad won’t keep his fucking mouth shut, non-disclosure agreement be damned, and who is this Schmidt asshole anyway? Did you see the story in the Watch last month?”

“The what?”

“The Watch, the Hurricane Watch. Half a page in a four-page newspaper. He says he’s got a source, an inside source, talking all about the ‘conditions’ at the restaurant. You seriously didn’t see it?”

“No, I didn’t see it. No one saw it. Four pages, Bob. Calm the fuck down.”

“Shit like that spreads, Parker. Don’t tell me to calm down. We need to find this guy and his fucking source and shut them both the fuck up any way we can! Priority fucking one!”

“Well, sheesh, don’t tell the old man. He’ll pay the little asshole off and every reporter in the state will be cranking out ghost stories by tomorrow. Get Metzger to handle it.”

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do all week?!” the first man interrupted, actually picking up his glass and throwing it. He threw it at the wall, far from Ana, but her little nerve broke with the glass and she bolted down the hall, away from his furious shout: “Where is he? Where is anyone? Why doesn’t anyone in this godforsaken town answer their fucking phone?”

Ana ran. No one noticed. Not the men, arguing with each other. Not the black-and-white man telling Ana’s mother she had to leave. Not even her mother, who always noticed when Ana did bad things and nothing made her madder than having to chase her. Ana ran and probably would have run out into the snow, which was blowing thicker and faster and might have easily swallowed up any useless little girl who was stupid enough to run headlong into its open mouth, but she turned the wrong way off the stairs and got lost deep in the house.

She knew she was lost, but she kept running, knowing there would be a door eventually, and eventually, there was.
It was a glass door, like the one that opened on the back porch at Aunt Easter’s house. This house didn’t have a porch, but it had a long, curvy sunken place that would be a swimming pool if it was summer. The cover was blue and snow had blown up over it in snaky lines like waves on frozen water. Empty furniture was arranged around it—tables and chairs and those long ones like Aunt Easter had on her back porch, where she and the man who sometimes visited liked to lay down together. Snow had melted on the metal lines of the cushionless chairs and the wind blew through them, forming icicles that curled up and outward in defiance of gravity like the spikes on fairy thrones. On the other side of the snowy pool was a little house, like a playhouse at the park, dark and empty, as cursed as the big house in which Ana now stood.

She stared a long time, drinking in the sight of this secret place, forgetting her mother, forgetting even Aunt Easter. She was alone here, alone in all the world, alone in this ice castle at the edge of the snowy desert, and in that moment, all was well.

Then she heard movement in another room—kitchen sounds—and a door opened, throwing light across the floor. Ana ducked behind a curtain and held her breath as shoes, light and hard like her mother’s, crossed the room, each step echoed by rattling dishes. When the person was gone, Ana snuck away, leaving nothing but the smudge of her small hands on the glass and the slowly fading puff of her last breath.

Her sneakers made clop-clop-clopping sounds as she walked, too loud. She took them off, holding them by their dirty rainbow laces, and walked in her bare feet. The floor was cool where it was wood, cold where stone, warm and soft where rugs lay over it, and Ana learned the feel of all three because she was very, very lost.

‘I will never ever ever find my way out,’ she thought and the thought did not frighten her. ‘I will be a ghost in this house and stay here forever.’

And as if time had opened up a window and let her peer into that oddly not unhappy future, Ana heard a low, sobbing moan.

She stopped there in the hall to listen, wary but not fearful. She was not afraid of ghosts. She still believed in them at that tender age, but they were only air, after all. You could see right through them, walk through them. Their smoky hands could not catch or slap. They might be scary to look at or hear, but like scary things on TV, they could not really hurt her and so she was not afraid. She listened and when she started walking again, it was to follow the sounds she heard. If it was a ghost, she wanted to see it. She had forgotten being lost as readily as she forgotten her mother and now knew only that not even David had ever seen a ghost and just wait until she told him she had. David was older than her by a whole year and he got all the firsts. Except for firsts like first stitches, first cast, first night in the hospital—all the bad firsts, Ana got. David got the good ones. First ghost was a good first, though, and Ana wanted it.

At the end of a long hall with snowy windows on one side, Ana found a door. It was partly open, letting light from the hall fall in and those sobbing sounds fall out. They sounded awfully solid, now that she was here. For the first time, Ana considered the possibility that she had not followed a ghost after all, but she could not imagine what else it could be, so she went in.

The room was dark. The windows were shut away behind heavy curtains and no lights were lit. The only source of illumination was the broad yellow-white stripe that came in from the hall, cutting a zig-zagging line across the floor and up the opposite wall. Like walking into a theater after the movie had started, it took her a little time for her eyes to adjust.

The room was strangely familiar, more in the feel of it than its looks. At Aunt Easter’s house, on the second story, at the end of the hall, was a forbidden room much like this one: dark wood all
around, tall shelves full of heavy books, chair and sofa cushioned with uncomfortable leather, and no TV or toys or anything to really do except sit there and be in a room.

But no, there were toys here, Ana saw with surprise. Here and there among the blocks of books on the shelves were stuffed animals and plastic figures, not left carelessly out, but arranged, some of them in glass cases, reminding her of the pretty plates in Aunt Easter’s china hutch. Those plates were not to be eaten off and these toys were not to be played with. Yet they were toys, for-real ones and not just grown-up things that looked like toys. Ana knew this because David had all the same ones and she played with them all the time when she was at his house. They were from Freddy’s.

All this, Ana absorbed in just a few seconds, and then she saw the man.

He was sitting in a chair in the darkest corner of the room, and if it had not been for the sounds he made, she might have missed him altogether. He was bent over far enough to have been tying his shoes, although his shoes were the grown-up man kind that had no laces. His other clothes were as grown-up, the sort Ana only saw in real life on those rare occasions that Aunt Easter took them out driving past the church on Sundays. In fact, just looking at him, Ana’s eyes took in details that her vocabulary had no way to express yet apart from ‘rich,’ ‘important,’ and ‘not a ghost,’ but at the moment, he was none of those things to her. He was only the crying man.

Ana had seen very few men in her day-to-day life. She knew boys, loosely categorized: ‘babies’, who, being babies, cried as often as they did anything else and so hardly merited notice; ‘little,’ meaning younger than David, who cried often, but for predictable reasons; ‘boys,’ the basic model, being within a year or two in either direction of David’s own age, and for whom tears were already a ‘girl’ thing to be teased for and made ashamed of; ‘big,’ meaning boys who had begun to stretch tall and get mean, who only cried if they were made to cry, and were then mercilessly mocked for it; and ‘very big,’ meaning those who attended Blackwood High and could not grow beards although many tried, who had outgrown playgrounds and bicycles and especially tears. As for grown men, huge and solid, she knew only one, and that one could no more cry than he could shout or hit. That one was only ever happy.

This man was crying and although he did it in a dark room away from other people, he was not really trying to hide it. He sobbed with his whole body, shivering, coughing, rocking. One hand wiped at his eyes. The other he kept clutched at his chest, as a small child will cup a scraped knee or pinched finger, holding what hurt the most.

Ana had seen very few men in her day-to-day life. She knew boys, loosely categorized: ‘babies’, who, being babies, cried as often as they did anything else and so hardly merited notice; ‘little,’ meaning younger than David, who cried often, but for predictable reasons; ‘boys,’ the basic model, being within a year or two in either direction of David’s own age, and for whom tears were already a ‘girl’ thing to be teased for and made ashamed of; ‘big,’ meaning boys who had begun to stretch tall and get mean, who only cried if they were made to cry, and were then mercilessly mocked for it; and ‘very big,’ meaning those who attended Blackwood High and could not grow beards although many tried, who had outgrown playgrounds and bicycles and especially tears. As for grown men, huge and solid, she knew only one, and that one could no more cry than he could shout or hit. That one was only ever happy.

For a long time, Ana only watched, fascinated in spite of her unease, the crying man as captivating in his own way as a dead lizard teeming with ants. She had the feeling he was not a stranger, although she did not know him. Her recognition came from a deeper place than just as someone she might have seen in town. It was as if she had dreamed him to life. ‘He sang to me once,’ she thought, but could not imagine where or how such a thing could have truly happened.

Then, deep in the house, she heard the slamming of a door and her mother’s shout, and fear gripped her. Ana had run, which was a bad thing, and there was nothing worse except to be found, as she must be found, but of all places, she could not be found here. The forbiddleness of the room was stamped into every surface. She was not sure what could be worse than to be hit and put back in the closet, but if little Ana had learned nothing else in her short life, it was that there was always something worse. She did not want her mother to find her here, so she had to make the crying man be quiet before her mother heard him.

Slipping further into the room, Ana closed the door. The man did not seem to hear the soft sound it made or her footsteps on the dark floorboards, but the next time his hand moved away from his eyes, he did notice the light that had come in from the hall was gone. He looked at the bookcases
where it had been, then turned his head and saw her.

He wasn’t just a man, but an old man. He was not very wrinkled, but the wrinkles he had were deep. They made crooked channels for his tears to travel in, like the miniature canyons that formed out in the desert after a hard rain. And although he had mostly stopped crying when he saw Ana, at least so loudly, the tears kept coming. He did not appear to notice at first (was that how it was with boys? Did it break something inside them to never cry when they were younger, so that when they got old, the tears came out through their cracks, whether they meant to or not?), but after one of the tears made it over his chin and dripped onto his neck, he fumbled out a small sort of napkin from his jacket pocket and wiped his eyes. He couldn’t do it very well. His hands were shaking.

Ana went to him as Aunt Easter had come to her so many times in the past and took the napkin from him. It was cloth, not paper, and felt very fine in her hands, but it had been his idea, so she guessed it was okay to keep using it.

She reached up, cupping the back of his neck just above his stiff white collar, and he let her pull him down where she could better reach. She did not shush him or sing the Cheer-Up song—that seemed inappropriate to do to a grown-up to her small-child sensibilities—but she wiped his cheek, blowing on his tears as Aunt Easter blew on hers when she cried.

He did not speak either, only watched her. Up close, she could see his eyes were pink from crying, but also very blue—a pale, painted-on shade of blue, brighter and bluer than David’s eyes. His skin beneath the tears and wrinkles was also pale, possibly the palest she’d ever seen in Mammon, where families gardened and children played outside and sunburns were a part of life, no matter how much banana oil your aunt rubbed on you. His hair was boy-short and unbrushed, blond where it was not white, with pale specks of stubble on his jaw that made a raspy sound under her napkin. That, and the smaller sounds of breath, his and hers, were all she could hear. He smelled of good smells—laundry smells and perfume smells, different from the ones her aunt used, but still good. She had only ever been this close to one other man, that man with whom she had always felt safe, and so she felt safe with this one, too, even if he was a stranger.

When she was done wiping and he was done crying, Ana gave him back his napkin. As he folded it into a triangle and put it away, she looked around, then took down a stuffed Freddy from the only shelf she could sort of reach (she had to climb onto the wide arm of a chair) and gave it to him. “Oh,” he said, accepting it. His voice was deep and rumbly in his chest, almost like the real Freddy, or as real as he was to Ana on the tapes Aunt Easter made for her. That sense of dream-like recognition grew stronger. He touched the tiny hat sewn to the soft toy’s head and looked at her seriously. “Thank you.”

Ana nodded, once more aware that she was not where she should be now that the man’s crying had been attended to and the immediate threat had passed. She turned to go, and at once, he reached out for her, not to catch and shake, but merely to touch the tips of his fingers to the back of her hand and swiftly take them away again.

“Did your aunt bring you?”

He pronounced it oddly, not like the bug, but to rhyme with ‘haunt’. Nevertheless, Ana knew what he meant and shook her head ‘no’. It did not occur to her to wonder how he knew Aunt Easter. Children are, by their nature, egocentric creatures. As prodigious as she might be in other areas of her development, Ana was yet of an age when she believed everyone she met knew everyone she knew. And so she did not doubt he would also know what it meant when she whispered, “Mama.”

He did not look afraid—grown-ups did not get afraid—but he looked at her like he knew why she
was. Again, he reached, this time shifting the curtain beside him at the same time so that the snow-bright day struck her in the face, blinding her. He looked at her as if she were pictures in one of the storybooks Aunt Easter read to her—Hansel and Gretel, Red Riding Hood, Rumplestiltskin—and when he touched her cheek, his thin, oddly rough fingers unerringly brushed across the place that hurt the most.

“Does she hit you?” he asked and somehow that was scarier than any other question he could have asked, just because he knew to ask. No matter how urgently Ana shook her head, the old man’s frown only deepened. He knew already. He knew the secret and he knew the lie.

Ana pulled away from him and fled to the door, but when she opened it, she could hear her mother, not close but not far, shouting and swearing. She hesitated, afraid to stay and feel her lies pulled out, afraid to go and meet her mother.

“Don’t run,” the man said, still seated, making no effort to chase her if she did. “You mustn’t run from monsters. If you have hope, then hide. If you have none, then fight, but you must never run.”

Ana looked back at him, standing tensely on her bare toes, ready to bolt. “You’re not a monster,” she said, whispering so her mother could not hear.

“I’m not? Well.” The old man looked down into the Freddy-bear’s plastic eyes. When he looked up again, the lines on his face seemed deeper. “That’s good to know.”

“There are no such things as monsters,” she said, as Aunt Easter had told her, but her own voice lifted slightly on the last word and shook. She did not think Aunt Easter would lie to her, and yet, every story had a witch or a dragon or a wolf in it for the endangered child to either outwit or be eaten by. Why should Aunt Easter teach Ana to beware what did not exist?

“Of course there are,” said the man, not in a scary way, but only confused, as if she had said there were no such things as giraffes.

“Aunt Easter says there aren’t,” Ana insisted, again with that slight quaver.

“She should know better. But then…perhaps she’s never seen one. They hide, you see.” The old man’s pale eyes fell back into shadow as he let the curtain drop. “They are very good at hiding. They dress themselves in human skins and wear masks made of human faces and they only take them off when they are about to eat you.”

Ana stared at him, the door forgotten even with the knob in her hand.

“Am I frightening you?”

She shook her head and it was true. She was not frightened. Neither was she angry at Aunt Easter for keeping this secret. If anything, she was relieved. What wasn’t real could lurk forever in closets and under beds; if monsters were really real, they could be pulled out into the light and killed. But she was unsure. Grown-ups did lie, after all.

“How do you know about monsters?” she asked. “Who told you they were real?”

“My father,” said the man.

“How did he know?” Ana pressed.

“He lived among them for many years. He knew them well, their speech and manners, and how they disguise themselves to pass as men. He lived too long among them, perhaps. He learned their
ways too well.” The old man was quiet for a moment, facing her but not looking at her, not really. After a while, he shifted and said, “My father taught me about monsters, that they are bigger and stronger and they will hurt you. Oh yes,” he said as Ana hugged herself. “Even children. Monsters are especially fond of hurting children. Do you know why?”

Ana shook her head.

“Because a child cannot fight and can rarely hold themselves still enough to hide. So they run. And monsters like to chase almost as much as they like to catch and eat. My father taught me that if I stand, the monster might still catch me, but it cannot chase me. And if you stand and face it, the monster might just crawl away. Monsters hate to see their true faces and of all things, they most hate to see themselves in your eyes.”

“Have you seen one?” Ana asked. “For real?”

“Oh yes. I’ve seen several, I should think, although I…I did not always see through their disguise. Yet I have seen a few, their true faces I mean.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill them?”

The shadows hiding his pale eyes seemed to grow bigger as he bent his head. “I’m told they died, but I…I’m not sure. Monsters tend not to die, you know, unless they are killed. They can be trapped, if you are very clever and very brave, but even the strongest trap will fail eventually. And monsters tend not to die.”

Out in the hall, Ana’s mother roared.

The old man looked at the door, then held out his hand. “Come here. Stand here with me, with us —” He moved the toy Freddy onto his knee, turned so that it seemed to be looking at her and holding out its own arm. “—and don’t flinch.”

Ana looked at the stuffed bear, its glass eyes and sewn-on smile. “He isn’t real.”

“But toys have power,” he told her intently. “Not on their own, I admit, but they have all the power a child can give them. So if you give him power, Ana, he will have it.” He moved the plushie higher on his knee; its handless arms opened wide, ready to take her in. “Come.”

She went, step by unsure step, and then dropped her shoes and ran to him, crashing against the arm of his chair. She buried her face against its cool skin and hugged its unwelcoming curves painfully to her narrow chest. The man petted her as she might a dog, then rested his hand on her shivering shoulder and just watched the door with her, the two of them waiting together in the dark to be found.

It wasn’t long in coming. Ana heard more voices, men’s voices, and then her mother’s rapid footsteps, hard shoes on hard floors. Doors opened and slammed shut, each one closer than the last.
The man’s hand on Ana’s shoulder squeezed, not to hurt her, but to comfort. “Stand,” he murmured. “Don’t flinch. Make her see herself in your eyes.”

The door burst open and there was her mother, black against the hall’s light. Her head swept side to side, then she backed away, and then she stopped and looked back in at them.

“What the hell…?” Her mother hit the wall until she found a lightswitch, then just looked at the two of them.

Ana shivered, but she stood and kept her eyes open wide.

“You know what? I don’t even care,” her mother said finally. “Do whatever you want with her. Where is he? Where is the motherfucker? I know he’s here. You tell him to talk to me!”

The man lifted his hand from Ana’s shoulder and shook it back and forth once at the black-and-white man coming up the hall behind her mother. The black-and-white man stopped, frowning, and went away. The hand returned its warmth and weight to Ana’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” said Ana’s mother, laughing as she watched the other man go. “The whole fucking town comes and goes when you whistle, doesn’t it? Well, I don’t. You think I’m afraid of you? I’m not afraid of you, you fucking queer!”

The idea that her mother was afraid of anyone or anything had never before occurred to her, but even at five, Ana knew that insisting on a thing was as good as admitting the opposite. She stared at her mother and at the man her mother feared; his eyes were still red from crying, but he did not blink as he faced her mother.

“We had a deal,” said Ana’s mother. “So you call your butt-buddy and tell him to get his cock out of my sister for five fucking minutes so she can pick this little bitch up. This was not the deal. I get weekends off! Every weekend! Do you hear me?”

“You don’t want her,” the man said. “Is that what you’re telling me, Melanie?”

Instantly, Ana’s mother’s entire demeanor changed, although Ana could not have said how. All she knew was that the anger withdrew, not cooled but wrapped up and hidden. “I never said that,” she said sullenly. “I said we had a deal and the deal was, I get child support and he gets visitations.” Her eyes darted to Ana. She reached out her hand, showing her teeth and her flashing, furious eyes. “Come here, honey.”

Ana didn’t move.

Ana’s mother took a step toward her, but stopped when the man stood up. She looked at him, laughing but still so angry. “What are you going to do?” she demanded. “Huh? What could you possibly do that’s worse than what you already did to me?”

“I am…heartily sorry—”

“You’re sorry?!”

—for what happened—”

“Oh, it happened, huh? It just happened?” Ana’s mother let out a shrieking peal of laughter. “No one knows how! It’s just one of those things that happened!”

“Melanie, I never—”
“You never!” her mother screamed. “You never! You never!”

“—meant,” the man said after a short silence, “for anything to happen to you.”

“Oh no! You didn’t mean it! You didn’t meeeeeean it! It was just an accident, huh?” In a few swift, long steps, she crossed the room, grabbed Ana by the wrist and yanked her arm up, shaking her as she sneered, “My unfortunate little accident!”

Ana forgot and let out a wail. Her arm had been out of the cast for a long time now, but her shoulder still hurt sometimes, especially when it got moved certain ways, and right now it was making a creaking sound like green sticks twisting.

The man seized her mother’s wrist and for a moment, it was the three of them locked together.

“You want her?” her mother asked, grinning. “Do you? So you can dress her up and bring her out at parties? Huh? Like you did to me?”

“I am sorry—”

“Right. Heartily sorry. Just so, so sorry.”

“—but I will not allow you—”

“Oh you won’t, huh? You won’t allow me. You allowed him, you allowed your friends, those laughing assholes, those goddamn animals…but not me, huh? Well, what are you going to do?” her mother asked, grinning. “Are you going to call the cops? And tell them what? What are you going to tell them that they don’t already know? I could beat the little bitch half to death in the middle of the damn street and as long as it’s only half to death, no one would give a shit. You think anybody in this fucking town cares what happens in my house? Huh? A Blaylock’s house? And what about what I could tell them about you? What about what happens in your house? Huh? About the parties you throw here for all your rich friends? Maybe you think no one will listen to me, but let me tell you something, motherfucker. Nobody gives a shit what happens to people like me until it’s people like you who are doing it. Then everybody wants to hear about it. Say goodbye to your money then. Say goodbye to your big house. Say goodbye to your restaurant and all your cute fucking toys. You think your rich friends will save you? They hate you more than I do. The whole fucking world has always been waiting for one good reason to take everything away from you.”

The man held her challenging stare and did not answer, but Ana felt something in him change, too. After a moment, he let her go. “Enough,” he said quietly. “Isn’t it enough? I’m tired, Melanie. I know you’re tired, too.”

“You don’t know me. You never knew me.” Her savage smile faltered and for a moment, even looking up at her, Ana didn’t know whether her mother was laughing or crying. “You…You son of a bitch, you did it all to someone you didn’t even know!”

“Let me fix it.”

“Fix it?! How the hell are you going to fix it?”

“Let me take care of you. Of both of you.”

“Oh sure. That’s all you want. Suddenly, after six fucking years, all you want is just to take care of me!”

“Things…have changed. Please. You can stay here, if you want.”
“Ha!”

“Or you can go away, anywhere, as far as you like—”

“I’m not going anywhere. I want you to see me. I want you to see me every day and know that I know what you did, what you let them all do!”

“I’m—”

“Sorry! You think that makes it right? You think that makes it even? You don’t give a shit about me! Why don’t you get to the point?” Ana’s mother yanked her arm up higher, until Ana’s toes left the carpet and all her weight hung on her creaking shoulder. “You want her! So? Just say it! Ask me how much I want for her!”

The man looked at Ana’s mother while Ana held her breath and just when her chest began to hurt, he said, “How much do you want?”

“Give me a million dollars!”

“Done.”

And just like that, the nightmare was over. This was her home now, and this was her father, and she would have a room with no closets and her very own refrigerator that was always full of her very own food, and when David came over, she would let him play with her toys and in the summer, they would swim together in her pool. She would never be hurt or scared or hungry again. It was over. She was saved.

But her mother just laughed and said, “Fifty million!”

“All right.”

Ana’s heart sank.

“A billion! One billion dollars and this house! This house and everything in it!”

“I need time to arrange that, but you’ll have it.”

“I’ll have it, huh? Just like that, I’ll have it? I! Don’t! Want it!” her mother screamed and threw Ana to the ground behind her, pointing with a shaking finger. “You don’t get her! I will drown her like a sack of kittens before I let you do what you did to me and reward yourself with her!”

Ana watched, wide-eyed, silent, as her mother covered her own face and cried in great, gulping hoarse breaths. The man reached out once, as if to touch her, and as quick as a snake, her mother uncoiled and slapped him.

The man had been hit before after all; he never flinched, never made a sound, just watched as Ana’s mother paced away, hitting lamps and vases and anything small that could break.

Ana lay clutching her throbbing shoulder and held herself very still.

At last, her mother turned around and said in almost a normal tone of voice, “Besides, you think anyone would let you within a hundred fucking feet of a child now? The whole fucking town thinks you’re crazy and they don’t know the half of it, but they will. They will know all about what you do with little girls on party night. You try to take her away from me, you just try, and I’ll make sure you and him and all your laughing friends spend the rest of your fucking lives in jail!”
“And you will lose your means.”

“Ha! I’ve been poor before. I’ll survive.” She paced some more, glanced at Ana, who huddled back and tried to be invisible, then looked at the old man and smiled with all her teeth. “Besides, I have something I can sell. I’ll get by just fine, so try me. And if you’re thinking about reaching into your wallet and pulling out a man with a gun, all I can say is, if I thought for one second you really had the balls, I’d snap the bitch’s neck right now! Ana, get over here!”

Ana, years of obedience beaten into her, went and let herself be seized, first by the arm and then by the throat.

The man took a step forward.

Ana’s mother lifted her higher, so that Ana’s bare toes hardly touched the floor, and her choking hand tightened. “You’d better be faster than I am,” she snarled. “Because I’ll do it. I will. I don’t give a fuck anymore.”

The man stopped.

The two of them stared at each other for a long time. Ana tried to breathe and could only make dry gagging sounds, but she did not struggle. She waited, tears of strain leaking in silence from her wide-open eyes.

“You think I won’t do it, don’t you?” Ana’s mother said through gritted teeth. “You’re going to make me.”

“No one is making you—”

“Shut up! Now I’ve got to go to prison!” Suddenly, her mother was crying, harsh as the cawing of a crow, but her grip never eased. “Now my whole fucking life is ruined! All because of you! This is all your fault, all of it!”

“I know.”

“You know, you know! You don’t know shit! You woke up and it was like nothing ever happened! I’m the one who had to live with it! I’m the one who had to feel it growing inside me! I had to squeeze it out and take it home and what did you expect? Was I supposed to love it?”

“Melanie—”

“All I want is a little fucking time to myself once in a while. Is that so bad? But oh no, you never stop. After everything you’ve done, you still want more! Well, you don’t get any more from me!” she screamed. “There isn’t any more!”

“Enough, Melanie,” the man said quietly. “Just be calm. We can come to an arrangement. Just tell me what you want.”
“Don’t you fucking say it like that, like I’m the one breaking the rules! I did everything you told me to, everything! All I want is what I was promised!” Her voice rose again to a shout. “And if I’m not going to get it, I might as well go to prison! I might as well! So try me! Just fucking try me and see what happens!”


“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m not telling. I’m asking. Please.”

“That’s better.”

The grip at Ana’s throat tightened even more, but only for an instant. Then she was shoved away, hitting the wall with her face, a table with her back, and the floor with everything else. She gulped air, shaking like she was cold, and tried to sit up.

“Leave her alone,” her mother snapped, kicking Ana back and away from the old man’s outstretched hand. “You don’t get to touch her, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Her mother paced and paced. “Now where is he?”

“He isn’t here.”

“Call him.”

The man seemed about to speak, stopped, then sighed and took a mobile phone out of his pocket and pressed a button.

“I want one of those,” said Ana’s mother.

“All right,” said the man and that was all he said until, “Hello, Marion.”

“Oh, she answered you, huh? No one was home for me.”

“I didn’t call her phone,” the man said, then said, “Your sister. She’s here. In my house. With…her daughter.”

“Tell her it’s Friday. It’s Friday!” she added in a shout. “And where the fuck are you? You can’t do this to me, Marion! We had a deal!”

“It’s Friday,” the man said and listened, his expression fading through changes, essentially unchanged, like sand in the desert. “I know. But you have children to think about… I know…I don’t know…Marion, I don’t know. But we both have obligations. We can’t just stop. We have to go on… Can you turn down the radio please? It’s difficult to hear you through the feedback on the line… Yes, that’s better. Now, please, Marion… Yes, I think that would be best… Are you all right to drive?”

“What do you mean, is she all right?” Ana’s mother stopped pacing and looked around, her eyes squinty. “Where is he, anyway? If he’s not here, he’s got to be there… right?”

“I know.” The man’s voice roughened slightly. “So do I.”
“He’s not, is he? Did he…? Did he run off with another girl? Or another guy?” Ana’s mother uttered a high, wondering laugh. “Are you consoling each other? Jesus fucking Christ, do you have any idea how fucked up you are?”

The man ignored her, speaking softly into the phone. “I agree and I would certainly support you if she could be convinced. If she can’t… I won’t provoke her.”

“Are you talking about me? You are, aren’t you? Don’t fucking talk about me.”

“All right,” the man said to the phone. “Yes… I will… Drive safely, Marion. Goodbye.” He pressed a button, closed the phone and returned it to his pocket. “She’ll be here shortly. If you’d like to leave her, I’ll see that she—”

“Oh no. No, me and my accident will just wait outside.” Ana’s mother grabbed Ana by the shirt and pulled her off the floor, giving her a push out into the hall. “Don’t concern yourself with us. You’ve got concerns of your own. You’ve got a whole roomful of angry motherfuckers waiting upstairs to talk to you about last week’s fun day at Freddy’s.”

The man’s expression flickered again. “Yes. I suppose I do.”

“Have fun explaining that. Or just buying them off. That’s what you do best, isn’t it?” Ana’s mother started walking, towing Ana by her bad arm and forcing her to all but run to keep up with her mother’s long strides, only to come to a sudden and painful stop. “Did you really hack them apart with an axe?”

What? Ana’s breath caught. She looked back at the man, feeling as if her mother had punched her in the stomach. Freddy? With an axe? Images from some Mickey Mouse cartoon tumbled through her mind—Mickey with an axe, shadows on the wall, splinters flying as the axe chopped and chopped…

The man took a long time to answer, but the answer was, “Yes.”

“I wish I could have seen that.” Ana’s mother laughed and for a brief, bewildering second, she looked like Aunt Easter—young and pretty and smiling. Then she laughed again and it was the old laugh, angry and full of teeth. “I hope you got the blue one first.”

Then she picked Ana up and threw her heavily over her shoulder to carry her away, letting Ana see nothing of where they were going, only the long hall growing longer behind her, and the man at the end of it watching her go before the heavy door shut between them and trapped him alone in his dark room.
As one door closed, another opened. The entire world rocked with the weight of a man swinging into the seat beside her, waking Ana with a start made doubly sharp by not having realized she’d fallen asleep. Disoriented, she could only wait for dream-memory and present perception to decide when and where and who she was.

Clues were surprisingly sparse. Her stomach felt pinched and empty, and her limbs were stiff and unreliable, as if she’d just come from the closet. Her body ached, but her bruises did not know or care whose hand had punched them into existence. The slight heat throbbing in her cheeks could have come by way of the winter wind as easily as the summer sun.

On the other hand, her feet were sweating inside her scuffed workboots, not barefoot on hardwood floors. Her adult-sized hands were gripping the steering wheel of her own truck, since Shelly didn’t keep one for landscaping services. And sitting beside her with a big stupid smile on his face was Jimmy Morehead.

“Yup,” he said, holding out a can of Monster Ultra Black and keeping a bottle of organic all-natural sugar-free apple-guava juice for himself. “You’re still in Mammon.”

“I never left,” she said without thinking. “I mean, of course I did, but I was dreaming of being here before…if it was a dream. I’m not sure it was.”

“Mammon,” said Morehead, affecting a tone of blind pride that probably wasn’t as feigned as he wanted her to believe. “The town that dreams are made of. But seriously, you were asleep. Whatever it was, I’m pretty sure it was just a dream.”

“I know it was, but maybe not all of it. I really think it might have been a memory.”

“Oh yeah? Of what?”

“Monsters.”

“Hm. Well, no offense, but if I was a betting man, my money would be on dream. These—” Morehead gave the Ultra Black a gentle shake. “—are the only Monsters in Mammon. And it’s hard enough to even find them.”

She took the can. It was cold in her hand, waking her up a little more, enough to remember some of the morning’s work, not that there was much to recall. Her wristwatch said it was almost four and judging from the fact that she’d been sleeping on the shady side of the gas station instead of at one of Mammon’s many recreation areas, Ana had to assume she’d checked off all the boxes on her daily to-do list, but one patch of grass was much like another when you were mowing it. All she knew for certain was that she was sweaty, tired, and sore. She could remember last week better than today…

God, no. Why did she have to remind herself? It was like a scab she couldn’t stop picking at and now here she was, bleeding again.
The ever-present stink of the quarry seemed to thicken as she remembered Bonnie dragging
himself into the kitchen. God, that smell. She had never imagined how much worse it could be
until she smelled it cooking on his battery case. Or how it would feel between her fingers as she
tried to comb it from his fur, scrubbing until her hands were raw and his poor cracked body was as
bald as his blue counterpart from the Toybox. And his voice…how good it had been to hear his voice…

telling her he was alive.

“Are you okay?”

Pulled from her reverie, Ana raised her head from the unblinking, unseeing study she’d been
making of her energy drink and looked at Morehead. “Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Just tired.”

“Maybe I’d better drive.”

Ana unbuckled her seat belt and slid over while he hopped out, jogged around the front of the truck
and hopped in on the other side. Full of energy, was Jimmy. Probably went for a ten-mile jog every
morning and of course, he never touched coffee. Or soda. Or high fructose corn syrup.

“What’s that look for?” he asked, settling himself behind the wheel and making all the little
adjustments necessitated by the two inches difference between their heights.

“Just thinking how lucky you are,” said Ana after a short pause to dredge up a polite lie. “Wife.
Kids. Nice house, decent job.”

“The Lord has blessed us,” he replied. “And you’re doing all right yourself, you know. You’ve
got…uh…”

“Good health.”

“Good health,” he repeated without a trace of the irony in Ana’s own tone. Opening his juice, he
raised it toward her, saying, “To your health!” and drank.

Ana opened her energy drink and sat with it on her knee, reading the word ‘Monster’ until it lost all
meaning.

“You are really out of it,” Morehead observed. “Want to go back to the lake? It’s real easy to look
like you’re working when you’re really just hanging out at the lake.”

“No. Let’s just go.”

“Your call, but Shelly isn’t exactly going to pin a medal on us for finishing up early. Knowing him,
he’ll make me sweep out the parking lot and make you scrub the bathroom.”

True. Right down to the division of labor. That man never passed up the chance to get her on her
knees.

“You mind if we just sit here for a bit?” Ana asked. “I need to wake up a little, get something cold
in me and put my head on straight.”

“Sure. Late night?” Morehead asked cheerily. “Or just an early morning?”

“Both.”

A sleepless night, in any case. The latest in a series of sleepless nights. She had driven away from
Freddy’s, but she had not gone home, not that night and not since. She had no home. She had a house, but Erik Metzger still owned it. She did not believe in ghosts, but she didn’t have to, did she? Mike Schmidt had told the truth after all. Erik Metzger could be dead and still be walking, stuffed inside one of his own Springtrap suits, shambling through secret passages she had yet to discover behind the walls. And Plushtrap? Fredbear? Also alive, two of his many victims, murdered solely to make a fun little toy to give to his son. Maybe there were more of them—a baby Chica or a proto-Foxy she had yet to unearth among the boxes in the basement or the attic. Maybe David was even with them. Or in them. Hadn’t Aunt Easter said he was with his father? Maybe she’d been telling the truth that day. Maybe they both had, Aunt Easter and her mother both. David was dead and with his father, who was also dead and still walking, still waiting for Ana to come home and make them a family.

No, she could not go home, so after driving aimlessly up and down the empty streets of Mammon, she had gone to the Sugartree Motel, only to discover she had left her daypack, wallet, phone, tablet, and pretty much everything but the clothes she was standing in back at Freddy’s.

Another aimless drive took her out of town and found her parked for the night on a flat patch of ground overlooking the canyon. Seemed like an ideal place for the local teens to earnestly discuss the virtues of abstinence, but Ana was alone all night, staring at the stony teeth of the open mouth before her and trying so hard not to think about Bonnie or Mason or Mike Schmidt that she instead found herself wondering if this was the spot where her not-father, Joe Stark, had either jumped or been thrown to his death.

So, yes, a sleepless night leading unfairly to a Monday morning. She had to go to work. After narrowly escaping her own murder at the half-remembered hands of Mason Kellar, then hearing Bonnie tell her he was alive and had always been alive, and then sitting alone in the dark on the probable site of her not-father’s suicide to contemplate just what ‘life’ really meant, Ana had to go to work like none of it mattered. After work, more aimless driving, bringing her back to a different curve on the same canyon for another sleepless night, another day at work. And so it went, ten more days and nights living off coffee and the doughnuts other people brought into the office and occasionally scavenging like a goddamn raccoon out of the gardens grown by the good Mormons of this quiet little town under the cover of a moonless night. Now here she was, sleeping at work on a Thursday when she didn’t have enough gas to make it to the weekend, in a town where she had no home.

“Seriously,” said Morehead, still smiling but with a crease of concern appearing between his eyebrows. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Just a weird dream. I’ll shake it off.”

He sipped his juice in silence while she stared out the window.

“Was it Freddy’s?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” Her voice was too loud, more like a bark than a word. She tried again, but the resulting, “What do you mean?” came out as badly read as a line in a grade-school play.

“In your dream. If you were dreaming about monsters in this town, it had to be Freddy’s, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Ana argued, too fiercely. “It could have been hungry ghosts in the quarry or mutant military experiments out at the base. There’s lots of monsters in this town. And anyway, it wasn’t. It was just people. My mother took me to…someone’s house. There was a man there. And he told me the worst monsters wear human faces…and you had to look them in the eye to trap them or…or make them look you in the eye. I don’t know. Something like that,” she said, turning
back to the window. “I don’t know anymore.”

It was sort of the truth. The events of her dream were already receding and the parts she could remember left her with a fading certainty that it had ever been founded in memory. After all, what had she really seen? She’d dreamed of a house she’d already been in and a man she’d already met. Easy enough to sit here and find all kinds of ominous meaning in it, but short of driving up to Faust’s house and asking him directly if she’d ever been there as a child, there was no proof.

And she didn’t have to ask, did she? Shelly had as good as told her the first time he’d introduced her to the old man, when he’d said Faust wouldn’t have known Ana’s mother or father (except by reputation), but that he might remember Aunt Easter. And so he had. ‘People tell me I look like her,’ Ana had said, and he hadn’t cracked even a pretend-smile, just nodded and said, ‘You do. When I saw you, I thought I’d seen a ghost.’

It couldn’t be a happy haunting, given what Mike Schmidt…and Wendy Rutter…had told her. And yet, he’d seemed to like her, in his own odd way. And, damn her, she’d liked him. She wondered, if she went up there right now, if she confronted him in his own glass house and demanded to know how he knew Aunt Easter—how he knew Ana herself—would he tell her?

Maybe, maybe not, but the real question was, did she really want to know? How much more of the truth could she take before it killed her? She used to roll her eyes at angsty songs that insisted you could die from a broken heart, but here she was, spending sleepless nights out at lover’s leap, one rhyming dictionary away from the sappiest song ever written. She’d lost everything—her home, her family…her man.

And even that thought bled, the most trivial cut and the deepest, because that had really been the great romance of her whole wasted life. Bonnie. And maybe she’d been his. He had been writing her a song, after all. He’d even played it once, using her body for his instrument, and that had been exciting and strange and a little scary, but only like a movie could be scary, because it was all in fun. She could be silly and in love and risk nothing. He wasn’t real.

Except he was. They were all real. The implications were enormous, so much bigger than her stupid broken heart, bigger even than Mammon and a few hundred measly little murders. The technology in the building alone was earth-shaking, and that was before factoring in the potential advancements in robotics and artificial intelligence, let alone the Tesla cosmic energy condenser in the basement, and how much did any of that matter to Ana? Not a goddamned iota. She’d lost her man. She was no one’s baby girl. And her stupid heart was fucking broken and that was all that mattered.

‘Stop thinking about it,’ she told herself and then went ahead and twisted the knife some more. “Have you ever been to Freddy’s?”

He responded immediately and with enthusiasm. “Heck, yeah. Me and my whole family pretty much had every birthday out at the one on Circle Drive. Us and everyone else, right? Between my family and my friends, I was going to two or three parties there every month for all my life until it closed. And I cried,” he added with a careless laugh, “because they closed it like a week before my tenth birthday. My mom was mad. I guess she’d already reserved the party place. I’m sure she got a refund, but I remember her complaining anyway. I even went to the one out by the quarry when it was open. Kaya was pregnant with Kayla then and I was actually really excited that she’d be able to grow up with a Fazbear’s Pizzeria like I did.”

“Kaya and Kayla?”

His smile of reminiscence became a sheepish grin. “And Jimmy and Jami, yeah. I don’t know what
we’re going to do for the third one. Jaya. Kimi. Kaja? I guess it could be a boy, but I kind of hope not, because I promised my mother I’d name my first son after her grandfather and calling a boy Meredith in this day and age is practically child abuse.”

“You got a third one coming?”

“Yup,” he said with a puff of fatherly pride. “Should be here by Easter.”

That gave her a pang, but all she said was, “Congratulations, man. Tell your wife I said the same to her.”

“Will do.” He took a swallow of his juice. “So were you? Dreaming about Freddy’s?”

“No. I’ve never even been there.”

“You don’t have to go somewhere to dream about it,” Morehead pointed out, then looked at her in belated surprise. “You’ve never been there? Ever? Not even as a kid?”

“Not even.”

“How is that even possible? Everyone goes to Freddy’s!”

“I know. They’re everywhere. And there’s that one out on Old Quarry,” she added casually. “I drive past it every day. It’s got to be the biggest pizza parlor I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, it was epic, all right. It had its own arcade and a little movie theater and a rock-climbing wall.” His eyes look on a misty, wistful stare. “Jami would have loved it there. Kayla maybe not so much. She’s more into hair and horses, but Jami would have loved it. She’s just like that little ferret, whatshername. Tomboy.”

‘Tumble,’ thought Ana, unable to keep the derisive tone out of even her inner voice. Aloud, she said, “Why did it close? People say it was only open for a week.”

“Yeah, just the one week. I always figured the smell might have something to do with it, although once you got inside, it was fine. But that’s just my guess, I don’t remember the old guy actually giving a reason. All I can remember is being incredibly disappointed. Well beyond reason. Like, devastated. This actually led to one of the worst and stupidest fights me and Kaya ever had, because I guess I was going on and on about how disappointing it was and she let slip she was glad because the mascots were freaky, and one hilarious cartoon jump-cut later, the two of us are literally shouting at each other over whether or not we’d take kids that hadn’t even been born yet to a restaurant that had already closed.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Married fights are different than any other kind of fight you can even imagine.” He gave her another quizzical smile. “Why? What did you hear?”

Thinking back to Freddy’s story, Ana carefully said, “Someone told me a kid broke in at night, jumped off the rock-climbing wall, hit the carousel and…and crawled off into the Parts Room and died.”

“Who, the Porter boy?” he asked at once.

She was tired enough to show her surprise, actually thumping her head on the window when she rocked back to stare at him. She wasn’t sure just when she’d decided that since one part of
Freddy’s story could not be true—the part where he’d claimed to not understand the seriousness of the boy’s injuries as he was much too new—that it all had to be a lie. Yet this confirmation felt even more dangerous. “That really happened?”

“I don’t know. You know how it is in this town. Anytime anything remotely unfortunate happens, everyone says it happens at Freddy’s. Heck, I was there when Peter Quinn jumped off Devil’s Iron Rock out in the Canyon Deeps and cracked his head open, me and a dozen other kids, and within a week, everyone was saying Foxy took a bite out of him. When his little brother left town, everyone said he got eaten at Freddy’s, too, in spite of the fact that we all saw him pack his car, fill his tank, and drive off. People would talk about him giving the billboards the finger on his way over the bridge, then immediately turn around and start talking about how they found his body stuffed into one of the mascots, folded up like a pair of pants so he’d fit. It doesn’t mean anything, it’s just a game and everyone plays along.”

“Everyone?” she echoed. “Including you?”

He signaled guilt with a smile. “Everyone loves a good ghost story. Haunted dolls, moving mannequins… there’s a reason they keep making movies and video games about that stuff. And here we’ve got all these great empty buildings with all these great animal mascots rotting away inside them.” He paused to take a drink, peeking at her boyishly out of the corner of one eye and blushing, then mumbled, “Not that I’d know they’re still there or anything. Not personally.”

“Law-abiding citizen that you are.”

“Slater told me they’re still in there, that’s all. If you believe him.” He shrugged hugely, drank some more and then had to muffle a burp for drinking too fast. His blush deepened to the color of anniversary roses. “To be totally honest...I did walk around some in the Circle Drive Freddy’s after it closed.”

“Was anything there?”

“Oh yeah, practically everything. Tables, posters, arcade machines. I mean, it was all busted up because kids are a thing, but it was there. Not Freddy and the band, though. Slater swears up and down that they’re walking around out at the quarry place, still doing their thing, telling jokes and singing songs to empty rooms and rats and whatever, but they weren’t there at Circle Drive.” He shrugged again, just a twitch this time, smiling hazily into his juice. “That’s the difference between reality and ghost stories, I guess.”

“But a kid did die there during the Grand Opening? You can prove it?”

“What’s proof?” Morehead countered breezily. “I know Richie Porter disappeared earlier that week. Some of his friends slipped away the same night and came back at three in the morning, kind of rattled. A couple of them admit they broke into Freddy’s and tell the usual stories, but the others insist they were just hanging out in the canyon and none of them will cop to Richie being there in either case. As far as his folks knew, Richie just went up to bed and vanished. We all beat some bushes, but you know—” He indicated the great, wide world with a swallow of juice and a wave of one hand. “—kids have been leaving this town ever since there was a town to leave. And not to speak ill of the dead or anything, but that kid was getting to be seriously bad news. Sixteen years old and already mixed up with drugs and trying on the Sheriff’s bracelets every weekend. Used to skulk around with Jacky Kellar and Arnie Campbell and that whole pack of rats and believe it or not, there were some who thought Richie was the worst of them.”

“Until he turned up dead in the Parts Room at Freddy’s?” Ana pressed.
Morehead shrugged. “I never heard they found a body, if that’s what you’re asking, but the kid definitely went missing during the Grand Opening. On Sunday, the Porters were absent from church. A week later, they pulled the rest of the kids out of school. A month after that, there’s a moving truck in their driveway.”

“Quick work.”

“Not really. Nothing seems to stay on the market long around here. And I guess I can’t blame them for wanting to leave. Small town, you know. Everything’s a reminder.”

“One week after your kid disappears is a little soon to cash in your chips, isn’t it?”

“Just because I never heard of a body doesn’t mean there wasn’t one. Like I say, whenever anything happens in this town, like a car crash or an accident, everyone says it happens at Freddy’s. But when bad things actually happen at Freddy’s, no one talks about it. Because, you know…”

“Freddy lives,” said Ana and shivered in the Mammon afternoon heat.

“But that’s not what you were dreaming about,” said Morehead, attempting an ironic tone, but too concerned to really pull it off.

“No,” she said and promptly muddied it up with, “I don’t know. Maybe. I never actually saw any monsters in my dream. It was mostly just me and this other guy. He told me monsters hide by wearing human faces. Maybe…Maybe sometimes it’s the other way around.”

“Like what? People wearing monster faces? What’s that mean, that we’re all monsters on the inside or that monsters can just be people too?”

“I don’t know,” she said again, rubbing at her tired eyes. “No offense, but I need to shut up about it now. This isn’t the place or the time. And you don’t want to hear me rambling on about this shit anyway.”

“What are friends for?”

“Yeah, right.”

She hadn’t intended her tone to be quite so derisive, but she didn’t apologize for it either. Being tired, like being drunk, had a way of taking the polish off honesty.

“You know,” Morehead said after a moment, plainly uncomfortable. “You can, uh…You can talk to me. I mean, we’re not just co-workers, you know? I do consider you a friend.”

Ana looked at him, momentarily distracted from her own inner turmoil by this baffling declaration. “You do not. What the hell for?”

“Oh come on with that Sunday School stuff. I’m not in the mood.”

“It’s true.”

“It’s true,” she echoed, fighting an unreasoning flare of temper. After a moment’s token resistance, she gave in and said, “You’re from here, right?”

“Born and bred,” he assured her. “As long as there’s been a Mammon, there’ve been Moreheads in
it. One of the miners and two of the rescuers buried in the quarry are Moreheads. And there was another one of us on the jury when, you know, that guy came back.”

“So you know this town. You know what it’s like.”

Morehead’s broad smile faded somewhat. He tried to shrug. “I think it’s like a lot of small towns that are kind of tucked away from the world. Everybody knows everybody. You work together, pray together, make the same kind of money and spend it on all the same stuff. It’s close, is what I’m saying. It’s a close community, but that doesn’t automatically mean banjos and cannibals. Small towns can be good places,” he insisted as Ana thought of banjo-playing Brewster in the lobby at Freddy’s and herself digging out his plastic eyes to put in Bonnie’s head. “If you’re a good person, it can be a good place.”

“So it only feels like a bad place if you’re a bad person?” she asked without meaning to.

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Everyone gets what they deserve in Mammon, huh? Let me ask you something. You said you went to the Freddy’s on Circle Drive. You said you were ten when it closed? So you must be around my age, right? We must have gone to school together. Do you remember me from back then at all?”

He nodded, but looked away, pretending to read the label on his juice.

“Did we play together?” she asked, knowing damn well they had not. “Did you invite me to your birthday party? Were you my Secret Santa one year? Did you give me a Valentine, like, ever?” She waited in the stifling silence and then said, “Did you laugh when kids pushed me around on the playground?”

“Hey, I was a kid,” he began.

“So was I.”

He didn’t answer, not that there was an answer.

Ana sighed and pressed the warming side of her can of Monster to her forehead. “Look, I’m sorry. I haven’t been sleeping lately and I’m biting your head—”

Animatronic teeth snapping. Animatronic eyes leaking blood like tears. Three hundred and fifty-seven missing people and it was all real, all true.

“—off,” she finished, pressing harder, until her head hurt and the can’s side buckled slightly and still the images remained. She motioned toward the key dangling from the ignition. “Let’s just go. I need some air conditioning.”

Morehead didn’t move. After a minute of extremely painful silence and a couple false starts, he said, “Can I tell you something?”

“Do you have to?” Ana asked sourly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I do.”

She heaved a curt sigh and looked out the window. “Go ahead, then.”

“Okay,” he said with an air of uncomfortable resignation every bit as profound as her own. “Okay,
listen. In the seventh grade, we had sex ed for the first time. We had a form that our parents could sign to get us out of it, and my mom signed it, but I kind of…you know.”

“Had questions?”

“A few.”

“And wanted to see some boob-drawings?”

“That, too,” he admitted with a blush, this grown man with two kids of his own and another on the way to prove he’d actually done the big It at least three times. “Anyway, on the first day, the teacher came in with this plastic picnic cup and she told us to pass it around and everyone spit in it. So we did, kind of giggling and confused, not really knowing what this had to do with sex. And when the cup made it back to her, she dumped out the spit and poured in some apple juice from a bottle she’d just opened and then held the cup up in front of the whole class and asked who wanted to drink it. Nobody did, obviously. And she said something like, ‘Remember this, girls. Once you pass it around and all those fluids get in there, no matter how sweet you are, no one will want you.’”

“‘Remember, girls,’” Ana echoed. “‘Not ‘kids,’ just the girls? Jesus, doesn’t that just say everything you need to know about this fucking town?”

Morehead nodded, wincing a little. “It does, yeah. Even at twelve, thirteen, whatever I was, that stuck out. I remember thinking, ‘That’s not fair,’ but I also remember feeling kind of relieved that I was a guy and it didn’t apply to me. It wasn’t until a lot later that I fully realized, you know, that this teacher, a woman herself, a woman who not only taught secular school but also Sunday School, had just compared a girl who had sex with more than one guy to a literal cup of spit. And I thought it was wrong. And once I started thinking that, I started seeing, you know…some other stuff that I…I just thought was wrong. That whether or not it affects me directly, some things are wrong.”

Ana bit back the first three bitchy comments that leapt to mind and said instead, “And this was the epiphany that led you to realize, long after I was gone, that bullying was wrong? Congratulations, I guess. Better late than never.”

“That’s the thing. I always knew bullying was wrong. I went to church and sang Love One Another, I went to school and took the champion-for-right pledge, and I stood up for my little brothers and sisters over so many petty occasions that one of them finally asked me to stop. I had no trouble identifying that bullying was wrong, I just didn’t think it applied to you. Everyone made fun of you and that made it seem okay, you know?”

“Oh yeah, sure, I understand perfectly now. How silly of me. Of course it’s not fucking okay!” she snapped. “You really expect me to agree? Maybe I’m supposed to apologize for making you feel bad about it now. Hey, here’s a thought: If you’ve got a guilty conscience, maybe you goddamn well deserve one! I was a child! I did nothing to you, nothing! And you hated me anyway and why? Just because someone t-t-told…told you to…”

The steam went out of her all at once, leaving her cold and sweating in the cab of the truck, staring at Morehead, but seeing Mike Schmidt like a ghost under his skin. She wasn’t exactly immune to peer pressure either, was she?

“You don’t understand,” Morehead was saying. “It wasn’t just a couple guys. It wasn’t even just the kids. It was everyone! My mom is the nicest person you ever met. Seriously. She loves everyone, and even she said things about your mom and about how…you know…how you were going to grow up. And everyone she said it to agreed, so…that made it seem true. That made it
As the pause stretched out, Ana shot him an angry glance and saw something approaching horror that he was fighting tears.

“This one time,” he said finally, “I saw you take a kid’s sandwich crusts out of the trash. My mom said you were dirty and probably stole things, and there you were. Now, I’d wonder how hungry you were, but back then, I saw you stealing and I called you out in front of the whole lunch room. Everyone started pointing and chanting at you. You spit it out and then you ran into the bathroom and the girls went in after you, so many the door couldn’t close, and I could hear you in there, crying and throwing up while they teased you, and you know how I felt?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” said Ana, desperate now just to shut him up. “I don’t remember any of this.”

“I felt proud,” Morehead said. “Like I’d done something heroic. Like I was frigging Superman, saving the schoolyard from a hungry little girl.”

“Okay, we’re done,” she declared. “You need the magic words? I fucking forgive you. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I don’t even remember you from back then.”

“But I remember you. I…” He glanced at her and away, then squared his shoulders and looked her in the eye. “I’m sorry about what happened to you when you were a kid. I’m sorry I was part of it. And I’m sorry, more than I can even put into words, that it’s still happening. But that’s not me anymore.”

“I believe you. Jesus. Can we please go now?”

“I just want to say—”

“How many times do I have to say this?” she interrupted crossly. “I don’t want to hear it!”

“Look, I have to say it!” he shot back, actually raising his voice to something that, if not actually a shout, was definitely a snap. “Every day at work, I hear guys razzing on you—still, after all these years—but even when we’re alone, you never say a word about them, you never take it to their level. And when every other guy on the crew gives me a hard time about, you know, me and blood, you never do. You just tap me out and step in and never say a word. I have to live with that, knowing what I did back then. And I’ve got to say I’m sorry.”

“You said it. And I said we’re good. It’s fine. And if you don’t start driving, I’m getting out right now and walking.”

Morehead touched the keys, but didn’t turn them.

“Fine,” said Ana, staring straight ahead. “Say it all then. Just don’t expect a lot of blubbering and a big hug afterwards, because that shit ain’t happening.”

“I’m not…I don’t…” Morehead took a deep shuddery breath and said, “I know there’s people in this town who still say things about you. I just need you to know…whether you believe it or not…that I’m not one of them. I’m not. Call it a guilty conscience or whatever you want to call it, but I did finally learn to judge people based on my own observations and not just to blindly embrace other people’s prejudices.”

Ana opened her mouth to tell him for the third fucking time that it was fine, only to close it again with a frown. She’d done some of that herself, hadn’t she? She, who had slept helpless as a baby at
Freddy’s for over a month and who had literally run for the door as soon as Bonnie admitted he was alive. She had experienced nothing worse at Freddy’s than stolen t-shirts, stolen kisses, annoying kid’s songs sung by an over-protective bear who didn’t think she had enough self-respect. Yet she’d run, not just embracing Mike Schmidt’s prejudices, but full-on fucking them. And if Bonnie was alive, with everything that word encompassed…how must that have felt?

“If you just want to be co-workers, I can understand why,” Morehead was saying, miserably hunched over the steering wheel. “But I want to be friends. I mean it. I’m a better man than the boy I was, I swear.”

“I don’t remember the boy you were,” she said again and sighed. “But you’re a nice guy. I mean that. You’re fine. We’re fine. Okay? For real, More—Jimmy. We’re good, me and you. You want to be friends, we’re…friends.”

“Do you…Do you want to come over for dinner?”

“What, tonight?”

“No, I wouldn’t want to spring something like that on Kaya. But…Sunday? Seven o’clock?” He offered her what he probably considered a morbid smile. “We’ll have lamb chops.”

She blurted out a laugh. “Yeah, sure. Tell her to start marinating now. It’ll need it.”

“So you’ll come?”

“Yeah, why not? I don’t need to dress up or anything, do I?”

He assured her she did not, that dinners were very informal affairs and jeans were fine, but Ana was already thinking she’d have to either go back to Freddy’s for a clean change of clothes or buy new ones, which also meant going back to Freddy’s for her wallet. Either way, she’d have to go back.

But not tonight, she decided. Tomorrow, after work. There was something talismanic about the start of a weekend, just knowing that she had two days to recover from whatever emotional hangover was sure to follow a return to Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria; but she could not, and no one could expect her to, handle such a thing on a fucking Thursday.

‘He’s waiting for me,’ she thought as Morehead finally started the engine and navigated the company truck out of the gas station lot. ‘He’s been waiting for me all week. He doesn’t have to do the shows anymore. He’s watching at the window. He’s never left. He’s waiting.’

She glanced at the tinted windows of the gas station, seeing late morning sun splash across posters advertising soft drinks, cheap chicken and cigarettes, but picturing a different building, windows boarded up so that only a glimpse of purple could be seen pacing behind the gaps…

‘Fine, tonight,’ she told herself, her silent words gradually roughening to take on Rider’s voice so she could pretend she was only reluctantly following an order instead of doing what she wanted: ‘Just go and get it over with, but don’t kid yourself. You said goodbye loud and clear when you ran out of there. And when you leave that way, don’t nobody want your dumb ass back.’

So. She was decided. She’d go. And when they threw her out or…or whatever…then she’d know it was over and she could get on with her life.
Late in the afternoon on a Thursday, the second Thursday after Ana ran, a rabbit came up off the access road and began to make its way across the parking lot. This was the first sign of life Bonnie had seen all day, so he watched it, although he kept his ears aimed at the road. It was a small rabbit, long-bodied but scrawny, not yet grown into its paws and not likely to, to be brutally honest. Its greyish-brown fur had a patchy look, which might just mean the little guy hadn’t felt like grooming itself or it might mean parasites. Closer examination showed him a scarred nose stained red by rubbing it in the desert soil, gummy eyes and a chewed ear. As it hopped across the parking lot, Bonnie could see it wasn’t moving very well, not limping but stiff-legged. It stopped often to investigate the brown, brittle plants growing through cracks in the asphalt until it came to a pothole deep enough to hold onto the summer rain for a while, creating a fairly lush oasis of hardy weeds. There, the rabbit nosed around and soon settled to graze.

Poor little guy. Bonnie couldn’t help but feel a brotherly sort of sympathy. It was a hard world out there. In the end, it didn’t matter how strong or smart or talented you were, nothing but dumb luck decided whether you made it or not, and despite the reputation attributed to their feet, Bonnie had never met a lucky bunny.

The rabbit chewed a few leaves, pausing often to push its nose against the ground or scratch its ears or just sit there and pant. As he watched, Bonnie found that he was very vaguely curious as to what sort of rabbit it was. All he knew was that it wasn’t one of the breeds represented by the intended animatronic inhabitants of the Bunny Patch, which were mostly European anyway. It had probably never occurred to their creator to name one of them after the local breeds. Harlequins and silver martens were exotic; wild rabbits were just garden-eating vermin.

“And it doesn’t matter,” he could remember their creator saying, talking to himself as he so often did. That had been here, down in the basement, the four of them waiting for their new skins to come out of their molds, watching him at his computer, nib in hand, sketching on his crestomathy —his tablet—and watching Freddyland form on the wall-sized monitor. “Anything will do, as long as there are enough of them. What else? What else? Through the Bunny Patch to…a farm. A barn. A cow…Miss Bovine. A sheep…no, a lamb…Mary…no, no, the other way, Merry, Merrily. A pig…Porky…no, that’s been done…Peggy? Peggy…Pigtails. So many girls, I need boys. A rooster. Feathers? What are chicken names? Rhodes? Rocky? Bantam…Banter? Brewster. Brewster Bantam…no, Brewster Rooster. Alliteration is good, rhymes are better. How many is that? Enough. Enough, enough. Move on. After the barnyard comes…town. A wild west town. Cowboys. A ranch…no, a gulch. Gallup Gulch…”

And so on, never giving more than a few seconds’ thought to each name, no more than a minute to any one design. And it was still more thought than he’d ever put into Bonnie’s own look. Freddy had been built first, the new and improved model of a teddy bear their creator had been building and rebuilding since he was four years old, and Chica had been designed as half-mother and half-sister to a boy who hadn’t had either, but Bonnie wasn’t anything special. “Purebred lapine lavender badass, baby,” he’d told Ana (and she’d laughed, not like it was funny and not to be polite, but just like she was happy), but the truth was, he’d been made a bunny because rabbits were everywhere out in the desert and their creator saw them every day. And he was purple, because it was his favorite color and their creator had wanted to surprise him. That was all Bonnie was, a gift for the Purple Man, who had taken one look at him and first groaned, then laughed.
“You don’t know me very well at all, do you?” he’d asked, then slung his arm around their creator’s slumped shoulders. “Aww, don’t take it like that. It’s neat, it’s just not my thing. Come on, we’ll make one together, just the two of us. That’ll be more fun anyway, won’t it? And won’t Father be surprised when he sees we can do it without him…”

And along came Foxy, his favorite. Everyone’s favorite.

Back in the here and now, Bonnie glanced behind him and down the short corridor to Pirate Cove, where he could hear Foxy leading the room in *The Drunken Sailor Song*. He imagined he could feel a little warmth in his chest, as if his resentment were a coal that needed to be turned and tended to keep from going out. And it was so stupid, because it wasn’t Foxy’s fault. The affection of the fucking Purple Man was nothing to vie for or feel bad about losing, but still…sometimes Bonnie felt like he’d spent his entire life being rejected.

‘At least Ana didn’t leave you for Foxy,’ Bonnie thought and, shaking his head, returned his attention to the rabbit outside. “Hey, Tux,” he said.

The headless animatronic stationed at the end of the hall beside the exit promptly turned its plastic eyes on Bonnie. His eyes, rather. It was hard to think of the fake animatronics installed around the building as having a gender, but hell, who was Bonnie to judge? “DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION FOR ME?” Tux asked in his fake British accent.

“Yeah. How many different kinds of rabbits are there around here?”

“THAT’S A GOOD QUESTION,” said Tux, as he always said, whether the question was *What’s the tallest mountain in the world?* or *Can goldfish fart?* His speaker hummed and clicked as he looked up the answer. When he spoke again, it was with the help of a text-to-speech program. Little mispronunciations and odd pauses made his mechanical delivery as he read from whatever kid-friendly online encyclopedia he used even more apparent, but Bonnie guessed that wasn’t the sort of thing kids noticed. “THERE ARE THREE SPECIES OF RABBITS NATIVE TO…THIS AREA…AS WELL AS THREE SPECIES OF HARES.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’M SORRY. I DON’T UNDERSTAND. CAN YOU REPHRASE THE QUESTION?”

“What’s the difference between rabbits and hares?”

“THAT’S A GOOD QUESTION.” Hum, click-click, hum. “RABBITS AND HARES LOOK VERY SIMILAR, BUT THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WAY THEY LIVE. FOR EXAMPLE…HARES LIVE ABOVE GROUND, WHILE RABBITS LIVE IN DENS OR BURROWS.”

“How the hell does that help? What, am I supposed to ask it where it lives?”

“I’M SORRY. I DON’T UNDERSTAND THE—”


Tux did, brushing its chipped hands once over its plastic lapels before resuming its default posture—hands behind back, chin up, lifeless floating eyes staring straight ahead. Bonnie had never understood why so many humans thought animatronics were whimsical and cute. Fucking things were creepy as hell.

Still, he remained curious about the rabbit in the parking lot. ‘There is nothing with more power to
fascinate than the things one sees when one is trying not to think.’ Now, who said that? Their creator again, maybe. Sounded like something he’d say. Either that or one of the many headshrinkers Chica thought were so quotable.

Chica. Now there was an idea. Chica might know what the rabbit was. She’d taken an interest in nature after being programmed with the environmental activist crap during their last update, and while Bonnie couldn’t remember her specifically studying the local wildlife, she probably had. Chica didn’t believe in boredom; if you had time to think you were bored, you had time to read a book.

So Chica could probably take one look at this rabbit and tell Bonnie whether it was a Southern two-tick cottontail or a snub-eared desert scrub-foot. But it was early into the five o’clock hour and she’d be onstage, probably soloing one of the few acts all three of them were supposed to perform together. With the doors hanging off and no way to barricade them, Freddy was more or less on constant patrol and Bonnie hadn’t left this spot since Sunday night. Poor Chica had been a solo act for days. Come to think of it, Foxy hadn’t been out at night either. Hell, they were all alone now. Alone together, but alone just the same.

The rabbit nibbled this plant and that one, a surprisingly picky eater for being as skinny as it was. Bonnie was tempted to go out and see if he could catch it, maybe show it to Chica. It had been many years since Bonnie had last attempted to catch a non-human animal, but he didn’t remember it being very difficult. Even skittish creatures rarely ran from him, no matter how much noise he made. They weren’t afraid of him, as long as they thought he was just a machine.

That reminded him of Ana, which drained the miniscule enthusiasm he’d had for chasing and catching anything, so he was watching, just watching, when the fox bolted out of the heaped rocks that bordered the lot. The rabbit startled, falling over its own forelegs before it fled. It hadn’t a hope in hell of outrunning its enemy, but it tried, zig-zagging from one thatch of brown weeds to another in a vain attempt to lose its pursuer before turning in an equally pointless challenge.

The fox, unimpressed, sprang and snapped. Bonnie had to give a fellow bunny some respect—even with its spine in the jaws of its enemy, it kicked, claws tearing at the fox’s throat. And it had at least some strength in those stiff legs because the fox did some pain-prancing, ultimately tumbling into the thickest patch of overgrowth on this side of the parking lot and falling on its side, out of sight. The dead grass shook as the lopsided battle continued, unseen. The rabbit screamed as only rabbits and small children scream, the fox yelped and snarled, the weeds shook for a few seconds even more violently and then, nothing.

Bonnie waited for the victor to eat its diseased dinner and emerge. It shouldn’t have taken more than five minutes—ten, if it stopped to say grace and wash the dishes after—so when twenty had come and gone with no sign of life, Bonnie opened the door next to Tux and went out to see for himself.

The door shut behind him and there was no latch on the outside, but Bonnie wasn’t worried about being locked out. The lobby doors couldn’t close since that Mason guy and his friends had forced them open. Even now, he could hear them creaking and banging against the frame. Occasionally, the wind would change and the lobby doors go still, only for the broken loading dock door to start up.

This fucking town. No matter how the wind blew, something was always on the wrong side of it.

Bonnie approached the weeds, knowing what he was going to find. Rabbits had an undeserved reputation as scrappy survivalists, but there wasn’t a rabbit in the world—himself included—who could beat a fox in a fight. However, when he reached the battleground, he found no victor. The
fox lay on its side, eyes open and tongue lolling in the sand. At first he thought it was breathing, but its pupils stayed fixed even when Bonnie leaned over to get a better look. It was dead, only the wind ruffling its fur and an army of fleas hopping around to give it the illusion of breath.

So…what was the story here? Had it choked on the rabbit? Nature, while rarely sympathetic, did have an ironic sense of humor at times.

But no. A slight scuff of sound attracted his attention away from the fox’s corpse and there, well-camouflaged against the weathered asphalt and reddish-grey drifts of sand, was the biggest snake Bonnie had ever seen—maybe five feet long, as thick around as a beer bottle except where it tapered at the tail and bulged at the mouth. He hadn’t seen it slither onto to the scene, so it had probably been here all day, just hanging out in some shady weeds, minding its own business until the fox fell on it. Bonnie didn’t know what kind of snake it was, but it was venomous, clearly. Also hungry and unscrupulous enough to help itself to someone else’s supper, although from the snake’s perspective, it had surely earned it.

And Bonnie had to admit, watching the snake eat was a lot more interesting than watching a rabbit nibble leaves or a fox rip into a rabbit. The snake’s head was grotesquely distorted around the rabbit’s body, the skin around its mouth stretched so thin as to almost be transparent. As he watched, the snake’s jaws flexed and the muscles of its long body rippled and, with another quiet scuff of sound, a little more of the rabbit was swallowed.

The rabbit was surely dead already, but this unnatural constriction made its hindlegs seem to twitch where they still hung out of the snake’s dislocated jaws. Seeing this gave him an impossibly queasy feeling, so Bonnie reached down and poked the snake in the middle of its long back.

If he were a man, the snake would have puked up its prize and slipped away into the desert as fast as its legless body could take it, but he was just a machine and not worth noticing, no more than the wind-blown tapping of a branch. Bonnie briefly considered picking it up by the tail and giving it a shake, but only briefly. The rabbit was dead and no longer needed saving. The fox was dead and had died hungry and in pain, so to the rabbit’s way of thinking, there was justice; to the fox, the hero of its own story come to an inglorious and unexpected end, there was none. As for the snake, it had the same right to exist and enjoy what good fortune came its way as anyone else. Let it eat its meal in peace.

The door behind him scraped open. “GOOD MORNING,” Tux said and probably went on to ask how he could help, except that Freddy’s bellow drowned him entirely out: “BONNIE. WHAT. IN. THE. HELLO!”

“WHY, HELLO THERE!” interrupted Tux.

“—DO. YOU. THINK. YOU’RE. DOING,” Freddy concluded. “GET. IN. HERE. NOW.”

Bonnie bent over, hands on thighs for balance, adjusting the limited zoom function on his eyes like he needed a close-up of the snake working its mouth around the widest part of the rabbit and only inadvertently making it appear as though he were inviting Freddy to kiss his ass.


“YOU LOOK LIKE AN INQUISITIVE CHAP!” Tux exclaimed.

“OH. SHUT. UP.” The door wheezed shut, but the faint hope that Freddy was on the other side

Bonnie’s ears flattened, but he did not look around. He watched the snake swallow another half-inch of rabbit like Freddy wasn’t even there.

“BONNIE.”

The snake flexed, gulped. Over on the fox-end of the buffet, a small column of red ants was forming between the fox’s protruding tongue and a nearby crack in the asphalt. Those poor fleas had no idea their host was even dead yet, much less that they were about to be invaded. Look close enough and everything had a point of view, everything had its own epic story to tell.

A growl, low but loud enough to be heard over the wind. “BONNIE. I. KNOW. YOU. CAN. HEAR. ME.”

“Then you ought to know I’m ignoring you,” Bonnie replied. “So why are you still here?”

“WHY. AM. I,” Freddy echoed, then broke off and said instead, “HOW. TALL. ARE. YOU.”

Bonnie glanced at him, then up at his ears and down at the snake again, feigning disinterest. “I don’t know. Seven feet. Maybe eight-two, eight-four with the ears up, give or take a few inches.”


Bonnie looked at him for a moment, feeling nothing but a dim, unanchored humor—a silent laugh without a joke. Then, in one almost effortless movement, he straightened, turned, cupped his hands around the speaker in his throat and turned up his volume as high as it would go. “Hey! Hey, look at me! It’s Bonnie the Bunny!”

The snake kept eating. The fleas hopped, the ants swarmed, and the fox stayed dead. Freddy flinched, but recovered fast, striding forward without a word but with an expression of thunderous anger.

“I’m at 1104 Old Quarry Road!” yelled Bonnie, backing away as he turned in a broad circle, head back, shouting to the godless heavens. “I’m still here! Come and get me!”

“BONNIE.”

“It’s over! It’s done! You’re supposed to kill the monsters when it’s over! What, did you just forget? We’re all still here!”

“THAT’S ENOUGH,” said Freddy, catching Bonnie by the shoulder.

He shrugged him off even as the submissive shudders coursed through him and blasted out a last, “Someone! Anyone! You can’t just leave us here!”

“STOP.” Freddy caught him again, but his roar of command gentled to something that was nearly a normal speaking tone. “PLEASE. STOP.”
Bonnie paced away to the very edge of the lot, cupped his speaker…and let his arms drop. He thought it would feel good to yell, that it might drain away some of this sick nameless emotion knotting up his head and heart, but it only made it worse. No one was watching. He could stand out here and shout until his new speaker broke and no one would hear him.

And yet…

“I still think she’s coming back,” he heard himself say. “I think I’d feel it if she wasn’t. Isn’t that the stupidest thing you ever heard? But I believe it, I really do. And I know what you’re thinking,” he said, turning suddenly to point back at the place Freddy stood unmoving, silent. “You’re thinking, ‘Bonnie, you idiot, how did you think this was going to end?’”

Freddy began to walk toward him.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” said Bonnie, backing away. “I thought she’d leave me! I thought she’d get through whatever hell she’s having to deal with at her cousin’s house and get on with her life. I thought sooner or later, I’m not going to be enough reason to stay in this godforsaken town and I thought—”

His foot went down deeper than the ground. Another pothole. He flailed, overcorrected and fell, landing with a skin-cracking thump on his back. His vision went briefly red with damage alerts both old and new, but the sky came gradually out as he cleared them and the sky was just as blue as any summer sky could be.

“And I thought it would hurt,” Bonnie said after a moment, making no effort to rise. “But you know what, Freddy?”

Because Freddy was there now, leaning over him, black and faceless with the sun behind him. Freddy grunted his go-on-I’m-listening grunt as he slipped his hands under Bonnie’s arms and picked him up.

“No matter how it ended, I always thought she’d leave thinking this big, dumb bunny loved her,” said Bonnie, taking his weight onto his own legs and out of Freddy’s hands. He turned his head and found the snake still unconcernedly working on his supper just a few feet away. The back end went down quicker; only its feet were sticking out now, and as Bonnie watched, the snake gave one more almighty gulp and those feet slipped away down its scaly gullet. “For whatever reason,” he said, watching the snake wiggle its jaw back into alignment. “Even if it was just part of some old program, she’d believe that. Laugh about it, sure. Who wouldn’t fucking laugh? It’s pretty funny, when you stop and think about it.”

“BONNIE, DON’T. DO. THIS. TO. YOUR. SELF.”

“But that was how I thought it would end,” he continued stubbornly. “With her kissing me goodbye and walking out the door, not running for her fucking life! Did you see the look on her face? Why? I’d never hurt her!”

“I. KNOW.”

“She’s supposed to know! She’s supposed to know me! What…What have we been doing all this time if it wasn’t real? Now go on!” he spat. “Tell me it was never real to her! Tell me that’s what made this the good ending! Tell me all the ways it could have ended worse! Losing her isn’t half as bad as waiting for the I-told-you-so.”

Freddy didn’t say anything. After a few minutes (during which time the snake labored itself deeper into the weeds to doze and digest out of the worst of Mammon’s punishing sun), some of the
pressure plates in Bonnie’s back registered weight. Freddy, stroking his back like he was a crying kid. And when Bonnie did not respond, Freddy moved around in front of him and pulled him into an awkward, uncomfortable hug.

“Is this supposed to help me?” Bonnie asked dully, his speaker muffled against Freddy’s shoulder.


“You don’t even like to be touched.”

“How tall did you say you were.”

“Yeah, we’re going to be throwing that one around for a while, aren’t we?” Bonnie mumbled, but brought his arms up and hugged him. And it did help. A little.


“No,” said Bonnie and had to laugh. “Because I still think she’s coming back, remember? Big, dumb bunny.”

Freddy’s arms tightened, making old plastic creak in protest. “Bonnie.”

“Relax. I said I’m waiting. Just don’t ask for promises, because I—”

Freddy pulled away and pointed. “Bonnie,” he said again, urgently.

Bonnie’s ears turned, then his head.

Dust in the distance, drawing itself in a smudgy line above the wavering road. A vehicle. Too far away to tell whether it was a car or a truck, and no way at all to know whether it was headed for here or the quarry or just whatever was further up the road, but Bonnie’s stupid heart leapt anyway.

“It’s her,” he said, more certainly than he felt. “Can you see…? It has to be her!”


“What if she won’t talk to me?” Bonnie asked, limping fast toward the lobby doors on legs that were suddenly even more unsteady than usual. “What if she’s just here to pick up her stuff and she won’t even give me a chance?”

“She. Has. To.” Freddy said grimly, catching Bonnie’s arm to steady him even as he flicked the casing on his other wrist open to reveal a few new items tucked away in his magic-prop compartment. “I. Have. Her. Phone. And. Her. Wallet.” He glanced at Bonnie, the late afternoon sun throwing the shadow of a crooked smile over his face. “See? I. Always. Thought. She. Was. Coming. Back. Too.”

* * *
All the way to Freddy’s, Ana planned for the inevitability of leaving. As she drove past the library, she reminded herself of the public payphone there beside the after-hours book depository slot. She would call Rider. He would wire her any amount of money without question. She could be back on his doorstep by tomorrow evening. It would be a hassle to replace her wallet and her other personal effects, but she’d done it before and she could do it again. She was fine, right up until she actually turned onto the access road that led to the top of the bluff on which Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria was perched and her engine coughed. It didn’t quit on her, but that little cough on a steep incline told her the fuel pump icon—which had lit up on her way to work that morning—had stopped being polite and gotten serious.

Oh well. It didn’t change much. She could still turn around and go back to the library for that phone call, she’d just be walking. Two miles. Down a dusty, shadeless road in Mammon. On a late afternoon in mid-July.

“Don’t forget Mason Kellar still on the prowl,” she said to herself, just like she believed it. Over the course of her travels this week in this very small town, she had not seen Mace, Jack or any of the regular members of either of their inner circles. Apart from the affected families, particularly that old bitch, Mrs. Kellar, no one seemed upset or even surprised. Talk around the coffeepot at Shelton Contractors said they’d gotten in over their heads with ‘cartels’ and lit out of town.

Ana doubted there was enough profit margin in the Mormons-of-southern-Utah demographic to make that theory hold water. On the other hand, it sort of jibed with Freddy’s story of a mystery phone call serious enough to make Mason and his entire court drop what they were doing, mid-murder, and haul ass down the road. And after all, she didn’t have to believe in something for it to be true. The world was full of unexpected Egg-Minders.

But if Mason Kellar could leave town at the drop of a top hat, he could just as suddenly return and Ana was sure she was at the top of his list of unfinished business. So she couldn’t walk back to town and she didn’t have enough in the tank to drive back. Fortunately, she’d left everything when she’d run out, including all her jerry-cans full of gas for the generator. Some of them would be empty, but not all of them and she only needed a gallon or so, just enough to make it to the gas station. All she had to do was go in and get them. And she wasn’t afraid to. She should be, but she wasn’t. She was more afraid of Mason and she didn’t even think he was (alive) in town.

So why had she stopped, here at the top of the access road? Why was she just idling here, wasting precious gasoline as she stared across the weed-choked parking lot? There was nothing to see but the north wall of the pizzeria, windowless, doorless, blank but for the overlapping layers of graffiti documenting Mammon’s favorite monsters engaging in R-rated pursuits. And still she sat, silently reflecting on every horror movie she’d ever seen where the dumb brunette with the big tits goes into a boarded-up building, until her truck got tired of waiting, choked on the last drops of fuel and died.

Without the air conditioner, the temperature inside the truck’s cab quickly climbed, forcing her out and once she was out, she figured she might as well go in.

Ana started walking, but changed direction after just a few steps, moving away from the shady back end of the building and heading instead all the way around to the front side. It was a long walk, maybe no longer than the walk to the loading dock would have been, but with the afternoon sun shining its full punishing force onto her head and the asphalt frying her boots from below, it felt longer. At last she reached the lobby doors, now resting crooked in a frame so new, she could still smell that new-door smell. She raised a hand, hesitated, then raised it higher and knocked.

She heard something immediately on the other side—the whir of old motors echoing in the empty
lobby. The doors shuddered, then scraped open just a crack, showing her the thinnest stripe of brown fur and the startling brilliance of one backlit blue eye. The eye blinked. The doors shuddered again and one of them groaned open on a badly-bent hinge, supported by Freddy’s massive paw.

“SO. IT. WAS. YOU,” he said, ears facing forward but tilted back in cautious surprise. “WHEN. I. COULDN’T. HEAR. YOUR.” He paused, clicking, then continued, “CLUCK. COME. ANY. CLOSER. I. DECIDED. IT. COULDN’T. BE. YOU. AFTER. ALL.” He paused again, but didn’t search for a soundfile. Tiny servos whined as his eyes stared into hers. His face, far too expressive for plastic parts, showed strain. “AN-N-A. I—”

“Why are you still talking like that?” she interrupted. She didn’t want to hear anything he had to say when it came after her name when he said it like that. “Bonnie was supposed to fix you.”

“HE. CAN’T.”

“I left the keys!”

“IT. ISN’T. THAT. SIMPLE.”

“Yes, it is!” Fear, grief, confusion and a thousand other emotions she couldn’t acknowledge and hardly knew how to name came boiling out all at once in a choked, angry rush: “And if that was all you ever wanted from me, you should have just asked! I’d have done it! I’m easily that stupid! I’m here now, aren’t I? But what in the hell was all that family crap? Don’t you talk to me about home and…and love and…and burying my fucking dead aunt when all you wanted was the keys! You had no right!”

“AN-N-A—”

“You had no right!”

He stopped trying to talk. She wasn’t sure how to start. Desert insects drilled up the air; apart from that, it would have been uncomfortably silent.

“My truck ran out of gas,” she said finally. “That’s why you didn’t hear it. I’m not trying to sneak in.”

“PEOPLE. WHO. SNEAK. DON’T. KNOCK,” he agreed.

They stared at each other some more.

At length, Freddy twitched and said, “WOULD. YOU. LIKE. TO. C-C-COME ON IN, KIDS! WELCOME TO FREDDY-DY-DY FAZBEAR’S PIZZERIA!” He shook his head, grumbling, and added, “I’M. SORRY. I. THOUGHT. I. WAS. READY. FOR. THIS. BUT. BONNIE. WAS. SUPPOSED. TO. HAVE. THIS. PART.”

“What?”

“I. THOUGHT. YOU. WOULD. GO. AROUND. BACK,” he explained, releasing the other door (it sagged at once, leaning slowly open until the wind gusted and banged it shut) as he stood aside to let her in. “BONNIE. IS. WAITING. BY. THE.” He clicked to himself, looking away with the same embarrassment as a man might show if he had to stop mid-sentence to burp, and came back with, “HICKORY-DICKORY-DOCK. I. WANTED. HIM. TO. TALK. TO. YOU. FIRST. I’M. NOT. GOOD. WITH. THIS. SORT. OF. THING.”
“I don’t want to talk to Bonnie,” Ana said quickly. She hadn’t moved, hadn’t put even one foot over the threshold, although he’d given her plenty of room to get by without touching him. “I’m just here to get my stuff.”

Freddy started to speak, but his first word became a growling grunt as his attention snapped out to the road. Ana caught only a glimpse of sunlight dazzling on a couple of bicycles before Freddy dropped a paw on her shoulder and propelled her inside, pulling the doors shut behind her. They wouldn’t close; he tried three times, then stood, tense, a door in each hand, holding them together with just a narrow crack between them through which to watch the road. She knew the bikes had gone on to the quarry by the way his ears relaxed. He grunted and fiddled with the doors some more, heaving them around on their bent hinges before he managed to shut them and keep them shut.

“I. MISS. THE. BEAR. ARCADE,” he grumbled, backing away from the doors with his hands up, ready to catch them if they should fall open again.

“The…? Oh. The barricade. Yeah. I’ll see what I can do. Don’t read too much into that,” she said as his ears went up and his eyes narrowed. “I just…I don’t want anyone else getting in.”

“OR. OUT,” Freddy guessed, but then simply moved on without looking to see if she followed. “BONNIE. SHE’S. HERE. CHICA. YOU. MIGHT. AS. WELL. WAKE. UP. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

Chica’s violent convulsions, coupled with the sound of something big crashing through the storeroom, prevented her from noticing that Freddy had moved away from her, but the little creak of the West Hall door opening cut across it all.

Freddy was leaving. She could hear Bonnie’s hurried footsteps in the kitchen now, each one closer than the one before. She could hear his hands beating on the cupboards and the oven for balance, even see the pale glow of his eyes growing brighter through what remained of the hanging sheets of plastic. She’d see him in a moment. He’d see her. And Freddy was just leaving them to it.

“Where are you going?” she blurted, taking half a step after him, a full step away and two steps back into the lobby, to the effect that she pranced in place and fell against the gift shop wall. “I said I didn’t want to see him!”

“I’M. GOING. TO. GET. FOXY,” he replied. “WE. SHOULD. ALL. BE. HERE. FOR. THIS.”

“For what? There is no ‘this,’ I just want my stuff and I’ll leave! Don’t!”

Then Freddy was gone and in the very next second, Bonnie was there, tangling up his ears in his impatient push through the plastic and trying to brute-force his way free. This succeeded in pulling the plastic off the door’s frame, but gravity only caused it to fall over him and either a slight static charge or the perverse nature of inanimate objects made it cling tighter. He staggered out into the dining room, pulling at the loose ends, which forced folds of plastic into his joints, wrapping himself tighter and tighter. “Oh for—really?!?” he exclaimed right before he fell over.

Chica and Ana both started toward him, stopped, looked at each other, and both stepped back, as perfectly synchronized as clockwork figures when the hour is struck. To punctuate this awkward exchange, the camera on the stage wall snapped on, throwing a dirty spotlight over the whole scene.

It focused on Bonnie first, attracted by his thrashing, but didn’t stay on him long. It aimed itself at the stage directly below it next, where Chica stood tapping her fingers and avoiding its one-eyed
gaze, then moved to the empty spot where Freddy ought to be singing, given that this was the end of the six o’clock set on a Thursday, then panned slowly around the room until it reached Ana.

It seemed to Ana that it ‘stared’ at her for a long time, considering that she wasn’t moving or making noise or doing anything that should keep its attention, but it did eventually return to its home position and switch off, right before the West Hall door opened.

Freddy limped in and stopped short, looking at Bonnie, still thrashing on the floor. “REALLY.”

“Yes, really!” Bonnie snapped. “It’s this new act I’m working on where I wrap myself in plastic and fucking faceplant on the goddamn floor! What do you think?”

“I. THINK. PERFORMANCE. ART. IS. UNDER. RATED. FOR. A. REASON,” said Freddy, but he headed over to start peeling Bonnie out of his trappings. “HOLD. STILL.”

“CAN I PLAY TOO?” Chica asked, stealing another glance at Ana before carefully descending the stage steps. “I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS!”

“Oi.”

Ana looked back as Freddy and Chica wrangled Bonnie onto his feet and saw Foxy still in the shadowed corner of the West Hall.

“I’ll g-g-give ye one chance, luv,” he said, tipping his head so that the loose side of his jaw gave him a wry slant of a smile. “Give me yer hand-d-d right now and I’ll carry ye off to P-P-PIRATE COVE. I’ll get-t-t ye drunk and do wicked things to ye that ye won’t remember and we never has to t-t-talk about. Ye can skip this sorry sh-sh—SHOWTIME!—show altogether. What say ye?”

“Still the same speech settings,” Ana said to herself. She looked at the stage and saw the glint of metal there on the grungy pad. The keys, untouched. “He didn’t fix any of you. How could you?” she demanded, turning on Bonnie. “How could you just leave them like that?”

Before Bonnie could answer, before he was even fully upright, Freddy said, “AN-N-A. THAT’S ENOUGH. WE. CAN. TALK. ABOUT. THIS. BUT. WE. ARE. GOING. TO. DO. IT. LIKE. ADULTS. SIT. DOWN.”

“Who said I was talking? I’m getting my stuff and I’m leaving!”

Freddy nodded. “FOXY.”

A cold metal hand closed around Ana’s tattooed arm, covering the ravens, Thought and Memory, from view. “Told ye it were yer last-t-t chance,” said Foxy, leading her away from the doors to the stage. “Rest yer nethers, lass.”

“I’m not sitting!”

“On the stage or on me knee, luv,” Foxy replied implacably. “Them’s yer only say on the matter.”

Ana sat. On the stage.

“OKAY,” said Freddy, limping over. He glanced once at the camera on the wall—dark now, blind —and then faced her with a bearish grumble and folded his arms. “LET’S. TALK.”
“You want to talk?” Ana jumped up only to be caught immediately by Foxy running his hook through her braid. He reeled her in and would not release her until she sat down once again on the show stage. Snatching her braid’s end back from him, she turned her fury back on the one who deserved it most: Bonnie. “Let’s start with you! What’s wrong with you? How could you?”

“Me?” Bonnie brought both hands up to the level of his heart, his ears folded back and bewilderment in his eyes. “What did I do?”

“Nothing! You did nothing! I gave you the keys for a reason! Why didn’t you fix them?”

To his credit, he didn’t throw that back at her. He simply said, “I can’t.”

“The keys are right there!” She started to point, but her hand shook. She dropped her arm fast and brought it up again in a fist. “You didn’t even try!”

“I can’t,” Bonnie said again, shaking off Freddy’s restraining hand and taking a step forward. He stopped when Ana backed away, but the challenge remained. “I can’t touch them, not even to pick them up, and I can’t access anyone’s control panel anyway.”

“Oh, that’s horseshit!”

“Ye ain’t the animatr-tr-tronic here, luv,” Foxy interjected, pretending to pick dust or maybe dried flakes of blood from the scruffy fur around the cracks in his chest. “Maybe ye ought-t-t not to be telling us how they work-k-k.”

“You’re set to Automatic now,” Ana argued, looking back at Bonnie. “You don’t have to follow the rules anymore.”

“I’m set to Autonomous,” he corrected, ears flat. “And so what? It’s just a word, not a magic spell.”

“Just a word, huh?” Ana looked at Chica. “What does autonomous mean?”

Chica twitched. “WOW, THAT’S A BIG WORD! AUTONOMY MEANS INDEPENDENCE. TO BE AUTONOMOUS MEANS TO HAVE THE RIGHT OR THE FREEDOM TO BE SELF-GOVERNING AND TO ACT WITHOUT OUTSIDE MONITORING OR CONTROL.”

“Thank you so much,” Bonnie said to Chica, who offered him a helpless shrug. With a sigh, Bonnie turned back to Ana. “Look, I know how that sounds, but you have to believe me. Our Autonomous setting only releases us from all the rules that have to do with the restaurant’s operation, like singing and dancing and all that shit. I can’t just do whatever I want.”

“Horseshit!”

“IT’S. THE. TRUTH,” said Freddy.

“You don’t get to talk to me about the truth,” Ana snapped. “You’ve been lying to me since the day we met. You wouldn’t know what truth was if it painted itself bright purple and bit you on your big bear ass.”
Freddy’s eyes flickered. He looked away, impassive, staring at the wall.

“All right now, d-d-don’t be saying things ye don’t mean,” said Foxy, giving her a light tap on the head with the curved side of his hook. “We’re all friends here.”

“Fuck you! Friends?! You lied to me worse than he did! And you got me drunk and flirted with me and…and…and you tied me to your goddamned bed!”

Foxy’s eyes shifted to take in Bonnie’s unseen reaction behind her. He chuckled, then leaned a little closer to her scowling face and winked. “Did more’n that, luv, if ye’ll recall. Me and ye? We’re very good friends.”

Freddy growled a wordless warning.

“I want my jeans back,” Ana said.

“Ye can have ‘em any time. Just take ‘em off me.”

Bonnie let out a low growl of his own, gave Foxy a hard stare, then visibly pushed that aside and refocused on Ana. “All I’m saying is, there’s always going to be some rules because we’re always going to need some kind of operating system. This—” He knocked on his plastic chest. “—is a machine. I’m not the program and I’m for fuck-all sure not the programmer! I’m just the controller!”

“The autonomous controller!”

“I keep telling you, that doesn’t mean—How can I explain this to you…?”

“If you’re about to spew a bunch of AI technobabble at me, I’m going to call horseshit right now.”

“Relax, I’ll keep it causal.” Bonnie paced away, raking one hand over the top of his head, then swung back with a plastic scowl. “You know computers, right? I mean, I’ve seen you use the internet and stuff, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you download anything to keep. You do that, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“You keep that stuff just anywhere on the drive or how do you organize it?”

“It pretty much organizes itself,” she said, baffled. “I keep the stuff I use most often on my home shelf, but I can find pretty much everything off the main directory. It’s all in folders. What the fuck has this got to do with the price of tea in China?”

Freddy’s ears came up as his brows drew slowly down, but he didn’t interrupt.

“All right, folders,” Bonnie said, all his attention still on Ana. “What do you call those folders?”

“I don’t know, whatever’s in them. What even, Bonnie, seriously?”

“Okay, so you put the games in the Games folder and the Music in the music folder and the Movies in the movies folder. You ever watch porn?”

All three animatronics looked at him with some degree of annoyance, but Ana merely thrust out her chin and said, “Of course.”

“You ever download any of that stuff to keep?”
Bonnie shoved a silencing hand in front of Freddy’s face, still glaring at Ana. “Give me a second, I’m going somewhere with this. Do you?”

“Sure. Sometimes.”

“Coo,” Foxy murmured.

“Shut up,” Ana and Bonnie said together and Freddy hammered it in with, “THAT’S AN ORDER.”

As Foxy put up his arms in a peacemaking gesture, Bonnie looked at Ana again. “Okay. So, what do you call the folder where you put it? You call that one Porn?”

She did not answer right away, but at last she said, “Gardening.”

“Ha!” Bonnie pointed at her. “You can name a folder, or a program, or an operations mode anything you want. It has nothing to do with what goes into it,” he told her, giving each word its own angry emphasis. “And just like there’s no such thing as a truly random number generator, there’s no such thing as a fully autonomous machine. That’s just a word. I—” He slapped his chest again. A crack appeared, forking out like black lightning from the point of impact. “I am a fucking machine! Every single object of function in my body requires an operating program or I can’t do it!”

“But you’re adaptive. You can program yourself.”

“To a point, sure. But certain programs are immutable, which means there are things we can’t do, things we can never do, no matter how much we may want to, and one of those things is that we can’t fix each other. We can’t even open each other up because it would give someone unauthorized access to one of our control panels. And you…you can’t really think I left them like this for the hell of it? What kind of sorry, self-indulgent ass do you think I am?”

Ana’s mouth formed protests without sound. She had air enough to speak, she just had nothing to say.

“You may think you know what it’s like here, but believe me—” Bonnie interrupted himself with an edged laugh and shook his head. “You have no idea. I’m sure at some point in your colorful work history, you’ve had to smile when you didn’t want to and say things you didn’t mean, but you could stop! It might have got you fired, but you could! When you humans say you have no choice, what you really mean is that you don’t like the choices that you have, but when I say I have no choice, it means I have no fucking choice! It’s like being a parasite in your own body sometimes, feeling it do things and say things you have no control over! It’s hell and I would never, ever leave them in it if I had the chance to save them!”

Chica put a hand on Bonnie’s arm, but turned her anxious eyes on Ana, chirping, “IT’S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS! YOU DID YOUR BEST.”

Bonnie looked at her, then at Ana. His ears snapped up, then folded back and lay low. “I didn’t mean you…I’m just saying…Come on, you know me better than that.”

‘I don’t know you at all,’ she thought, but even in her head, it sounded hollow, ugly, and most of all, untrue.

“So what does autonomous mean?” she asked finally. “If it doesn’t let you do whatever you want, what does it do?”
“Mostly, it just disables all the subroutines that have to do with how we’re supposed to act during operating hours.”

“So you can say whatever you want?”

He shuddered, hard, then scowled and said, “Not exactly, but at least I don’t have to say the stuff I don’t want. I don’t have to put on a fucking show every hour and I can’t be triggered by performance cues. Some of my speech restrictions are immutable. It’s just the ones that directly stem from the restaurant, guests or staff that are disabled. The ones about—”

And without warning, Bonnie’s mouth snapped shut, his eyes opened up black, and he flung himself backwards at a spine-cracking angle, convulsing wildly.

Freddy made a grab, not at Bonnie, but at Chica, yanking her out of the way a split second before Bonnie’s arm drove through the place she had just been and punched Swampy instead, shattering the statue’s snout and scattering shrapnel as far as the tray return window.

Ana jumped to her feet, but Foxy snatched her up before she even knew where to run. “Hush, luv,” he murmured, his speaker right against her ear. “He’ll b-b-be all right in half a shake, no fear, but d-d-don’t ye move and don’t ye make a sound until he’s full awake.”

“Is he okay?” she asked, trying to whisper, but her voice came through like cracks in ice. “Is he crashing? What’s wrong?”

Bonnie shrieked, wrenching his entire body around in the direction of the stage and then dropping face-down on the tiles. His stiff limbs rattled without bending. His ears tapped and skittered on the tiles. His speaker emitted a constant stream of static and feedback at the highest volume, underscored by the sounds of laboring mechanisms and the grinding of metal teeth.

“KEEP. HER. QUIET,” Freddy snapped, moving Chica to one side and putting the bulk of his own body between Bonnie’s black-eyed stare and the rest of the room. “BONNIE. LISTEN. TO. ME. AND. BE. CALM.”

“Bon’s all right, luv,” Foxy said. “If he has t-t-to, Fred’ll pop ‘im in the freezer to c-c-cool off, but he don’t look that deep to me. Just hush and he’ll c-c-come out on his own.”

Sure enough, as suddenly as the seizure had come over him, it stopped. After those harsh electronic screams, the quiet came almost as a blow. Bonnie seemed to sag into the floor as his joints unlocked and for a few seconds, that was all he did. Then one hand slowly splayed open and the other slowly clenched. “What is this?” he asked, then raised his head and blinked in confusion at the tiles in front of his face. “Am I on the floor?”

“See?” said Foxy, setting Ana on her feet and releasing her. “Safe as houses. And there she g-g-goes.”

Ana had indeed gone, sprinting across the dining room and dropping so that she slid the last few inches on her knees. “Are you okay?” she asked, catching at Bonnie’s shoulders and feeling them too loose in their settings. She helped him sit up, fixed his ears—one of the upper casings had come loose—picked up the pinkie that was forever falling off and looked up to find his face just inches from hers.

The urge washed over her to close that little distance, to just let go of everything and hold him. She felt somewhat light-headed when it finally faded, as though it had taken part of her with it when it left.
After a moment, he offered his damaged hand.

She found the pin and put him back together. “I have really got to fix this.”

“You keep saying that.”

She fussed with his finger some more, but couldn’t do it forever. “So…Autonomous mode just means you don’t have to do the shows, but all the rules still apply?”

“Yeah. Well, no. The first few don’t.”

“THE. FIRST. TWENTY-ONE,” said Freddy.

“Whatever. I don’t care how many there are. The point is, the rest of them still do and always will. All the rest of my programming was built around those rules.”

“And they’re immutable.”

“They’re worse than that, they’re absolute. Even attempting to access that part of my code could fry the neural pathways affected by them, which is all of them. You asked me once if I could blue screen and shut down if I create an exception? Well, this is a guaranteed fatal exception. I’d die. I don’t know if I’ll still be able to walk around or…” Bonnie glanced over at the stage, or maybe at the camera on the stage wall, and finally met her eyes again. “I don’t know what this body will still be doing, I only know I’ll be dead.”

“You can fix buggy code,” Ana said, trying not to think too hard about what she was getting at. “I don’t mean you as in you, Bonnie, but someone could.”

“I know what you’re saying, but no. Even if you knew how to program code, and I get the feeling our code is way different from any other code out there, but even if you found the greatest programmer in the world, there’s no way to access it. My braincase is literally designed to destroy my CPU if someone tries to open it who doesn’t know how.”

“Do you know how?”

“Sort of. It’s only happened a couple times since I was first switched on, and I guess I’m shut down when the case actually opens because I don’t remember anything when it happens, but I’ve seen it happen to—” He shuddered again, his pupils dilating. “—to the others. So…So I know what’s involved and it seems to be the same for all of us.”

“Well, can you tell me? I mean, if you can walk me through it, maybe I could do something for you.”

“Yeah, I appreciate the thought, but it starts with a voice print that’s only keyed to—” Bonnie’s pupils grew huge, until the green color was nothing but a thin ring around them and the light at the back of the cameras could be seen as a silver point of light behind them. He brought a twitching hand up, closed his eyes, and vented his cooling system a few times, twitching.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No. Give me a sec. I gotta…I gotta figure out a way to say this without saying it.”

Freddy put a hand on Ana’s shoulder. She shrugged it off and waited, watching Bonnie shiver.

At last, his eyes opened and if the pupils were still a bit too big, they were green again. “The voice
print is keyed to the guys who initialized it,” he said. “And if by some miracle, you could find a tape with one of them talking and piece together the code word without me telling you what it is, there’s still special tools involved and a certain order they’re used, and that’s just to open the case. Once you’re in there, it’s a whole new level of impossible because these—” He tapped the side of his head. “—aren’t compatible with just any old piece of hardware or software. There’s no user interface or anything. You need to connect my neural net to an external drive to do anything, and yeah, there’s a jack on the inside, but you’re going to have a hell of time finding the only cable in the world that will work with it or the only console that’s set up to receive it! But yeah, okay, just for shits and giggles, let’s pretend you’ve got it. I still can’t give you any kind of useful help on reprogramming us, because I’m not allowed to interfere with immutable code. That includes telling someone else how to do it for me. Bottom line: It doesn’t matter how it happens, immutable is immutable and I can’t change it!”

“What can I do?” Ana demanded. “Just tell me how to fix this!”

“I can’t,” he said, throwing her exasperation back at her. “Because this isn’t considered broken, Ana. This is how we were made. This is what he considered working just fine.”

“Well, it sucks.”

“You’re telling me.”

They looked at each other, the fire of their mutual frustration slowly fading until it became impossible not to know she was still there beside him, her hand on his chest and his face right in front of hers.

‘I missed you,’ she thought. She didn’t say it, but she couldn’t stop thinking it. She’d missed this place, missed the good smell of old rot mixed with fresh sawdust and plaster, missed the white noise of gears and pumps and fans and especially of Freddy’s footsteps as he checked on her in the small hours of morning, but most of all, she’d just missed him. She wished she could say it. More than that, she wished she didn’t want to. And most of all, she wished wishing made any damn difference at all.

“I really missed you,” he said softly.

Ana opened her mouth, hesitated, and said, “You need help getting up?”

He looked around at the floor, touched his bad knee, and frowned. “No, I think I can do it.”

Ana stood, holding out her hand.

Bonnie acknowledged the offer with a grunting laugh, but did not accept. He turned at the waist, caught the edge of the table she used to sleep under, then flipped his legs around and dragged them into a kneeling position. He got his good foot on the ground, adjusted his arms, checked to see where Ana was, then heaved himself up. The table’s legs creaked, but held him, even when he leaned on it to give his left knee a loosening smack.

“I need to fix that, too,” Ana said.

He snorted, giving his leg a few practice kicks before putting his weight on it. “I dare you to find one thing in this whole damn building that doesn’t need to be fixed.”

“THE. WOOF.” Freddy unfolded his arms and took a step toward her, then another when she didn’t back away. “THANK. YOU. FOR. THE. WOOF. AN-N-A. I’M. GLAD. I. GOT. THE. CHANCE. TO. SAY. THAT. AND. IF. THAT’S. THE. LAST. THING. I. EVER. SAY. TO.
YOU. I’M. STILL. GLAD. I. GOT. THE. CHANCE.” Without looking at the stage or even taking his eyes off hers, he reached up and tapped one broad, blunt finger against a precise point on his chest—over his battery case and to the left side. “IF. YOU. WANT. ME. TO. SAY. MORE. THAN. THAT. I. NEED. YOUR. HELP.”

Ana looked at the keys. She went over and got them—they jingled in her hand like a child’s toy, stupidly cheerful as they hung from their Frankenstein fob—and looked at Freddy again.

Freddy ticked hard, shuddering as he fought not to say, “IT IS UNLAWFUL TO T-T-TAMPER WITH THE ANIMATRONICS,” and said it anyway.

She started with Chica, even though Freddy was closer. Chica tapped her fingertips together in that nervous way she had as Ana approached, but didn’t say anything or resist in any way as Ana reached for her. Right before Ana opened her chest panel, Chica closed her eyes. Then went dark, slumping and dead.

Ana put the key in, turned it, and pushed the Auto button. The light came on. She closed Chica up and heard the surge of systems as she changed over, but it was still several seconds before her eyes opened.

“CLOCK DISCREPANCY DETECTED. CORRECTING…CORRECTED. Oh, that’s better,” she said, very softly. It was still her voice, but equally not at all her voice. Some ineffable quality was present now and something else missing, maybe just the too-cheery birdbrained enthusiasm revolving solely around pizza, fun and safety. “Oh thank you so much. Thank you for coming back.” She brought her hands up to her face, plastic and metal fingers tapping and feeling along the sides of her beak before she covered her eyes. “I didn’t think you would,” she said, still in that same soft, breathy way as servos ground and hummed inside her. “I’m sorry. Thank you so much for coming back.”

“I shouldn’t have left.” She didn’t mean to say it, but adding, “Until I knew you were all right,” only made her feel worse, like she was hurting Chica’s feelings. And maybe she had, that was the really rotten part. Because these were machines, sure, that part hadn’t changed, but they were no longer quite the machines Ana had thought they were. They weren’t people…but they weren’t objects either. The space between was grey and full of teeth. She wasn’t ready to know just where they fit on it, but ready or not, here they were.

Freddy twitched a few times as Ana moved toward him, but managed to hold still and refrain from spitting rules at her. He went dark when she opened him up and came back almost at once when she closed him. The difference between the old Freddy and the new, even before he spoke, was as immediate and as distinct as Chica’s transformation. His entire way of standing seemed to change in some invisible, impossible way. He looked at her and she almost couldn’t believe she was looking at the same piece of plastic.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

She wasn’t ready for that, either.

Ana moved past him to Foxy and he let her, but he stayed close behind her, keeping her in arm’s reach.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked, keeping her eyes on her hands as she opened Foxy up so she wouldn’t have to see him go dead. His insides were different from the others. The frame wrapping his endoskeleton was noticeably more intricate, more accurately mimicking a human skeleton; the mechanisms that moved it, of sleeker and more complex design. His control panel,
she saw, had an extra setting: Party.

Freddy’s voice.

She blinked around at him like a sleepwalker. “What?”

His eyes slanted down, then cut to look at Foxy’s control panel. He paused, then said, quietly, “Are you going to tell someone?”

“And what if I did?” she countered, closing Foxy’s cracked chest panel. “What if I go out there right now, drive to the nearest newspaper office, grab a reporter and tell him everything? Do you honestly think anyone would believe me?”

“I can’t take that risk. Do you remember what you said to me about the condenser the night you fixed it?” Freddy asked. “How it would be seized and weaponized before the public ever learned of its existence?” His head lowered, his expression grimly set and his gaze unwavering. “It would be just the same for us. I won’t let that happen.”

“Oh, ye wouldn’t play us so foul as that, now would ye, luv?” Foxy asked, slipping between them. He did it smoothly, catching Ana’s elbow like he was just getting her attention and keeping his back to Freddy like he didn’t even know he was cutting him off. If Ana had never met Mike Schmidt or seen his videos, she might never have noticed how deliberate and practiced a shield Foxy made, but she had and she did.

And so did Freddy, who folded his arms and fixed the other animatronic with a hard stare. “Why are you doing that?”

“Doing what?” Foxy asked, eyes innocent-wide even as he nudged Ana even further away from Freddy.

“That.” Freddy gave Foxy’s hand on Ana’s waist a pointed stare. “That is completely unnecessary. I’d never do anything to her.” His eyes shifted back to Ana and hardened. “But I won’t let us be taken, either. I’ve been ‘studied’ before. It was…”

The silence dragged out, broken only by the slight revving of Freddy’s cooling fan and the hard clicks as one of his ears ticced.

After a long moment and without finishing the sentence, he simply went on. “That was just a few days by men who thought they were only looking at an advanced machine. If they really knew what we were, there would be no end to it. We would spend the rest of our lives being broken into smaller and smaller pieces by dumb tinkerers with electric scalpels who regard our pain as no more than a scientific curiosity. No, I will end these lives before I allow that.”

“Dibs on the fox,” called Bonnie.

“Have at me, ye scabby swab,” Foxy countered, unconcerned. “I’ll give ye first two shots of a one-shot pistol and still be wearing yer ears for garters at the end.”

“Why are you still talking like a pirate?” Ana asked, staring at Foxy.

He waved his hook in an expansively helpless gesture. “I told ye. I can pick me words, but that don’t change how I says ‘em. That’ll always be with me.”

“An immutable object.”
“Aye.” Foxy nodded his chin toward Bonnie. “Bon may be long on ear and short on wit most o’ the time, but he laid it out straight for ye, luv. We ain’t but machines. We can only do as our programming allows and mine don’t allow me to talk any way but this’n. I can’t even tell ye what kind o’ accent this be. Not sure he could, tell ye the truth. It just be the way he thought pirates talk.”

“You have questions,” Freddy said, now focusing his attention on Ana as if they were the only two in the room, in the world. “And I’ll answer them if I can. But whatever you’ve heard or think you know, we’re not monsters.”

“Not all the time, anyway,” said Foxy, earning himself an impressive glower from Freddy.

“What are you?” Ana asked, the latest in a string of things she hadn’t meant to say. “Answer me that if you answer nothing else. You’re not really animatronics.”

Foxy thought about it, scratching at the side of his muzzle, but ultimately shrugged. “Not in the traditional sense, but I don’t know as there is a word for what we are. So…one word’s as good as any other, I reckon.”

“No, but I mean…Who are you? Really?”

Foxy shook his head and showed her his hook. “Captain Fox be the only name I knows.”

“Bonnie,” said Bonnie, and hyucked out an unflattering imitation of his pre-recorded spiel. “I’m your best buddy, Bonnie the Bunny!”

“Chica the Little Chicken,” said Chica. “Although I saw my draw-ups once before I was skinned and he had Shelly and Henny and Peepers written and crossed out. I think it was the housekeeper who started calling me Chica and thank goodness for that.” She tugged self-consciously at her bib, muttering, “The bib is bad enough, but all those early versions had me wearing an egg for a diaper.”

“And a bonnet,” Foxy reminded her. “That wee little egg bonnet.”

“Ugh. What kind of message would that have sent? Am I wearing a diaper on my head or am I pooping in a hat? And Peepers didn’t even have eyes, just those huge, thick glasses with the holographic eyes in the lenses and nothing at all on the actual head, not even sockets. Can you imagine? Like that’s not going to scare kids. Just…double-ugh.”

“I’m Freddy Fazbear,” said Freddy, staring straight into Ana’s eyes.

“Before that!” she insisted.

“There was nothing before that. I wasn’t born,” he said, his eyelids drawing down in a plastic frown. “I was built. I don’t know how much of what I think or feel comes from my programming, but I like to think that I still know who I am.”

“There’s a lot about our condition that’s open to interpretation,” Chica agreed. “But you could make the same argument about the human condition. I mean, what is life, really?”

“Oh God, here we go,” Bonnie muttered and Foxy sighed.

“Your body is as much a machine as mine is,” Chica continued earnestly. “It’s just constructed from different material. Granted, we were programmed to be self-aware rather than arrive at it through a philosophical exploration of the psyche, but I think you can agree that most people live
without examining the source or the meaning of their lives and that certainly doesn’t invalidate their existence. After all, isn’t any animal instinct just a form of biological programming? The human body operates off of and generates electrical current. So does mine! Your brain is made of organic neurons and mine is a deep feedforward neural network, but we both think. I believe we feel the same feelings and that mine are just as real as yours. If you ask me if we have a soul—"

“For the love o’ God, don’t,” Foxy said dryly. “I ain’t fully recovered from the last discussion o’ bloody Neoplatonic psychopathology versus Cartesian duality.”

“Do you have a soul?” Ana asked warily.

As Foxy groaned and Chica eagerly opened her beak, Bonnie bluntly interrupted with, “Ours or other people’s?”

The other three turned on him with very nearly the same expression, but none of them got the chance to say anything.

“Well, that’s what you really want to know, isn’t it?” he said, his ears set at a challenging angle. “Is it actually easier for you to believe that the ghosts of Reardon’s victims are possessing the animatronics where he stuffed their bodies? What, are you surprised I’ve heard that?” he demanded with a short laugh. “I’ve heard it all. At Circle Drive, before Reardon, the story was that our bodies were made from scraps from the old animatronics at Mulholland, so that we picked up the ghosts along with the wires and pumps.”

“And we weren’t, before ye ask,” Foxy interjected. “We were around long afore they were. If anything, they were made from bits of us.” He glanced at Bonnie. “Some of us more’n others.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Bonnie said with a snort. “The son of a bitch still has my damn arm.”

“At Mulholland,” said Ana, re-attracting his attention. “When you were blue.”

“Hey, I was never blue,” he said, thumping his thumb on his chest. “I’ve always been some kind of purple, but yeah, that other guy was blue and he was the Bonnie everyone saw, up there on the stage with my fucking arm attached so he could play my old guitar. And the story floating around there was that those guys were brought to life by Stalinists—"

“Stalinists?”

“Satanists,” Chica corrected quietly.

“Whatever! Satan, Stalin, what’s the difference? The story is, they murdered babies to make the animatronics and if you opened their battery cases, you’d ‘find their still-beating hearts,’” Bonnie intoned, wagging his fingers sarcastically for emphasis. “Believe me, I didn’t like those guys, but they were made exactly the same way we were: on a work table, in a basement, by two guys with a lot of tools and a lot of boring code. And before that, at the place on High Street, it was supposedly just one ghost-kid possessing all of us, and before that, it was ghosts of fucking cannibal miners from a hundred goddamn years ago who crawled out of the quarry and into our soulless robotic bodies on a dark and stormy night. I mean, come on! Do you seriously believe any of that?”

“I never said I did!”

“No, you just want to know where we got our souls,” he shot back, ears flat. “Well? Where did you get yours? How do you know you didn’t get it from someone else? How do you know you’ve got one at all?”
“I guess... I don’t.”

Chica opened her beak again and Foxy, without looking at her, gave her a swift, silencing tap with his elbow without fully unfolding his arms.

“But you think you do,” Bonnie pressed. “You think you’re real and that your thoughts are all your own and whatever you feel is your own feelings and not just a bunch of chemical impulses firing off in response to a cluster of neurons in response to synaptic stimuli. You think you have a soul and it’s what makes you who you are and not just—” He gestured at her head, her body. “—hardware and software and a power source.”

“I... guess so.”

Bonnie moved closer to Ana and said, “So do I? You’ve got no more proof than I do, but if you think you’ve got the answers, then you tell me. Am I real?”

“I...” She blinked a few times, searching his eyes while he stared with silent defiance back at her. They didn’t look like plastic. Which was to say, of course they did and they always had, but she did not see plastic when she looked at them, any more than she had ever looked into another person’s eyes and seen vitreous humors and optic nerves. She just saw Bonnie’s eyes. Not even Brewster’s, but Bonnie’s.

She looked at him and his eyes were just the same as they had ever been, even before she’d dug them out of Brewster’s big fake head and affixed them to his cameras.

He was alive. And however that had happened, whether by accident or design or some cosmically crossed wire that connected the two, it still didn’t need the ghosts of children murdered by a crazed Nazi to be real. He was Bonnie the Bunny, made for no more sinister purpose than to play the guitar in a pizza parlor. Whatever spark of life had raised him up beyond that—and whatever hidden programming had perhaps forced him to act beyond that—it really didn’t matter. She knew who he was and he was more than hardware and software and a power source.

“Yeah,” she breathed and frowned. The realization was not an entirely pleasant one. “Yeah, you are.”

Some of the challenge faded from Bonnie’s gaze, but it lost none of its intensity. “And?”

“And you’d never hurt me.”

“Never,” he said softly, fiercely. “I never lied to you, Ana. If I wasn’t as honest as you think I should have been, it’s only because I couldn’t say everything I wanted to, but I never lied and I would never hurt you. I’m your man. I have been from the night I first met you.”

His hand found hers somehow and she gripped it without thinking. The plastic scratched at her palm except where his metal bones were exposed, and it was Bonnie’s hand.

Those hot jaws she hadn’t really been aware of chewing at her heart now loosened. She took the first truly calm breath she’d taken since Bonnie had told her they were alive, days ago, and held out the key ring to Freddy.

“I can’t touch them,” said Freddy.

“Not even you?”

“Not even me. You could throw them away, I suppose, but I would feel better about things if I
knew you were keeping them. Please.”

Reluctantly, Ana put them in her pocket. Then she pointed at the back wall of the stage. “I heard about the kid who died here during the Grand Opening. But you sure weren’t so new that you didn’t know any better. So tell me what really happened,” she said, her eyes locked with Freddy’s. “And tell me the truth.”

Freddy’s fans revved. He glanced at the backstage door, then looked back at her and said, “I did tell you the truth. A boy died.”

“Who are we talking about?” Bonnie asked and Foxy answered, “The kid what jumped off the rock wall face-first into the carousel.”

“Oh Jeez, that guy.”

“Did you kill him?” Ana demanded.

Freddy’s ears lowered slightly, although his gaze never wavered. “I didn’t save him.”

“What did you do?”

He did not answer right away. In the quiet, the sound of tiny servos as his lenses opened wide and irised small was like the buzzing of mosquitos, but in the end, all he said was, “I got rid of the body.”

Ana absorbed this confession—if she could even use that word to describe Freddy’s unemotional statement—and finally said, “Why?”

“Over the years, I have had ample opportunity to observe first-hand how the missing…and the dead…lead to investigation. The secret of our existence, our self-awareness, cannot survive a close scrutiny. If we are taken as faulty machines, we will be disassembled and either whatever it is that gives us life will be destroyed in the process, killing us, or it won’t, and we will serve out whatever time remains to us in that state—stripped to base components, our separate parts in separate rooms and each one still speaking to the others, registering more and more damage and more and more distance until it was all I could feel—” He stopped there, turning his head sharply to stare at the wall while his revving fan slowed and quieted. When it had resumed normal rhythm, he started to speak again, very quietly, every word underscored with static. “The boy was dead. I couldn’t save him, so I did what I could to save us. I got rid of the body.”

“Did anyone ever find him?”

“I wouldn’t know, but I doubt it.”

“And he was never in the Parts Room?”

“No.”

She absorbed that too, then looked at him and said, “What was? More importantly, where is it now? And does it have anything to do with that?” she demanded, now pointing at the maze in the ceiling.

Freddy opened his mouth, but it was Foxy who said, “Ye’ve been up there. Ye don’t need us telling ye it ain’t for moving air around.”

“Or animatronic rats.”
“Or rats,” he agreed.

“Then you lied to me, too. You looked me right in the eye and lied.”

Foxy unfolded one arm to tap his hook on his chest. “Pirate.”

“Lying ass,” she corrected.

“They goes together quite a bit, luv.”

“Well, tell the truth now, if you can. What was it for?”

“Looks,” replied Foxy and shrugged. “Believe me or don’t. It were never meant for more than a bit o’ shine on a hook. But we used it for a cage, aye.”

“Whose?”

Again, Freddy started to answer and again, Foxy beat him to it, saying, “Once upon a time, there were a princess who dreamed of running away and being a pirate.”

Ana looked at him, remembering that night, the bitterness in his story, and finally said, “You were talking about Foxanne, weren’t you?”

The sound of servos briefly surged as the other three animatronics reacted, but Foxy merely said, “Aye.”

“I should have guessed. I saw her poster in the lobby and…whatever that was in Kiddie Cove…but I never found her.” She looked at Freddy. “You were keeping her locked up? All by herself for all these years?”

“It was the safest place,” he said without apology. “For her as much as anyone.”

“And for us most of all,” Foxy interjected. “Look, I’ll give ye the short story, because I ain’t got in me to give ye a longer one, and the short story is, she weren’t made right.”

“That whole batch at Mulholland was just…off,” said Chica, shaking her head.

“Aye, a flaw in the core program, I reckon, but all I know is, she started out wrongish and only got worse. One day, she…” Foxy’s eyes lost their focus. He shook his head. “Call it a fatal exception, call it a code bomb, call it whatever ye want. She went mad. Aye, we kept her in the crawlway. Before that, we kept her in the freezer. The important thing was keeping her well clear of us.”

Ana thought and uncertainly said, “So that was…that was her nest in the Parts Room. She was getting in and out through the hatch to the…what did you call it? To the crawlway?”

Foxy rolled his shoulder stiffly. “There’s a part of our program what says if’n we gets damaged, we should go to the repairs dock backstage. I don’t know. Hell, maybe it was just a nest, like ye says, but I’d hear her sometimes and think maybe she’d come out of it, just enough to try and find her way home. I’d talk to her a little through the door in me cabin, but…she didn’t often talk back.”

The other three animatronics exchanged a group glance, heavy with shared feeling.

Foxy’s ears snapped flat. “She could talk,” he insisted. “She weren’t all in the black! Sometimes, she came out of it!”

“So that was her vocal coil I found on the shelf?” asked Ana.
“No,” said Foxy, shaking his head firmly, but Bonnie said, “Sort of. She had an animatronic—a real one, I mean—kind of attached to her shoulder.”

“The parrot,” Ana said, thinking of the plastic bird on the video Mike Schmidt had shown her, and the way Foxanne had flinched and swiped at it every time it spoke. “It had a vocal coil?”

Bonnie shrugged. “It could talk.”

So could Tux and the other New Faces, but they all had simple speakers, nothing like the specialized device the real animatronics used. But then again, Mangle wasn’t a New Face. She was old, older than Ana…

They were all old. Bonnie was old enough to be her father. Funny how she could laugh at the age difference when she thought she’d been kissing a teenager, but spin it around—

‘That doesn’t matter anymore,’ thought Ana and asked, “Where are you keeping her now?”

“We’re not,” Freddy said.

She didn’t want to ask, because the answer seemed so obvious, but she did anyway: “Because of me?”

Chica shook her head, Freddy and Bonnie said, “No,” practically in unison, and Foxy calmly said, “Aye.”

Bonnie swung on him, ears flat, and even Freddy looked angry, but Foxy did not apologize and take it back.

“You didn’t have to,” said Ana. “You could have told me.”

Foxy snorted. “And what would ye have done? Let her be or crawled in to see what could be done for her? Aye, and I could just carry that on me conscience the rest o’ me bloody life. Like I ain’t done enough to be sorry for.”

“She couldn’t be fixed,” Freddy said quietly, his words directed more at Foxy than Ana. “If there were any hope of that, then maybe…but even when she was new, she was prone to violent impulses. She couldn’t control them.”

“I don’t think she even knew she was having them,” Chica inserted.

“Aye, she did,” said Foxy. “She never knew what she did in the black, but she knew she were doing something. She knew she weren’t right. She and I…we had a lot o’ time there behind the curtain o’ the Cove after hours. I could keep her pinned together most nights, but during the day, all those lights and screaming kiddies running at her?”

“She bit someone,” Freddy said. “She bit a number of people, but she bit one of them…badly. She couldn’t be fixed, so instead she was punished.” His ears twitched, then his shoulder. The fingers of one hand begun to tremor, producing a low, steady rattle under his emotionless words: “They made her into the interactive exhibit you saw in Kiddie Cove. Every day…she was pulled apart. Over…and over. She went black and never came out of it.”

Foxy shifted, opening his mouth, only to close it and look away.

“Foxanne died,” Freddy continued. “What was left…they called it the Mangle. That was who we had here. Not Foxanne, only Mangle. And she was fast, Ana. She was strong. And she could still
bite.” Freddy drew an invisible line across his chest, calling her attention to a particularly deep gash in his casing, and another on his bicep, his neck, his thigh, his muzzle. “I kept her anyway. But I knew I couldn’t keep her forever. It’s true your coming here made that day come sooner than it otherwise might have, but even if so—” Freddy sighed and looked directly at Foxy. “—it’s just as true it came years later than it should have.”

“If yer waiting for me to agree, ye’ve a hell of a long wait coming, mate,” said Foxy, still staring at the wall. “Ye did what ye had to. I don’t hold it against ye none, but I’ll never give over and say it were right. She never did wrong of her own will, and what fell on her in her sorry life…she deserved none of it, Fred, none of it. Not from him, not from ye, and especially not from me.”

Chica moved toward him, one hand outstretched.

Foxy sent her back with a nod and a pat, then looked at Ana again. “She weren’t bad,” he said with a gruff sort of dignity. “She hadn’t a cruel hair on her pretty head when it were on straight.”

Bonnie muttered something whose particulars could not be made out, but which did not seem to be agreement.

Foxy did not so much as glance that way, although his ears rotated back at an angle. “She weren’t bad,” he said again, not to Bonnie but to Ana, only Ana. “She were broken.”

And there was a difference, wasn’t there? She doubted it would mean much to Mike Schmidt….or to Jeremy Fitzgerald, who had gone to work one Friday morning never knowing he had tied his shoes and pissed in a toilet for the last time….or to Foxanne, for that matter. Because she was broken and knew no better than to bite.

“I’m sorry,” she said and with some discomfort, found that she meant it. “For whatever my part in it is—”

“It’s not your fault,” Bonnie interjected.

“—I’m sorry she’s gone,” Ana finished.

Foxy shrugged one shoulder, looking at the point on his hook as he turned it this way and that to catch the light from his yellow eye. “Reckon I would be too, if’n sorry changed anything. It don’t, so I ain’t. And ye shouldn’t be either. She’s gone now and there ain’t nothing more needs saying.”

“Well, I am. And I’m sorry, but I have to ask …and I swear I won’t tell, but I have to know…” Her nerve slipped; she caught it before it could fall away beyond her reach and said, looking straight into Foxy’s face, “Did you kill Mason Kellar?”

“Of course not,” said Chica. “We can’t kill people.”

Foxy glanced at her and back at Ana. His eyes moved and that was all.

“I know there have been…accidents over the years,” Chica said, reaching out one timid hand but not quite touching Ana’s arm. “Especially at Mulholland. Those animatronics were just…just not well made. But we were and when it comes right down to it, we were programmed to be unsupervised around people. There are all kinds of safety protocols worked into our code. We could never deliberately injure a human, even if we wanted to.” Chica’s fan revved. “And I’ve tried.”

“Chica, don’t,” said Bonnie.
“I’m sorry, but it’s true! I have wanted to! I really have! It’s hard enough to admit that out loud, so please, just let me say it!”

“But—”

“Please!” Chica turned to Freddy, her voice soft but shaking with strain. “Freddy, please!”

Frowning, Freddy put a hand on Bonnie’s shoulder. “Let her talk.”

“But she doesn’t have to—”

“Then let her explain. Hush,” Freddy said as Bonnie opened his mouth again. “That’s an order.”

That must be one of the rules not covered by the unmagical word of Autonomy, because Bonnie’s muzzle snapped shut and he shuddered. His pupils fluxed black and green, but his expression was more frustrated and confused than truly upset.

Chica ducked her head so she wouldn’t have to look at Bonnie, silenced, then turned to Ana again, her eyelids at an imploring angle. “Those men came here to hurt you. And even if you believed we could just watch that and not try to stop it—I hope you don’t really believe that—but even if you did, remember that they also hurt us. Look at us!” she said, touching her fingertips to both sides of her beak, only recently restored and in noticeably better condition than the face in which it was set. “Does it look like we’ve ever, even once, hit back?”

Ana looked at Bonnie, who was squinting at Chica, then at Foxy, who just looked calmly back at her, like he’d never told her he was going to kill Mason for her, that they’d all try but he was the one who was going to do it. He’d buckled on his sword and left her and…and she’d woken up covered in blood. That happened. That had absolutely happened.

“Do you know where I was when those men were taking the boys away to throw into the quarry?” Chica asked. “I was hiding in the bathroom so they wouldn’t find me. And when they were here before, standing right where you’re standing now, talking about what they were going to do to you, I was telling jokes onstage. They laughed at some of them. Do you know how that made me feel? Like I was part of it, that’s how! Like we were all in it together. Like Bonnie…Bonnie had to tell jokes when that girl broke his face with a bat! I had to laugh at them. If she’d kept going, if she’d broken his CPU, she’d have killed him right in front of me, while I laughed. Even that silly thing!”

She pointed at the back of the room and Swampy, as if he saw, raised his jug and laughed. “When they taped the firecrackers to him and blew his eyes out, all I could do was watch and wait to see if I was next! Yes! I want to fight back! I do! I know it’s wrong, because they don’t even know they’re really hurting someone, not really, but I don’t care anymore! I don’t want to die! Is that wrong? Don’t I have as much right to protect myself as you do?”

Ana had no answer. Life was life, wasn’t it? If she really believed the animatronics were alive, then she had to believe they had the same right to defend themselves as she herself had. She certainly couldn’t claim to have attached much value to Mason’s life or the lives of his court of junkie fools. If they’d came after Ana, she’d have taken them out without hesitation. Without calling the cops either, but hey, there was legally wrong and then there was morally wrong. The point was, if she didn’t think it was wrong for her, how could it be wrong for, say, Freddy to defend his home, his family? The question of whether human life was inherently superior to synthetic life was, quite frankly, not one Ana wanted to shoulder the burden of answering.

“I can understand it,” Chica was saying. “A little. I’ve seen children play. Even when they love their toys, they throw them. And when they outgrow them, they break them. It’s fine. It’s natural. And Freddy’s right, they can’t know we’re alive. They can never know that.” Chica’s finger-
tapping slowed and finally stilled. “It’s funny,” she said after a while, almost smiling as she stared off into a shadowed corner of the stage. “We have so many songs and stories to tell children that they’re special. They have to be convinced, you know. They have to be reassured. But they don’t know how awful it really is, how scary...when you’re not human.”

Freddy grunted, Foxy snorted, and even if Bonnie couldn’t make a sound, his ears registered a perfect, unhappy understanding.

“I thought when we were moved here that things would be different.” She ducked her head, passing one hand over her face in a flattery, embarrassed movement. “I always think that. I knew better, but I still tried so hard to believe. Even when the restaurant closed and we were left behind, I thought we finally had a chance to just—” Chica raised her arms and dropped them with a plastic slap against her sides. “—just live and be happy! But this town...it never forgets.”

“Or forgives,” Ana heard herself say and frowned.

“Or forgives. Now all I want, all I’ve wanted for years is just to be left alone. Until I met you.” Chica toddled forward two steps, reaching again only to withdraw her touch and tap her fingertips together. “Meeting you reminded me that people can be good.”

Laughter bubbled out of her, bright with denial. “Oh wow, sister. I am not that goddamn great.”

“Not that great can still be good. Everything is relative. And...And I like it when you call me that,” she added with the suggestion of a shy smile hidden in the angle of her head and the slight opening of her beak. “Sister, I mean. I could never say so before. It’s nice to have another girl around. I’d really like it if you and I spent some more time together, doing girl-things.”

“What does that even mean?” Ana asked, hiding her uncertainty with sarcasm. “We gonna bedazzle our bras and paint each other’s nails?”

“Okay, well, I was thinking bake cupcakes and play skee-ball, but I’m just so glad to see you that I’m up for whatever.”

“Chica,” Freddy broke in, not harshly, “Ana may not be staying.”

Ana glanced at him, then turned all the way around and faced him. “Is that your tactful way of saying you’re throwing me out?”

“No. But if you choose to leave, I won’t stop you. And...I’ll be sorry to see you go. I know I lied to you,” he said without apology in his voice or on his face. “And I would have gone on lying as long as I could, but not to hurt you. I know I...I made you work far too hard to earn my trust, and I realize I have betrayed yours, but I...I hope you can believe that I care for you.”

The part of her still holding on to her anger wanted to laugh in his face or at the very least, roll her eyes, but she didn’t. Couldn’t. She managed a lackluster nod and then just stood there, staring at the floor to one side of his foot and listening to Chica tap her fingertips.

“So what now?” she asked finally.

Freddy studied her in silence for a moment, then said, “Can you keep a secret, Ana? That’s all I want to know. Everything else...I can deal with what comes when and if it ever does, but I need you to tell me you can keep a secret.”

The word ‘Or’ hovered invisibly between them, and after it, an ellipsis and a lot of dark space.
“Yeah,” she said and actually laughed a little. “This wouldn’t even be the worst one.”

Freddy nodded, just once, like the hammer of the judge’s gavel and as final. “Then I trust you.”

And again, he put out his hand, just like he’d done the night she fixed up Bonnie’s face. Shaking it this time felt even more surreal.

“What now?” Freddy asked, with her small crushable hand still enveloped in his.

She had nothing to tell him but the truth: “I don’t know yet. I should at least get the doors back on. After that, I guess we’ll see.”


“I know, but…look, I’ve never left a job half-done in my life. If I stay, then that’s what was going to be the next step anyway, and if I leave…well, that’s the most important thing about leaving.”

“That you lock us up first?”

“That I leave you in a good place.”

They looked at each other.

In a low, staticky voice, he said, “For as long as I have known you, from that very first night, that has always…always been the most important thing to you. Forgive me for suggesting otherwise. You did not deserve that.” He released her hand. “I hope you stay tonight. I’ll understand if you don’t, but I hope you will. However, if you’re serious about continuing your work here, I’d appreciate it if you started by cleaning this mess up first.”

She blinked. “Um…yeah, okay. Sorry.”

“I realize you aren’t responsible for it, but they are your possessions and the rules are still in effect,” he said, taking Bonnie by the arm as he turned around and headed for the East Hall.

Ana’s lips smiled in spite of the knot in her heart and the throbbing uncertainty in her head. He wasn’t scolding her. He was just doing his best to give her some space without embarrassing her by asking if she needed it. “Okay,” she said, since she couldn’t say ‘thank you,’ and started picking up.

“Hush,” said Freddy, not in reply, but to silence Bonnie, who was struggling in his grip. “You know the rules. No one is allowed in the room when Ana’s working. Bonnie, follow me, that’s an order. Chica, Foxy, come along.”

Chica obeyed at once, but Foxy lingered, taking only a few steps toward the hall before circling around closer to Ana. “Eh, I could stay. Lend a hand. Or a hook, as the case may be.”

“Go on,” said Ana, cleaning. “I’m fine.”

“Foxy!” Freddy called from a distance. “If I have to come back for you, you won’t like where I put you!”

Foxy shrugged, leaning up against the wall and running the tip of his hook through one of the belt loops on his jeans. “Freezer can’t cool me burning heart and all that rot. I’ll dare the bear’s wrath to push a broom with ye awhile. What say ye?”

“I say go on. I’m fine. Why?” she asked aggressively. “Are you afraid to let me out of your sight,
Captain?”

“Ain’t afraid of naught, luv. Sure and I’d rather have ye in me sights than out of ‘em, but that be less a safety measure than me own idle ruminations on a damned fetching figure.”

Ana cleaned, ignoring him.

Foxy watched her without moving and finally said, “Are ye staying?”

“No. I don’t know. It’s a work night. Maybe,” she relented. “But if I do go, I won’t leave without saying something and I hope that’s good enough for you, because it’s all I’ve got in me right now. Okay?”

Foxy flicked an ear and pushed himself off the wall at last. “If that’s all ye got, reckon it’ll have to do, but I still say I makes a fair deckhand, should ye need one.”

“And I still say go on,” Ana said for the third time, finding enormous comfort in the recitation, like a healing mantra. “I don’t need you. I’m fine.”

He left.

Ana picked up a few more things without even seeing what they were, then let them spill through her shaking fingers. Her breath quickened, coarse in her ears. She stumbled to the nearest wall, but its support failed her. She slid down, sat on the floor, and hugged her knees, alone in the dark beside the empty stage.
Chapter 5

CHAPTER FIVE

Freddy’s commands didn’t come with a preset time limit and sometimes only lasted a few seconds even when Bonnie wasn’t hammering away at it from within. This one held, either despite his internal resistance or maybe because of it. Whatever the reason, Bonnie was forced to follow Freddy all the way to the back end of the building. A couple cameras lit up on the way, following their progress, but there was no camera in the security room and that was where Freddy took them. When Foxy and Chica finally joined them, Freddy brought the doors down.

The small room’s windows began to light up, one by one, as the cameras on the other side turned their lenses (and their microphones) toward the security room. First, the one-way glass next to the door leading to the employee’s break room; then the one next to the other door, the one to the back hall; then the one outside the front window, where guests could pass things through to the guard without going into a restricted area.

Scowling, Freddy opened the top drawer on the desk, shoved the junk inside to the back, opened the bottom compartment, and disconnected the in-house security monitor—nearly the same size as Ana’s tablet, although thicker, with less rounded corners—from its charging station. It came on automatically, its dirty screen slowly brightening to display an image of the Fazbear Band with a few simple icons arranged in a neat row along the left side. Using the attached nib and making no effort to disguise what he was doing from the watchful eye of the camera on the other side of the glass, Freddy tapped into the security system and pushed the grey square at the bottom of the screen.

Dust blew outward on the other side of the glass as the armored shutter dropped, then Freddy turned and stared tensely at the last window, the one between this room and the manager’s office. Bonnie, still mostly frozen by compliance to Freddy’s authority, managed to look that way too, and as mad as he was about, well, other things, all of that went away as he waited for the lights in there to come on and for him to be standing on the other side of the glass, grinning through his rusty teeth.

He couldn’t get out. There was no way. Even with the power on, the workshop door was locked and there were only two keys. Ana had one, their creator had the other, and that was that. Hell, even if he’d gotten around that…punched the doors open or gone through the wall or something, he’d need the key to work the elevator, too. He could barely walk in that old rotted suit and the fine motor function in his hands were fucked. During the Grand Opening, he hadn’t even been able to use a doorknob. He’d tried for three painfully long minutes, clumsily groping and prodding and dragging his knuckles back and forth across the face of the door before simply standing back and letting the Puppet do it for him, and that was years ago. If Bonnie’s own deterioration was anything to go by, he’d only gotten worse. So yeah, he might be able to brute force his way into the elevator shaft (if he could break out of the workshop, no other room in the building could hold him), but there was no fucking way he could climb it, not in that body.

But no matter what he told himself or how convincing his arguments were, Bonnie watched the window of the manager’s office and if he could have, he’d have held his breath.

The window stayed dark.
While they were all looking at it, in the lost-and-found box on the bottom shelf of the cupboard, unseen by any of them, Babycakes powered on. It did not yawn itself awake. It did not giggle or sing. It opened its eyes, but saw nothing. Its eyes were not the important thing right now. The thing in the basement could barely see anyway. The important thing was the microphone hidden in the cupcake’s plastic candle. The thing in the basement dialed up the volume on the master security control panel and listened.

After a while, Freddy stopped staring down an empty window and looked at the rest of them, but he left the doors shut and the shield down. Bonnie could actually hear how much power this protective measure was using, a white noise hum of effort in a small room that would otherwise be silent. If it was night, the small segmented battery icon in the top corner of the monitor Freddy had exposed would be draining right before his eyes, but there was still plenty of daylight for now and it didn’t matter.

Freddy started to put the tablet down, hesitated, then used the nib—it looked ridiculously tiny in his hand—to tap at one square of the simple map in the lower right corner of the screen. The dark background changed at once to show the empty stage in the dining room. Freddy dragged his nib slowly left; the image panned over and stopped when it came to Ana, sitting on the floor with her legs drawn up small, so still. After a moment, her head turned to look at the camera. Freddy tapped the map again to exit camera-mode and set the tablet down.

“Wake up, Bonnie,” he said, and before Bonnie had even stopped twitching, added, “If you touch that door, I’ll put you right back under.”

“I need to talk to her,” Bonnie insisted, still shivering.

“Not yet. Right now, we need to talk.” His eyes shifted to Foxy. “Will she leave?”

It annoyed Bonnie no end that Freddy seemed to think Foxy would know that and he wouldn’t.

“Oh aye,” said Foxy calmly. “She said she wouldn’t, but she were quick enough to tack on a ‘without telling ye,’ and she wouldn’t meet me eye when she said it. Wouldn’t curl me tail if’n we stepped out and found she’d bolted while we were jawing in here.”

“Freddy, come on,” Bonnie began. “Just give me five minutes! Three! I’ve got to talk to her!”

“She left her wallet,” said Freddy, ignoring him.

Foxy snorted. “There ain’t not one damn thing in this building she couldn’t replace if she had half a mind to, which means she had a better reason to come back than a few dollars and a driver’s license.”

Freddy glanced at Bonnie.

“Maybe,” Foxy said just as if Freddy had commented aloud, although he looked annoyed. “Maybe not. She didn’t exactly fall in his arms, did she?”

“Maybe she would have if the three of you weren’t standing around staring at us!” Bonnie snapped. “Freddy—”

“I said no, Bonnie, and I’m not going to say it again, I’ll just order you quiet.” Freddy’s gaze shifted to Foxy and his eyelids took on a warning tilt. “And if you can’t give your opinion without taking cheap shots, I’ll shut you up, too.”

“I’m only saying—”
“Find another way to say it,” Freddy said coldly.

A moment of prickly silence settled over them, broken at length by Chica’s hesitancy, “I think she’s looking for something, like before. Do you remember? When she…When she brought Babycakes?”

“Yeah, we all remember,” said Bonnie, rolling his eyes. “But she’s way over that.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Chica said. “And whatever she was trying to connect us to at Mulholland…well, we just made that connection for her. And whatever it is, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s the real reason she came back. And it’s probably pretty bad.”

“That don’t narrow it down much,” Foxy commented. “Lots o’ bad to go around at Mulholland. ‘Course, there be a broad stripe o’ bad going all the way back to Fredbear’s, so—”

“Oh no,” said Chica, shaking her head. “Whatever it is she’s investigating, it definitely happened at Mulholland.”

“What do you mean, ‘definitely’?” asked Bonnie. “She hasn’t said a word about Mulholland.”

“But she knows things, Bonnie. Things she could have only learned at Mulholland.”

“Foxanne,” Foxy said suddenly, his ears pricking up sharply before swiveling around and lying flat. “She called her Foxanne.”

Chica nodded. “Not Polly, not even Mangle. Foxanne. She never heard that name anywhere in this building. Unless you…?”

“Not on yer life,” Foxy said. “I ain’t said the name even to meself since I carried her out.”

“I think we all know who she got it from,” said Freddy, adding pointedly, “as sure as we know the price of tea in China.”

Chica turned toward him at once. “I thought that sounded familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“That one night guard at Circle Drive,” said Bonnie and never mind how many night guards there had been over the years that Circle Drive had been in operation. There had really only been one worth noticing. The last one.

Chica’s eyes widened and brightened at once. “Oh, that’s right! Mike! Smith, I think. Smith?”

“Schmidt. Mike Schmidt. I knew we hadn’t seen the last of him,” muttered Freddy, rubbing at his temples. “Although I cannot for the life of me understand how she could talk to him and then come back here. If she believed even half of what he had to have told her, she’d never set foot in any Freddy’s again.”

“But she did,” snapped Bonnie. “So she doesn’t. We’re fine.”

Foxy gave him something of a lingering glance, then turned back to Freddy to say, “Lord knows I’d love to tell ye what ye want to hear, but truth is, it’s hard to know what’s in her head.”

Still scowling, but without the heat that might have been there just seconds ago, Bonnie said, “What is it you think he wants to hear?”

Foxy and Freddy both looked at him, but it was Chica who answered, softly saying, “That she believed me when I said we don’t hurt people. Or at least she believes we don’t remember it when
we do. And if there were injuries, they only happened at Mulholland, where the others were responsible and even then, hopefully, she believes they were accidents.”

“Don’t get me started on that, Chica. I’m too goddamn mad at you to be nice. No, you know what?” he broke in, cutting his hands between them to sweep away Chica’s protests before she could even make them. “You brought it up, so let’s talk about that! What the hell were you thinking?”

“I—”

“She gave you your voice back,” said Bonnie, biting off each word and throwing it at her. “You can talk for the first time in over ten years and what do you do? What are the first words out of your beak? You lied to her!”

“I had to!”

“No, you didn’t! Believe me, she wants to know where those guys are right now! She wants to know for a fact they’re dead so she can finally catch her breath and stop worrying about them coming back! And if she asks me,” he went on, thumping himself on the chest in challenge, “that’s what I’m telling her!”

“But we’re not just talking about them,” said Chica.

“Aye,” said Foxy, leaning up against the security door. “Ye can’t just dig up some bones, mate, and expect her not to pull up all of ‘em.”

“I get it,” Bonnie snapped, then looked at Chica and softened his tone. “I do, but look, not telling her isn’t exactly hiding it. It’s just not telling her! She was born in this town, remember? She already knows the stories…and if the things they paint on this building are anything to go by, she’s heard worse things than we ever actually did.”

Foxy uttered a dry bark of a laugh. “Hell, ye sure about that? Who can say what we done in the black, playing his Game?”

“Exactly! So we tell her that! We’ll tell her about the Game! I know!” he interrupted angrily as Freddy started to speak. “But we can tell her something! Tell her…a long time ago, there was a bad man who programmed us to do things, things we couldn’t control, couldn’t even remember. But he died. Well, he did,” Bonnie interjected again, this time glaring at Chica, who had half-raised a hand, like a child asking for help in the Crafts Room (down in the basement, the thing hunched over the speaker chuckled and said, “More or less.”). “He died and it’s all over now! We don’t just go around killing people anymore.”

“We done for a fair number,” Foxy remarked.

“But we always at least try to scare them off first.”

“You can’t tell her that,” Chica pleaded. “Listen to me—”

“No, you listen to me.” Bonnie heard the anger in his voice and made himself step back, to see the unhappiness in Chica’s face and remind himself this was a friend. “Listen,” he said again, gently now. He put a hand on her arm, over a pressure plate he knew was still working, and she put her other hand over his at once. “If you’re right and she’s been doing her own research, then we don’t know what she knows. But let’s get one thing straight: The only way he ever tried to hide what he’d done was by making it too crazy to believe. Right?”
Chica’s brows pinched slowly together.

Bonnie looked at Freddy, who was already scowling. “Right?” he pressed. “But if you start by believing that we can be real, like really real, then suddenly nothing else is all that damn crazy, is it? So the fact that she’s out there right now might not mean that she doesn’t know about...you know. The Games.”

“And all the times we weren’t playing,” Foxy reminded him.

“ Whatever! The point is, it’s just stupid to think she doesn’t know anything about that. What if this is a test? What if she’s just waiting to see if we’ll come clean? If we’re even worth protecting? You asked her if she could keep a secret,” he said, looking back at Freddy. “Why should she, if we’re going to go on lying to her?”

Freddy was quiet for a moment, giving Bonnie just enough time to hope he was considering it, before he shook his head. “I can’t take that risk.”

“What risk?” Bonnie demanded, flinging out his arms in frustration. The room was too small for such grandiose gestures; he hit the cupboard door with one hand and Chica’s arm with the other. “Sorry,” he said as Chica reflexively rubbed at the point of an impact that couldn’t really hurt. “But seriously, what risk? She’s already heard the stories! Even if she’d never met that Mike-guy, she’s still heard all the Freddy Lives garbage! She doesn’t believe!”

“She doesn’t believe in ghosts,” Freddy corrected. “Artificial intelligence and advanced robotics do not require much of an adjustment to anyone’s personal philosophy in the age of the internet. Living animatronics is one thing. Killer animatronics is an entirely different matter.”

“We can explain!”

“Bonnie, there has to be a list of missing people in this town longer than I stand tall. After one or two hundred victims, even the best excuses start to sound a bit suspect.”

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking this is an ethical issue, Bonnie,” added Chica. “This is not a question of whether or not the people we killed deserved to die. This was never about morality. It’s about agency.”

“Agents of what?” Bonnie asked irritably. “God damn, I forgot you talk like this. What are you saying, and can you please try to say it using words of one syllable?”

“Did we choose to kill them?” said Chica. “Schoolyard stories are one thing, but if she’s talked to Mike Schmidt, she knows we killed people. She might not know how many—the truth may actually work in our favor, because there’s just too many for any reasonable person to believe—but the fact that some people died or disappeared at each and every restaurant, including this one, is unassailable. She came back anyway, which means she believes not that we aren’t capable of killing, but that we weren’t culpable.”

Bonnie groaned.

Hurriedly, Chica said, “It means that if we were programmed to do what we did, we become the murder weapon and not the murderers, but if the Game ended and we could still choose to kill, it really doesn’t matter who or why. It only matters that we killed them and it matters because it means we can kill anyone. And she lost someone at Freddy’s once. Someone she loved. Someone she still misses. Think about it,” Chica said softly, intently. “When you talk about telling her the truth, are you really ready to tell her that you may have killed her cousin?”
It could not be silent, not with the four of them sharing such a small space. The sound of all their mechanisms moving together seemed to form a single heartbeat, counting out the seconds until Bonnie said, “Her cousin’s not dead.”

Foxy snorted, Freddy sighed and Chica softly said, “Bonnie…”

“It was a custody thing,” he insisted. “He just went to live with his father. She’s said so. Hell, go out there right now and ask her. She’ll tell you he just moved and she never got the chance to say goodbye!”

“Sure,” said Foxy. “And that’s why she claimed I let him die.”

“She said you let them both die,” Bonnie pointed out. “And she’s clearly not dead. She was just a kid and kids take things hard.”

“No,” said Freddy, frowning at the floor. “No, Bonnie, she didn’t say her cousin went to live with his father.”

“Yeah, she did. It was the night—”

“I remember. I was there.” Freddy raised his head and locked eyes with Bonnie. “She said she was told he went to live with his father. You called her out on that yourself. And regardless of what she was told or even what she believed as a child, the fact remains that she’s here now. She said his ghost was here, if it was anywhere. Does that sound like she thinks he went to live with his father? Does that sound like she thinks he’s alive anywhere? No, Bonnie. She thinks he’s dead. She may or may not admit it depending on how sober she is at the time, but she believes he’s dead. The only real question remaining is whether or not we killed him.”

“And it doesn’t need answering,” said Chica. “Ana’s already put her David behind her, as much as anyone can. We can’t give him back to her, so no matter what we tells her, we can only make it worse for her.”

“I have no intention of telling her, either way,” said Freddy. “But I want to know.”

Foxy snorted. “Ye sure about that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Bonnie.

Foxy shrugged. “There comes a point when another dead kid more or less makes no difference to anyone, save them what’s left alive to mourn ’em. If ye ain’t going to tell Ana, why put another notch on yer killing hand? Just let it be.”

“Okay,” said Bonnie. “Now what’s it really mean? Don’t stand there and try to pass it off like you don’t want Freddy, or any of us, keeping score. Like you said, what’s another dead kid at this point?” Bonnie broke off, his ears pushing forward as a thought struck. “Did you know her cousin? Did she tell you who he was?”

“Hell, we all knew him. The way the girl talks, he were all but born at Freddy’s.”

“Cut the shit, Foxy. Do you know him or not?”

Foxy glanced at him, but did not answer. The silence stretched out, broken by mechanical breathing, mechanical hearts beating, and nothing more. In the cupboard, tucked away, Babycakes did not make a sound.
“Ye know me,” Foxy said at last. “I ain’t one for raking up the past. But I can’t deny I’ve done some thinking on the subject of Ana’s wee cousin and there is one glaringly obvious David what we all know—”

“I fucking knew it!” Bonnie interrupted, his ears slapping flat against the back of his head. “There is nothing so bad that you can’t find some way to make it worse, is there?”

“Ye asked,” Foxy said calmly.

“There is no fucking way in the world it’s that David and you know it! How the hell could David have a cousin? He didn’t have any brothers or sisters!”

“Marion did.”

“Shit,” Bonnie said.

“Not. But ye put ‘em side by side and there was no doubt.”

Doubt poured itself across Chica’s face in contradiction of this declaration. “Foxy, I believe you, but this is a small town and, well…let’s just say the family trees here make an awfully thin forest.”

“I know what I know,” Foxy insisted.

“Can’t you see,” Freddy said, stepping between them. “And I know Ana’s aunt’s name was Easter, not Marion. We’ve all heard her say so.” He paused, his gaze unfocusing. “I’m not sure how I feel about that, because even if what happened to David Blaylock was…what it was…that’s the only missing child I’m completely confident we had nothing to do with.” He looked up again, frowning. “I have personally killed over fifty people that I know of, and I didn’t know all their names. So what do we know about her David? Do we have any clues at all? She doesn’t talk about him to me. Chica?”

Chica shook her head.
“Bonnie?”

“Apart from the fact that he’s alive and well and living with his dad?”

“She’s mentioned him to me a few times,” Foxy said. “According to her and the rosy pedestal she put him on, he was the smartest, most talented kid in the world who was the best at sports, liked superheroes, didn’t like wearing his glasses and was the most loyal friend a girl could want. And before ye bust me muzzle, no,” Foxy said, looking at Bonnie. “Glasses and superheroes aside, I ain’t saying that sounds like our David. That just sounds like a kid, same as every other kid. But it may be worth mentioning he were eleven when he left and that do narrow it down some.”

“Well, if he was eleven, he had to have been taken at High Street,” said Bonnie. “I mean, I don’t know about you, but I never killed a kid—I mean a real kid—at Circle Drive, and Circle Drive was the only Freddy’s Ana ever knew us from.”

“David—” Foxy began, but shut up with a sigh when Bonnie swung around to glare at him.

“I still say this has to do with Mulholland,” said Chica after an awkward silence. “Kids were taken there.”

“She’s not that old,” Bonnie declared, setting his ears at a stubborn angle. “She’s barely old enough to remember Circle Drive. She’s nowhere near old enough to have gone to Mulholland.”

“Yes, she is,” Freddy said, then rolled one shoulder. “If only just. She told me she was born in 1983. So whether she remembers it or not, she’s old enough. And her cousin had definitely been there. Remember, just because Ana was ten when she left Mammon and her cousin was eleven when he disappeared doesn’t mean those two events occurred simultaneously.”

“Ana says they did,” Bonnie argued.

“Yes. She may even believe it. But Ana’s memory is unreliable to say the least. She might have mentally combined two traumatic events into one, when in reality, he could have been taken years earlier.”

“That’s a hell of a stretch.”

“If it’s true that she’s looking into Mulholland’s history, there must a reason. More importantly, he had to have been at Mulholland if it was her cousin who drew the picture.”

“What picture?” asked Chica and Bonnie together.

Growling low in his speaker, Freddy opened his abdomen and passed her a folded wedge of paper.

Chica unfolded it and held it at an angle that allowed Bonnie to see it, too. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be seeing or why Freddy had been keeping it. It was just a bunch of scribbles on a standard birthday coloring page with THE BEST BIRTHDAY HAS printed along the top and the words *Cake! Yum!* clumsily scrawled beneath, but Bonnie sure couldn’t see a cake in this Rorschach mess of blobs and lines. Yet Chica’s eyes first widened, then narrowed, then slanted in confusion as she studied it, and when she looked at Bonnie, it was with the incredulous stare of someone who thought they were sharing a revelation.

“Okay, I feel stupid, but what’s the big deal?” Bonnie asked.

“What’s the…? It’s the Bite of ’87, Bonnie! Someone drew a picture of the Bite of ’87!”
“No way,” he said, although now that he was looking at it with that in mind, the pink and black scribbles sure looked a lot like Mangle lunging out over a group of bubble-headed people, including one, drawn bigger than the others, that had been colored over—practically blotted out—with red.

“It is!” Chica insisted, then looked at Freddy. “Are you telling me Ana gave this to you? Or that she drew it?”

“All I know is that Ana brought it here. I don’t know why. She was upset…and probably high. I don’t think she remembers it and I’d just as soon keep it that way for now. My guess is, she found it while she was cleaning her aunt’s house.”

“So you think her cousin drew it?” asked Chica.

“Personally, I think her aunt drew it. It had to be relatively recently.”

“A child drew that,” said Chica with authority. Even when adults tried to imitate a child’s artwork, their sense of placement and proportion was too well-developed. Chica was right. A child drew this picture.

Freddy wordlessly took the poster and turned it over to show her the uncolored back.

“Or not,” Chica said, her eyebrows rising. “This isn’t from Mulholland, it’s from here.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Bonnie scoffed. “They’ve been using that template since the first Freddy’s.”

“Because it has the address and the phone number on it,” Chica said patiently, pointing at the tiny text on the bottom of the cut-away coupons printed on the back. “Do the kids still say ‘duh’? Because duh.”

“Whatever,” Bonnie said. “All you’ve got there is a picture some kid drew of something they heard about. Do you think every kid who ever came around trying to scare up Billy Blaylock’s ghost knew him? The last batch couldn’t have even been born when Billy died, but they all know his name. We’re a ghost story!”

“Whoever drew that saw the Bite,” Foxy said flatly. “How many ways have ye heard kiddies talk about the Bite? Ain’t it always a kid what gets bit? A boy, a girl, a babby, aye, but always a kid. Because it’s kiddies what tell the story, so it’s always one o’ their own. That’s how myths are made. Now look at that.” The tip of Foxy’s hook pressed down on the smiling figure with its head between the crayon-Mangle’s teeth. Beneath the layers and layers of red wax, the figure’s badly-proportioned body was purple. “That be a guard.”

“That could be anything. A kid in a purple dress…hell, a purple giraffe! Anything.”

“It’s a guard, Bonnie,” Chica said in a tone that brooked no argument. “But at the moment, the question of how this particular child knew enough details to draw the Bite is of far less significance than the question of how he or she drew it on this poster.”

Bonnie looked at it, frustrated, but found nothing new hidden on the front or back. “Okay?”

“It be a birthday poster,” Foxy said, less than helpfully.

Damn it, so they all knew and it was just the big dumb bunny who couldn’t figure it out. Bonnie stared at the drawing, feeling his frustration like a live animal scratching at the underside of his
skin. Just a drawing, crayon squiggles done in pink and purple, black and red. “So?”

“So it be a birthday poster taken from this restaurant,” Foxy emphasized and when that failed to bring on the aha-moment, fixed him with a stare of real contempt. “God, yer thick. Guess she likes ‘em big and stupid.”

“Foxy, knock it off,” said Freddy as Bonnie stared at the poster some more, feeling impossible heat crawling up his plastic face. “I’m not going to tell you again.”

“There weren’t any birthday parties that week,” Chica said gently.

Bonnie looked up, blinking. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Chica stated. “I bake all the birthday cakes! There were only the grand opening cakes that whole week…and he ordered those from someplace else,” she added with a sniff. “So what if they could feed sixty people? They were dry and the frosting was sugary.”

“How could a kid have gotten hold of a birthday poster if there wasn’t a birthday party?” Bonnie asked, baffled. “Weren’t they…Weren’t they kept locked in the Party Room?”

“But Ana’s aunt worked here,” Freddy reminded him.

“Here?” Chica pressed. “Are you sure?”

Freddy nodded. “Ana thought we were going to find her body in the basement.”

“Marion worked here,” Foxy interjected, examining the point on his hook. “Marion worked at all of ‘em.”

“This makes less sense the more you explain it,” said Bonnie. “So…So Foxy, in your version of events, Marion Blaylock had a sister who we never met and she’s never mentioned, not once in the thirty-plus years we’ve known her, and that sister had a kid, Ana, who hung out all the time with her cousin, David, our David, who also never mentioned her. Never once. But whatever, not all families are close, right? The fact that Marion apparently goes by a fake name when she’s with her niece is a little weird, but whatever! I guess not all families go by their real names, right? The three of them are one big happy private family, until David dies and Ana leaves. That part adds up, I guess,” Bonnie said grudgingly. “Life goes on in Mammon until he turns up again, and then this place opens and Marion does what she did, but just in case Ana should show up in the future and wonder what happened to the happy family she used to have in total secrecy, Marion-Easter decides to leave a series of cryptic clues, such as a birthday poster colored like the Bite of ’87, because that’ll explain everything, right?”

“Well, when ye say it like that, it sounds stupid,” said Foxy.

“That’s because it is. And meanwhile, Freddy’s theory is that Ana’s aunt, not-Marion, drew this picture,” said Bonnie, holding it up with a dramatic wave. “Which means you think…what? That this Easter-person saw the Bite of ’87 as a kid, which traumatized her so much she started working at Fazbear’s and hanging out with us every day, because that’s totally plausible. Eventually she had a kid named David, who one of us probably killed, sending her into a spiral of self-destructive behavior that manifests as…what? Working at Fazbear’s and attracting no attention? For years. Until this place opened and finally, she puts her grand plan into action, and as the first, last and only step of said plan, she stole a birthday poster and drew the Bite and left it someplace conspicuous as a clue, then sent Ana an invitation to come visit or whatever brought her back to town, before she walked off into the desert and killed herself? Have I got this right?”
The three of them looked at him while, unheard, the thing in the basement laughed so hard, his rotten outer head fell off, exposing the one beneath to the bluish light of the computers.

“So what do you think the connection is?” Chica asked.

“Why does there have to be one?” Bonnie demanded. “Why are you all so determined to see one big picture here? This isn’t a story! There’s no plot and there’s for sure no writer making sure everything gets explained and everyone lives happily ever after! This is the real world and the real world is a stupid, random, meaningless place! And this?” He held up the poster again, then crumpled it into a wad. “It’s trash. It’s just another piece of trash.”

He threw it. Freddy let it hit him, but then caught it in his hand before it could fall to the floor. For a long time, the only sounds were those of their cooling systems working out of sync and the slow rasp of Freddy’s hands carefully smoothing out the paper.

“That must be a comforting philosophy,” Freddy said finally. “I almost wish I could believe it. I wish I could simply wash my hands of Ana’s past and be here in the present, but I can’t. Not if I had something to do with…no. We knew them, Ana’s ‘Aunt Easter’ and ‘David,’” Freddy went on as Bonnie swore low in his speaker and shook his head at the ceiling. “I want to know what happened to them before Ana finds out for herself. And if this—” He held up the poster, now neatly folded into a square, and then tucked it back into his abdominal cavity. “—can help us at all, then we had best use it to whatever advantage we have.”

“So we can get our lies straight,” said Bonnie.

Freddy simply looked at him. “If the truth is that we killed her cousin and her aunt, then yes, I will lie to her. And I may answer to God for it someday, but not to you. I am the head of this family. I do what is best, not what is right. And not what makes you happy. Understand?”

Bonnie shook his head, but not in answer. “I hear you,” he muttered and scuffed one skinless foot across the other, leaning against the security door. “I don’t agree, but you don’t care, so I guess we both understand each other just fine.”

“Good.” Freddy turned away, directing his next words at Foxy and Chica. “Now I don’t believe Ana’s aunt drew that picture intending for Ana or anyone else to find it. Ana’s said her aunt didn’t do well after her son was taken from her, however he was taken. She was alone, with no one to look out for her…and no one to pull her out when she began to sink into her own mind. So it isn’t a message…or a clue,” he concluded with a shrug. “But it was in her house and whoever drew it was old enough to remember the Bite, even if the drawing itself was done, as I say, relatively recently. And that means we’ve known this person, Easter, for at least thirty years. One of us surely remembers her.”

Foxy snorted. “That don’t narrow the net one smidge, Fred. If we know a face, we’ve known ‘em all their lives. If we don’t, how would we know we didn’t know ‘em?”

“A child drew that picture,” Chica said again.

“Or someone pretending to be a child. Ana’s mentioned a playroom, one with children’s clothing in adult sizes, and children’s toys collected for twenty years.”

Chica’s eyebrows lifted again. “You think she was keeping her son alive by…by pretending to be him?”

Foxy gave his muzzle a thoughtful scratch. “I’ll grant ye, that’s the sort o’ thing I’d notice, but as I
can’t recollect any grown woman dressing herself in youngish boy-togs and skateboarding down the halls, perhaps ye’d best adjust yer theory?”

“Yeah, okay, maybe she was coming here just to be around kids so she could have dress-up time at home,” said Bonnie, before Freddy could answer. “Crazy people do crazy things. But listen, isn’t it way more likely that some random jackass broke in here, took the posters for a souvenir—you know how they do—and then Ana moves back to town, and whoever the guy is, he draws the picture and left it for Ana to find?”

“In her house?” Freddy asked skeptically.

“Maybe. She said that guy Mason broke into her house once. Maybe he’s not the only one, like those people who keep leaving postcards on her truck.”

Freddy’s only answer was a grunt, but he did at least seem to be thinking about it.

Bonnie pressed the point home, saying, “The only Freddy’s Ana ever knew about, the only one her cousin could have gone to, was the one at Circle Drive. Period. And the only ones who died at Circle Drive were night guards or trespassers. I can remember a couple of teenagers, but no kids.”

The argument fractured as a new thought struck. Bonnie looked uncertainly at Freddy. “Except…”

Freddy closed his eyes and sighed. “Scotty, Isaiah and Archer.” He opened his eyes again, but his gaze remained distant. “And Emily and Diane, but the only dead child named David at Circle Drive was ours.”

“Maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way,” Bonnie declared. “Forget the kid, let’s talk about the mom. She wasn’t married, so her name must have been Stark, too.”

“Hang on,” said Foxy. “Ana said sommat about that once. She said, and I be quoting her directly now, ’Me mum weren’t married—’” Foxy held up a finger to point at the significance of his next words, “—or at least, she weren’t married to me dad.’ End quote. To me own ear, that means she were married and just got herself knocked up by another man. Stark could be her married name, which means Auntie could be named anything a’ tall.”

“Oh wow, I don’t think so,” said Chica before Bonnie could reply and she did it with a kind of shocked surety that was far more convincing that any argument Bonnie could have made. “I’m sorry, but not in Mammon. It’s hard enough to believe she’d even stay in town, but I can’t imagine any woman who would willingly hold on to her married name when everyone already knew she’d conceived outside her marriage. It would have been like sewing a scarlet letter to her own chest, let alone the baby’s.”

“Besides,” Bonnie broke in, “even if last names change, first names don’t. Ana’s aunt was named Easter,” he insisted, hammering the last five words in with their own emphasis. “I mean, maybe something like Auntie Em or even Emma I could maybe get behind, but how does anyone, even a child, get Easter out of Marion?”

“When was she born?” Foxy asked.

“Who, Ana?”

“Marion. She an Easter-babby?”

Bonnie blinked, momentarily thrown by this possibility, but Freddy shook his head.

“January 21st,” he told them. Seeing the understandable surprise on their faces at the immediate
retrieval of this trivia, grunted and added, “He must have forgotten one year. He programmed me to remind him.”

“Could be her favorite holiday,” Foxy pressed.

“Pretty sure that was Christmas,” said Chica. “I remember her talking about the lights and decorating the tree an awful lot. I don’t really remember her saying much about Easter at all, except when David was young enough to go on egg hunts.”

For a moment, Bonnie forgot the argument, forgot Foxy, almost even forgot Ana. None of that went away, exactly, but it faded out just long enough for him to remember David, after hours at Circle Drive, excitedly showing off the egg-coloring kits Marion had bought, telling him they were going to make baskets for the egg hunt and load them up on jelly beans and chocolate Bonnies. Not bunnies. Bonnies.

‘Yeah, but he never said a word about a cousin,’ Bonnie told himself.

And like an echo, he unexpectedly found himself thinking, ‘Baskets, though. Baskets, not basket. Plural. More than one. Who was the other one for, his mom? Grown-ups might eat candy and chocolate bunnies, but since when do they go on egg-hunts?’

Kids and good grammar didn’t always go hand-in-hand, but now that Bonnie was thinking about it, he could recall more than one occasion when David had said ‘we’ where a ‘me’ might fit better. “Mom says I can do the fire for the barbeque and then we can have fireworks after it gets dark.” “Mom’s going to take us trick-or-treating in Hurricane. She says there’s more houses there.” “Mom’s taking us to see the Christmas lights at the zoo.” And yeah, sure, ‘us’ could mean a lot of things, including a boy and his mom…or a boy and his cousin.

“So it had to be Easter Stark,” Chica was saying, bringing Bonnie roughly back to the here and now. “Sound familiar? Has Ana ever said what she looked like?”

“Like the mermaid,” Freddy said at once.

Bonnie’s ears snapped up in surprise as Foxy’s tipped forward in interest, but it was Chica who cautiously said, “Okay, well, not to play both sides here, but the mermaid looked like Marion. I mean…I mean, exactly. He took the face-mold from her.”

“By the time Ana saw it, there wasn’t much of a face left,” Freddy admitted. “But she did say her aunt was blonde. And dead. That may have been the extent of the similarity, but it’s a start. Long blonde hair. Who could that have been?”

“Apart from Marion?” Foxy asked.

“Yes,” Freddy replied evenly. “Apart from her, because we know her name wasn’t Easter.”

“Well, do ye remember an Easter working here? Name like that, ye’d think ye would, especially around the holiday. Hell, do ye remember anyone who worked here long enough to remember, apart from Marion? Ana’s said her aunt always worked at Freddy’s.”

“Well,” Chica said reluctantly. “In the interests of fairness, I have to say…what does ‘always’ mean to a child? Ana was young and her memory isn’t that great. It wasn’t that unusual for one of the servers to stay on a few months, even a year. To someone like Ana, that could be as good as ‘always’ if it was the only job Ana remembers her having. It wouldn’t have taken him long to notice her.”
“So now you’re saying it wasn’t the Game or…or the others, but that he did it?” Bonnie asked. “He killed Ana’s cousin? Personally? Why?”

“Think about it,” said Chica. “Ana’s awfully pretty. If Ana’s aunt looked anything like her, there’s no way he wouldn’t have noticed her. I don’t remember too many of his…I don’t like to call them girlfriends, but whatever. For what it’s worth, I don’t remember an Easter, but gosh, there’s been hundreds of them, haven’t there? If she was pretty…well, we all know what his father was like.”

“Get rid of the pup,” Foxy said, glaring at the floor. “Breed the bitch.”

“Admittedly, I never saw the Purple Man hunt a child the way his father did,” said Chica with a small shrug. “But I sure wouldn’t put killing one past him, especially if he thought the child stood between him and the mother.”

Freddy grunted, rubbing thoughtfully at his muzzle. “This puts the killing back at Mulholland if we’re really considering a sexual motive, because Ana wasn’t born yet when High Street was open and by the time Mulholland closed, he was dead.”

“Ish,” Foxy corrected with a shrug.

“Deadish,” Freddy agreed with a sour sort of humor. “Dead enough to dramatically reduce the number of women who might otherwise succumb to his charm. Do we remember one of the servers losing a son?”

Bonnie scowled, but made himself think about it, which made it all the sweeter when he could honestly say, “No.”

“I don’t either,” said Chica, throwing Bonnie an apologetic glance. “But that doesn’t mean much. If the Purple Man killed Ana’s cousin, he wouldn’t have necessarily done it at the restaurant, and if her son was taken, she might have quit without notice. And then he would go console her and so forth, and we’d never hear about it.”

Freddy grunted contemplatively, but Foxy said, “I can think o’ one lad named David who wore glasses, played sports, loved superheroes and had an unmarried blonde mum what worked at Freddy’s and who was eleven years old when he died. A David we all knew. A David who were all but born here.”

Freddy’s voice took on a note of warning. “It wasn’t him, Foxy. It wasn’t. Please, stop bringing him up. You know it’s painful for me.”

“I ain’t doing it for the grin of it, Fred. Look, any one of those things proves nothing, but ye put ‘em all together and add on that the lad or his mum had one o’ me own swords, the promo art fer Bon’s album, Babycakes…” Foxy paused, then grabbed the hat off Freddy’s head and shook it at him so the Velcro tabs on the bottom of the brim showed. “One o’ yer hats and, crowning the lot, his bleeding keys!”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie as Freddy took his hat back and reattached it to his head. “His. Not Marion’s.”

“Well, who the hell else would have left ‘em at her house?”

“Ana might have found them here,” Chica said. And when they all looked at her, she shrugged. “He probably still had them in his pocket. Maybe they fell out. Lots of…bits…fell out. Ana might have swept them up when she was cleaning or maybe someone put them in the desk before closing. Or maybe Mangle ate them and Ana found them up in the crawlway. But I seriously doubt she found them at her aunt’s house.”
“Why not?” Foxy asked.

“Because she kept them, but didn’t put them on her own keyring.” Chica replied sensibly. “If she found them at her house, but they didn’t open her locks, wouldn’t she have thrown them out? Instead, she kept them and she kept them here, I might add. In her toolbox, but here. The only logical reason to do that is because she thought she’d need to open the locks they went to. In other words, the locks here. Although I’m with you on the rest of it,” she added with a frown. “Who else but Marion could have had those other items?”

“Anyone,” insisted Bonnie, as much as to convince himself as Foxy. “You said that Ana said there was a collection in the house, remember? How many swords have you given up anyway? I seem to remember them being ordered by the goddamn gross!”

“Aye, they were,” Foxy countered. “One time. One goddamn gross. One hundred forty-four swords, and I still got twenty or thirty of ’em backstage. And aye, that be plenty passed out over the years, and I’ll grant ye not every top hat in the world had to come off Freddy’s head, but Babycakes? There were only ever one o’ those and Marion took it home!”

“You don’t know that. All you know is, she took it away from Circle Drive when Schmidt threw it at you that one night and broke it. She could have thrown it out or sold it or had it stolen from the repair shop. Why would she have kept it? Marion sure couldn’t have fixed it. She couldn’t figure out how to pour water out of her hand even if the instructions were written on the back of her wrist.”

“That’s mean,” said Chica.

“Like I care about her fucking feelings. Besides, it’s true. Or are you actually going to try and convince me that Marion Which-Way-Does-The-Battery-Go-Again Blaylock took Babycakes because she really thought she could fix it?”

“Ain’t saying that a’tall,” Foxy said, glaring. “I be saying she might have taken it home for her niece to fix.”

“Then it would have been fixed,” said Freddy, “and back on the desk the next day. Now that’s enough, Foxy. I’ve heard you out and there is no getting around the fact that David’s mother was Marion Blaylock and Ana’s aunt was Easter Stark. I just don’t see how it could possibly be the same David.”

“It isn’t,” said Bonnie. “It can’t be. It can’t.”

Foxy scowled and stared at the floor for a long minute, his servos whirring fast and slow again as if he had been several times about to speak before he finally just shrugged. “I ain’t going to keep on arguing with ye, but I ain’t convinced either. Truth, the more I hears meself talk it out, the more sure I am that I be right.”

“What would convince you?” Bonnie demanded. “Seriously. Short of actually asking her, because I’m sorry to be a hardass here, but if you stir all that shit up out of nowhere for no reason, I will break your fucking face in.”

“We might have a photo,” said Freddy suddenly.

They all looked at him.

“You mean she might,” Bonnie said at last.
Freddy shook his head. “I mean we might. The first night she broke in, I was back in the hall, but I could see her light. It moved around for a little while, then it just stopped and stayed fixed in one place on the wall for several minutes. Come to think of it, she did it again the day she brought the picture of the Bite. She was definitely looking at one picture in particular.” Freddy lapsed into a short, brooding silence before dismissing the possibility with a shake of his head. “On the other hand, she’s taken them all down and she obviously has no intention of putting them up again, so I could be wrong.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Chica went to the cupboard and opened it (in the lost-and-found box, Babycakes closed its eyes but did not go to sleep). Indicating the stacks of photos, newspapers and posters, Chica said, “She didn’t throw them out. If they were garbage, which, honestly, they are, she wouldn’t have hesitated to get rid of them. Instead, she took them down, washed them off, and put them away. I think you’re on to something, Freddy. I think we have a picture of her David right here.”

“Statistically speaking, we’ve probably got pictures of a dozen Davids,” Bonnie said. “There’s, like, a hundred kids in those pictures.”

“Okay, now you’re being argumentative just for the sake of arguing.”

“No, I’m not! I’m just saying, how does a picture help? It’s not like the kids are labeled.”

“He’s her cousin,” said Chica. “He might look like her.”

“Thin forests, isn’t that what you said?” Bonnie reminded her. “A lot of faces in this town look the same to me. Even Ana looked weirdly familiar the first time I saw her and she’d never been to a Freddy’s before.”

“Well…yes, but they’re first cousins.” Chica spread her hands in a hopeful shrug. “It stands to reason there’d be a stronger-than-normal resemblance.”

“What’s a normal non-related resemblance?”

“You’re doing it again. Freddy, he’s doing it again.”

“I’m not arguing, I’m trying to be the goddamn voice of reason! You all seem to be forgetting that those pictures are of kids,” Bonnie said, emphasizing the last word. “Ana grew up. Do you really think you’re going to find some sort of meaningful comparison now? Or are you just going to hand her that whole stack and say, ‘Hey, have a look at these and see if you can find us a photo of your dead best friend. We’re all curious to know what he looks like for no particular reason. We certainly aren’t worried that one of us may have killed him. Hyuck-hyuck! Nope! Nothing to worry about there!’”

Chica tipped her head to one side and looked at him. “You know, I love you, but I’ve often thought you were awfully dyspeptic for someone without a duodenum.”

Bonnie’s ears slowly dropped and leveled as he glared at her. “I hate it when you insult me with words I don’t know.”

“Read a dictionary.” Turning to Freddy, Chica said, “We can image-map her features and reverse age her, then use that result to compare against the other children in the photos.”

They all stared at her. Even Freddy looked dumbfounded.

“No, we can’t!” sputtered Bonnie. “Since when can we even save an image file, much less modify
one? The only ones who even got that facial-scanning software were those fuckers at Mulholland!"

“Watch yer mouth, bucko. I were one of those fuckers at Mulholland.”

Bonnie looked at Foxy, startled, then at Chica.

She was waiting for it, hands on hips. “Now put your ears back up and don’t you ever flatten them at me again. It’s super-disrespectful!”

Freddy grunted his that’s-enough grunt and turned to Foxy. “Can you really do that?”

“The software’s there. I never tried using it that way, but if I could get me hands on Ana’s tablet, I could maybe find a guide to how features change during aging. Everything’s on the bleeding internet these days,” he added with an eye-roll. “But me mapping scanners are close-range. I’d have to get right up next to her and convince her to hold still at least a full minute while I just stare at her. What are the odds of her letting me do that without wanting to know what for?”

“Awake?” prompted Chica. “Not great.”

“Aye, well, ye’ve got a wait and a half coming to ye if ye think she’s bedding down here anytime soon. She ain’t running yet, but she ain’t letting a one of us within arm’s reach tonight, let alone sleep over.”

“She’s nervous, all right,” Chica agreed. “She’ll want to…relax.”

They all gave that a moment to sink in.

“Are you seriously suggesting we get her drunk?” Bonnie asked incredulously. “So drunk, she doesn’t notice Foxy staring at her from an inch away? Correct me if I’m being dyspeptic here, but isn’t getting someone drunk so you can do things to them without their knowledge or consent a bad thing?!”

“I know, I know, but…look, I think we all know that if she leaves, she’ll do it anyway and who knows what she’ll take or what she’ll do next? At least if she’s here, we can look out for her.”

“Oh. Yeah, right. So we’re just being good friends. You can’t be considering this,” said Bonnie, rounding on Freddy, who was being awfully damn quiet all of a sudden. “You don’t want to tell her about the Purple Man, fine. She probably already knows. You don’t want to tell her about those guys last week, fine. She’ll figure it out on her own. Hey, she probably won’t even care that we lied to her when she realizes we made a plan to fucking drug her and snoop around behind her back so that we can find out whether or not we killed her cousin, and then not even tell her if we did!”

“What’s yer druther, mate?” Foxy inquired with a sweep of his hook-hand. “Do we march out there right now and tell her we talked it over and decided she ought to know we been killing folks for fifty years? Mostly for the Purple Man, but also of our own will, up to and including last week, when we killed sixteen men—” Foxy leaned forward to emphasize his next words. “—for her.”

Bonnie blinked, all his frustration flushing out and leaving him empty and impossibly cold inside.

“Aye, don’t expect her to answer that with kisses and tears o’ gratitude.” Foxy resettled himself and folded his arms. “At best, yer informing yer lady fair she’s an accomplice after the fact o’ a spree-killing. At worse, ye made her responsible-like. Oh aye, she was,” he said as Bonnie opened his mouth. “If she hadn’t been here, they wouldn’t have crewed up and come for her. They’d be alive today if not for her. Extenuating circumstances aside, that much is a fact. Give her a day and a
night to think on that, and ye think it’ll matter to her one whit what they meant to do to her? Her, who can jaw at a man six hours and more about bad blood?"

“This is wrong,” said Bonnie. It was all he could say and it wasn’t enough.

“Yes, it is,” Chica said and spread her open hands. “There really isn’t a ‘right’ thing to do. But some things are definitely more wrong than others and personally, I think the worst thing we could possibly do is tell Ana the truth about the Game and the Purple Man before we know if her cousin was a victim of it. So whatever we have to do to find that out first, without her knowing, gets my vote.”

“Are we voting?” Foxy asked curiously.

“This is not a democracy,” Freddy replied with a frown.

“Figured. Well, if’n we were voting, I vote we keeps our mouths shut. Whether her cousin were our David or not, he were someone’s little boy. Maybe we done for him and maybe not, but there’s a lot o’ living room in maybe, so let it be. S’far as she knows, if we’re in the black or playing the Game, we don’t remember what we does so we got no reason to tell her about it. Ana’s got plenty o’ past she’d rather see buried. I think she could let it go at that no matter what she thinks we’ve done.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far,” said Chica. “If we learn for a fact that her cousin’s father took him away, then I say we go ahead and tell her about the Purple Man and his Game. I don’t know about the rest of it, about those men last week or…or all the rest of them…but about him for sure. And we emphasize the point that he’s dead and it’s all over.”

“Is it?” Freddy looked at his reflection in the tinted window of the manager’s office for a long time. No one else moved. No one else spoke. If the cupcake in the cupboard had so much as blinked its eyes, they might have heard it, but Babycakes was silent and perfectly still. Even the thing listening in down in the basement did so in silence.

“I want to believe that,” Freddy said at last. “It may never be over for us, but I want to believe that it is for her, for Ana.”

“Freddy—”

“Bonnie, I know you don’t want to hurt her. But Ana is already hurt. She’s been carrying that hurt all her life and she needs to put it down. She needs to let herself heal. That’s what she needs. Not to know what happened to her cousin. She knows all she needs to know about him already. She knows he’s gone and that she can move on. But to do that, she has to have a safe place to live and people who care about her, who will protect her—”

“And lie to her,” Bonnie said, stabbing the words in.

Freddy merely nodded, his eyes tired and his ears low. “And lie to her. At least until we know what the truth is. After that…I think the truth belongs to whoever killed her cousin. If it was me, I’m not going to tell her.” He glanced at Bonnie. “If it was you, you can.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not good enough. I’m not going to lie to her, Freddy. I’m not.”

“I understand and I’m sorry, too.” Freddy looked back at the window, closed his eyes, then opened them and turned all the way around to face Bonnie with grim resolve. “Listen carefully. Rule Number Forty-Five.”
“God damn you,” Bonnie said while he still could.

“Perhaps he has,” Freddy said heavily. “I’ve given Him plenty of reasons. I may have to answer for them some day. Until then, Rule Number Forty-Five: Bonnie, you will not tell Ana that we have killed or even that we are capable of consciously harming a human. Not in words, not in writing… not in semaphore, sign language or interpretive dance. In no way and by no means will you tell her. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Bonnie, clenching his useless fists as the rule wrote itself into his code. “And since I don’t have much of a choice, I guess I’d rather help you than spend the night in the freezer. So who’s going to get her drunk and take advantage of her trust when she passes out, me or you?”

“Me,” said Foxy, raising his hook with an air of punchable confidence. “Years of experience, finally come to bear, mates. I’m damn near an artist with a bottle o’ rum, as Ana herself could attest if only she could remember any o’ the times I already done it.”

Freddy’s stoic features shifted to express a deep disgust. “I am not going to enable that child’s substance dependency. She drinks too much as it is. I will give her one doobie and that’s it.”

Foxy snorted and covered his eyes. “A doobie. Lord Almighty, mate.”

Bonnie’s ears came all the way up in confusion, but not at Freddy’s outdated slang. “I don’t know what you think one joint is going to do to her, but I’ve seen her put three of them away and then do math, so whatever you’re planning, I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

“I just want to relax her,” said Freddy with a nod at Chica, who also looked perplexed. “And when she’s relaxed…”

Freddy turned and opened the cupboard. Again, Babycakes closed its eyes, but Freddy pulled the lost-and-found box out anyway, pushed the toys and loose articles of clothing aside, and picked the plastic cupcake up. He turned it upside down and righted it again (as Babycakes ‘woke up’ and its eyes opened, the central monitor in the security array came on, showing a close-up of Freddy’s face and throwing light over the three figures gathered around to watch or listen), and when it was done yawning and giggling, Freddy said in a loud, clear voice, “Maintenance override, eject cartridge.”

The thing in the basement murmured, “What are you up to?” but Babycakes didn’t make a sound, just flipped its frosting cap and the bottom of its ‘mouth’ open and let Freddy shake the roll of lick-and-stick tattoos out into his palm.

“And when she’s relaxed,” Freddy repeated, setting Babycakes aside on the desk to pick the roll up, pinched between his thumb and forefinger, “I’ll use one of these. It’s painless, effective, quick-acting and non-habit-forming.”

“Yeah, right,” said Bonnie dryly. “Side effects include drowsiness, headache and the weirdly specific hallucination of a giant bear hand casually applying it to your face.”

“Now you’re just being insulting.” Freddy closed said hand around the roll of tattoos, opened it again almost immediately—empty, of course—and grimly said, “She’ll never notice. I’m very good with my hands. Not one word, Foxy.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You’ve got to get it wet for it to work,” Bonnie said with a nod of reluctant admiration. “Or get her to lick it. Shut up, Foxy.”
“I didn’t say anything!”

“You were thinking it,” Chica said quietly.

“Of course I bloody was, and picturing it besides, but ye might let a man do the crime a’fore ye hang ‘im!”

“I’ll take care of it,” Freddy promised, picking up the tablet. With a tap of the nib, he opened the armored shutter, then peered out at the dark hall. He turned on the camera in the dining room next, but Ana was still there, now sweeping. He grunted approvingly and switched the tablet off, returning it to its hidden compartment and closing the drawer before opening the security doors.

“All right, let’s get this over with.” Freddy took his hat off and rubbed at his head like it hurt. “I’ll go talk to her…and put her under. Foxy, I’ll turn her over to you when she starts to fade, but I don’t know how long that will take, so just be ready. Bonnie, there were kids headed to the quarry when Ana arrived and they might end up here when they get bored, so I’m counting on you to keep a close watch on all the exits without letting yourself be seen. Chica, can you hold the lobby doors by yourself until I get there?”

She nodded, although her tapping fingertips suggested she had doubts.

“You said I could talk to her!” Bonnie burst out.

“Not tonight.”

“Damn it, Freddy!”

“If this doesn’t work or if she remembers any of it tomorrow, I don’t want her to think you were part of it. She’ll leave, but at least she won’t leave hating you. She can hate me instead,” Freddy said expressionlessly. “And Foxy—all of you, in fact—try to keep Ana out of his sight as much as possible.”

“He knows she’s here, mate.”

“Yes, and he’ll know our settings have been changed before long, which means he knows Ana has his keys. He’s going to be very curious about how that happened and if Ana notices the—” Freddy picked up Babycakes and gave it a meaningful shake before tossing it into the lost-and-found box and closing the cupboard door. “—following her around with an unreasonable level of scrutiny, she’s going to start wondering who’s behind those eyes. I can’t stop him from looking at her if she’s in front of them, so just keep her out of his sight as much as you can. Go on.”

Foxy and Chica went, but when Bonnie tried to follow, Freddy caught his arm. After a few moments to let the others get good and away, Freddy said, “I need you with me on this.”

“Rule Forty-Five means I kind of have to be with you,” Bonnie reminded him. “You going to make a new rule that says I have to like it?”

“Bonnie—”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know. Everything you’re willing to do…everything you’re willing to undo…and all so you can maybe learn something you’ve already decided not to tell her. I realize I’m being kind of a bitch about this, but why the hell should I make it easy for you to fuck her over and say it’s for her own good? Because that is what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“Bonnie…” Freddy closed his eyes, shook his head a few times, then opened them and looked at him. “Bonnie, I stood with her in the Grotto and watched her bury one of the only two people she
ever loved, who ever loved her. I’ve killed a lot of people and I don’t feel much of anything anymore when I do it, but I’ve never had to see what comes after. Her grief was...” Freddy’s speaker crackled; his fan revved. Otherwise, he betrayed no emotion as he said, “…difficult…to witness.”

Bonnie tried to hold on to his anger, only to realize how hard he was trying. He nodded, acknowledging Freddy’s struggle as much as Ana’s.

“But the other one is still out there, undiscovered, unburied. I admit, I am less certain now than I was ten minutes ago that we were responsible for her cousin’s disappearance, but I need to be sure. Not so much for her sake as for mine, because...because someone broke her. And I have to know. Was it me?” Freddy’s fan revved again. He put a hand over his chest, rubbing in a distracted way as he stared out the window behind Bonnie. “She said once that I was the one she really needed, when she was young.”

“You weren’t in the room for that.” Bonnie blinked. “You were eavesdropping? You?”

“I had my ears turned. The roof was off. The wind was blowing in my mics. That isn’t important,” Freddy said brusquely. “What’s important is...I wasn’t there for her then. And when she first arrived here, needing...something...I wasn’t there for her then, either. And now that I want to be, I’m not sure she’ll ever let me.”

“Boy, if this is you trying to say something comforting, maybe you shouldn’t hammer home the you-only-get-so-many-chances point because it feels like we are really fucking this one up.”

“I understand. But we’re looking at it differently. I don’t see this as our last chance at happiness with Ana. I’m sure it is, but to be brutally honest, we can survive without her. And she can survive without us, as far as mere survival goes. What this is, is Ana’s last chance at happiness with us...maybe her last chance at happiness, period. And perhaps that’s over-stating our role,” he went on as Bonnie frowned, “but I really don’t think it is.”

“You don’t think she’d...I mean...you know.”

“Consciously? No. But I think she drinks too much and I think she takes too many pills, sometimes at the same time. And I think she thinks she’s telling the truth when she says she doesn’t. And most of all, I think she comes here—” Freddy spread his arms, indicating the full awful ruin of the restaurant and the empty wasteland beyond. “—when she wants to escape the misery of her life, and that makes it a more miserable life than I can even imagine.” His arms lowered; his hard features set, harder. “I need you, Bonnie, because she needs us. I can’t make you happy about deceiving her and if I can’t make you understand why it’s necessary, she’ll sense it. She may not know what’s wrong, but she’ll trust her instincts and she’ll leave. She has no one out there. No home, no family, no one to care for her or watch over her. If you love her, then help me keep her here.”

“All right!” Bonnie snapped, then said it again, softly. “All right.”

“I know you’re upset with me, but do you trust me?”

Bonnie nodded, staring at the floor in defeat.

“And you’re with me?”

“Yeah. I’m with you.” Bonnie reached down deep and found it in himself to offer a small, but genuine, smile. “God, I’m glad it’s you making these decisions and not me, because it’s got to
suck.”

“You know I don’t approve of that particular turn of phrase, but yes, it does, in the worst, most loveless and manipulative way, and then it spits it in your face when you try to kiss it afterwards.” Freddy heaved another sigh and turned toward the door. “Go on, Bonnie. Keep a close watch. I’ll come and find you when I’m done.”

* * *

In the security office, the animatronics went their separate ways. In the cupboard, Babycakes closed its eyes and powered down. In the basement, the thing standing over the monitor array activated a hall camera to watch Freddy limp toward the dining room. “Silly old bear,” the thing said in a rusty voice tinged by equal parts contempt and affection. “She has a family. And we’re all looking forward to meeting her again, aren’t we?”

It glanced aside, glowing eyes piercing the blackness until it located its companions among the hanging garden of endoskeletons and empty casings. There were lights in the basement and power enough to run them all night, but the thing had grown accustomed to the dark and the face he was looking for—a bone-white mask towering high above the loose clutch of rattling, restless figures that shared this prison—reflected his eyelight, almost seeming to leap out from the black, easy to see.

“Keep an eye on her,” the thing said. “If she goes home, go after her and make sure she doesn’t get too messed up. And if she does anyway, at least make sure she doesn’t pass out and drown in the toilet or some damn thing. If she stays…hell, go home anyway. Check on the baby. Make sure he’s not drowning in the toilet either. Or drinking out of it,” the thing muttered, rubbing at the suit’s moldering brows. “Let him know Daddy loves him and I’ll see him real soon if he’s a good boy.”

The masked figure did not respond at first, but after a moment’s silent stare, it raised one skeletally thin arm and touched the tips of its long claws to its throat. There was an opening there, a single hanging wire to mark the place where its speakerbox had been. Reminded of its muteness, it nodded, then left through the ventilation system, which had, due to a rushed building schedule and high overturn in the labor pool, been fitted with a drop-shaft and access panel two inches wider than the designer’s express specifications. A tight squeeze, even for the Puppet, but only as far as the crawway, and once it had made its way to the hatch in Kiddie Cove, it was free to go where it willed, slipping like a spider along the exposed rafters of the unfinished ceiling, unnoticed, just another crawling thing in the shadows.

In the basement, the thing at the monitors set the cameras to their automated routine and settled back to watch the night pass by, reaching absent-mindedly down to pat the sloped, shivering head that had nudged up under his arm. “Daddy loves you,” he murmured, unaware of the wagging tail and happy grunts that answered him. All his attention was on the screen, where Ana swept the floor. “And you’re going to see me real soon.”
After Ana had returned the things Mason and his boys had rifled through to their proper places, she guessed the dining room was clean enough to satisfy Freddy, but she kept cleaning anyway, determined not to let her insecurities show by rushing through the job. When she ran out of things to pick up, wipe off or rearrange, she found the broom and swept, taking particular care to sift out all the pieces of Swampy that Bonnie’s errant punch had broken off. She didn’t like Swampy (she didn’t like any of the New Faces, with the possible exception of Rumble, and him only because he had been carried off by trophy hunters before Ana ever had to clap eyes on him), but she’d glue him back together anyway. It would give her something else to focus on besides…everything.

Even after sweeping, the floor remained splotchy and Ana remained restless, so she decided to mop. She was standing over the kitchen sink, aiming the hose into the wheeled bucket on the floor beside her, when she heard footsteps approach. Chica’s first, her stiff-legged shuffling gait underscored by the soft scrape of her hand trailing along the wall for balance. Bonnie came limping along right behind her and although he hesitated when he reached the end of the hall, he followed Chica to the dining room instead of turning into the kitchen. Then came Freddy.

Ana’s stomach tightened. The rule about not bothering her while she was working might still be in effect, but she knew those footsteps and Freddy didn’t always follow his own rules.

‘He’s just passing through,’ she thought, refusing to look even when she heard him come to the doorway. ‘He’s always on watch and there are those kids down at the quarry. He just wants to go to the storeroom and have a look out back.’

The footsteps stopped.

‘He won’t say anything if I don’t,’ she thought, now with a touch of desperation.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“I know,” she told him and was proud of the calm, even disinterested way she said it, like she’d hardly noticed he was there. Her knuckles where she gripped the hose were white and her ears were pounding, but as far as Freddy knew, she was fine. “I want to.”

“You do realize that you’ve already cleaned this entire building more often and more thoroughly than it ever was when it was open?”

Ana shrugged.

“You’re clearly exhausted.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ana, please. Bedtime Bear says, get some rest.”

Cold fingers brushed across Ana’s heart even as dull heat climbed in her cheeks. She’d had so many fun names for him. Bedtime Bear. Munchie Bear. Fascist. Judgmental asshat. Pretentious Mammon pricklord. The list went on and on and he’d heard every one of them.
He’d always been listening.

“Ana—”

“I’m working,” she said. Her throat hurt. She gripped the hose tighter to keep from rubbing uselessly at something that wasn’t really hurt, couldn’t be loosened. “I need to work right now. Leave me alone and let me finish. Please.”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t leave either. He stood in the doorway, watching her, quiet.

She kept her back to him, affecting unconcern, wondering if she would always feel this itch between her shoulderblades now when he was behind her, the anticipation of a spine-shattering punch. Maybe not. Maybe that part would get better, it was too early to tell. But one thing was for sure: it would never be the same between them again.

When the mop bucket was full, Ana shut off the water, returned the hose to its proper resting place, poured in cleanser and swished the mop through the water until suds formed.

“I should have found a way to tell you,” Freddy said.

“We don’t have to talk about this.”

“It would be a lie to say I wanted to tell you, but if you had to know, it should have come from me.”

“We don’t have to talk about this!” The hoarseness of her voice annoyed her. She forced a laugh to clear it. “It’s one of the things I treasure most about our relationship, a well-nurtured sense of catlike indifference.”

His expression shifted, pained. “I was never indifferent toward you, Ana. However I may have felt at various times, they were always strong feelings.”

“Don’t,” she said and had to suppress a wince at the coldness of her tone. “I’m sorry, but please don’t. I don’t want to fight, so just…go somewhere and let me work.”

“Ana—”

“I need to work!”

“Because you don’t want to think,” he said and finally moved out of the damn doorway. He did not merely step aside, however. He went to the cupboard in the corner, opened it, and took down her bag of grass and rolling papers. “There are other ways,” he said and put it on the counter, looking at her.

She didn’t move.

“I’m not as much of a prude as you think I am.” He closed the cupboard, shutting away the rest of her stash as he gestured invitingly at her cannabis.

“No thanks,” she said, even as her eyes dropped to the baggie and fixed there. “I don’t toke and drive.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replied. “But you’re not going anywhere.”

He said it without menace, but her blood chilled all the same. Intensely aware of the distance between them, and between her and every exit in the building, Ana said, “What makes you think
that, Freddy?"

He pointed at the bucket of soapy water at her feet. “You’re mopping our floor, not packing and leaving. I know you’re upset. I’d be surprised if you weren’t. However, there are three Ms…” He trailed off, giving her plenty of time to glumly reflect on the fact that she’d said ‘masturbate’ to Freddy Fazbear, before awkwardly concluding, “…and one of them is medicate.”

She wrapped her hand around the mop’s handle, but didn’t pick it up. “I can’t,” she said, perfectly aware she was only stalling the inevitable. “It’s a work-day tomorrow. I’ve got to go home and get some sleep.”

“I know that look in your eyes. You’ve miles to go before you sleep.”

Another phantom breeze crept up her spine. Ana frowned. “I’ve heard that before.”

“I’m sure you have. It’s from a popular poem.”

Ana nodded, but she knew she hadn’t read those words in a book. She’d heard it, and in another moment, she remembered who had said it. Fredrich Faust. He had promises to keep, he’d said, and miles to go before he slept. He must have said it in front of Freddy too, and so of course Freddy would think she’d heard it. After all, it really didn’t matter whether they quoted poetry or beat a child unconscious and locked her in the closet—whatever your parents did was a child’s understanding of normal.

“It’s all right, Ana,” Freddy said, misinterpreting her prolonged silence as indecision. “I’m completely unaware smoking it will also give you an appetite.” His ears twitched, suppressing some emotion his plastic features did not show. “I have no ulterior motives whatsoever.”

She smiled, caught herself, and finally leaned the mop against the sink and went over to roll herself a joint.

Freddy gave her space, but did not retreat as far as the doorway. Although she tried not to eye the space between them too obviously, he noticed and took another small step back. Out of grabbing range, maybe, but not out of lunging range. She’d seen him move damned fast when he wanted to.

“I don’t suppose you have a light,” Ana said, checking her pockets and finding only keys. Two sets of keys.

Whatever dark thoughts had begun to rise up at the touch of that Frankenstein string-doll were burned entirely away in the next instant when Freddy stepped up, pointed at her joint, and a two-inch flame leapt out of the tip of his finger.

Ana did not flinch, but she did gape, too astonished to even think of actually lighting up.

“There’s a striker hidden in the tip.” The flame winked out so he could show her, then snapped back into existence so he could offer it again.

“Why?”

“He built us to impress. He was…Our creator, I mean…He had a keen mind for the unexpected wonder.” The flame went out again. This time, Freddy let his arm lower. “When the first restaurant opened, Bonnie played an acoustic guitar—you may have noticed it in the photographs from the lobby—but after a few years, our creator thought up a way to install an amplifier in Bonnie’s arm so that he could play an electric one. Much better sound, a much more impressive performance. One of the animatronics at Mulholland had a small helium tank installed with a line that ran to a
valve in his finger so he could inflate balloons for the children. And I saw schematics for another animatronic that could dispense soft-serve ice cream.”

“From where? Never mind,” said Ana quickly, shaking her head. “I don’t want to know. Every possible orifice is just gross. But…Why a lighter?” she asked as he offered it for the third time. “What are you setting on fire? Whenever I’ve seen Chica bring a birthday cake out, the candles are already lit.”

“Flash paper at parties. Always a crowd pleaser.” He rolled his other shoulder while keeping his extended arm steady so she could finally lean in and light up. “And believe it or not, it used to be considered gallant to light a lady’s cigarette.”

“At Freddy’s?”

“There was a smoking section at Circle Drive,” he agreed, nodding. “And Mulholland, I suppose, although I never saw it. The only reason there wasn’t one at High Street is because the very idea of a non-smoking section was so inconceivable. Everyone smoked when I was young. When I saw the sign here declaring the entire premises to be smoke-free, even the parking lot, I was astonished.”

“That is ironic,” she agreed. “Especially when you consider how many kids came out here to sneak a smoke before the place was even built.”

“Mind you, it’s an unhealthy habit and I don’t approve, but it was one of those things I never thought would change, until it did.” His eyes moved up and over the walls, through them, reading the restaurant’s history, maybe the whole town’s. He grunted, seemed to remember he could talk, and said, stiltedly, “Change is different here.”

“In Mammon? Yeah, that’s what everyone says. Nothing ever changes.”

“It does, though. Invisibly.” He gestured vaguely, his eyes still in constant motion. “We tell the same jokes, sing the same songs, see the same faces in the crowd. Our years are made up of the same Mondays, the same Christmases, the same opening and closing acts…the same silence when the doors lock and the windows are boarded up. Without children to grow in front of us, there are no years here, just hours in the same week, over and over. And then there’s another grand opening and suddenly everything is different. Hemlines, haircuts, language, attitudes…I still remember the outrage over the violence in Elevator Action and now there’s, what? She-Zombie Slaughterhouse III? Everything changes,” he said again, shaking his head. “But it never happens in front of us.”

All the while he’d been talking, Ana had listened, fascinated by the juxtaposition of Freddy’s familiar voice and Fred Faust’s personable, if slightly odd, way of speaking. They weren’t quite identical, but closer than coincidence. This was Fred Faust’s own voice, not as it was now, eroded by age, but as it had been then, when the boy barely out of his teens had recorded it for his favorite animatronic to use.

She must have been staring. Freddy’s head tipped, his ears coming forward. “What is it?” he asked warily.

“Nothing. It…How is it that you still have lighter fluid after all these years?” Ana asked, nodding at his hand. “I have to refill mine every month or two.”

“So do I. Fortunately plenty of people leave their lighters behind when they come here.”

“You can keep your finger topped off, but you can’t fix yourself in any meaningful way?”

“We can’t fix each other,” Freddy corrected. “Rule Number Twenty-Two. We can fix ourselves,
although of course we can’t access our control panel or CPU, and there are limits to what we can reach or see. And yes, I try to keep lighter fluid in the well. My eyes were filthy before you cleaned them. I had trouble seeing without the extra light. Not that there was much to see most nights, but when there was, I liked to be prepared.”

“What else do you do?” Ana asked.

“Pardon?”

“Self-maintenance,” she explained, gesturing at him with her joint. “What’s your routine? Because, not to embarrass you, but I can see at least a dozen things from here that ought to be way higher on the priority list than keeping your fire-finger in working order.”

He lifted his chin, his plastic features composed and his tone even as he answered. “I tried to keep myself clean and oiled, initially. But the water stopped working and we ran out of oil. Then my casing started breaking down and my sensor plates began to clog up and…” He stared at her, impassive, and finally said, “It got to be more than I could handle very quickly.”

His quiet dignity in the face of what had been—she had to admit it, now that it couldn’t be taken back—a question meant to embarrass him, backfired on her. Ana smoked away her twinge of conscience, pretending to read the kitchen safety signs around the room, wondering why she’d done it. She felt a little ashamed now, sure she did, but there was a part of her that was disappointed, even angry, that he hadn’t squirmed.

“So what do you need?” she asked. “I could take a look at you, I guess. If you want.”

“I don’t know. You may find this hard to believe, but I don’t know much about mechanical engineering or computer programming. I can run a diagnostics and tell you what about me isn’t working. It might make sense to you. It’s just words to me.”

“Well, if it comes to that, I guess I don’t know much about how the human body works, either.”

Freddy nodded, then glanced sharply at the door. A moment later, Bonnie passed by, head down, ears drooping. Ana focused on the smoking tip of her joint so she wouldn’t have to see if he looked in at her. She heard whirring—eyes or ears or both—but his footsteps continued on without stopping or even slowing. The West Hall door scraped open and shut before Ana dared look up again and there was Freddy, looking back at her.

“Are you all right?” he asked, which was better than asking about Bonnie, but not by much.

“What kind of question is that?” she shot back, instantly annoyed and determined not to understand why.

“Is it so impossible to imagine I might be concerned about you?” His own voice remained low and even, refusing to rise to her challenge. “The last time I saw you—”

“Impossible, no,” she interrupted. “Unnecessary, yes. I take care of myself. I always have. I don’t need you.”

He looked away, at the freezer first, then the store room door, and finally at the bucket of cooling mop water, but not at her.

“I don’t want to fight,” she said and that was true, so why the hell was she trying so hard? “It’s just…a lot to deal with. I don’t know how I’m supposed to be handling this.”
“Neither do I.” Freddy rubbed a hand across his muzzle, pushing it slightly askew and had to adjust it back into place. “But I think we have to talk about it.”

Ana snorted smoke through her nostrils. “Nothing good has ever come out of any conversation that started with ‘I think we have to talk.’"

“Nothing good comes of replacing lies with silence either. Ana, please,” he said quietly, still not looking at her. “I feel like I’m losing you.”

“When did you ever ‘have’ me, bear?”

Several long seconds passed.

“Twice,” he said at length. “The first time, when you came here so sick, you hardly knew us. I had you then. I brought you in, because you had nowhere else to go…but here.” He looked around, his gears whining as he ran his gaze from one dark corner to another. “This awful place. I brought you in and I hated that I had to do it, but home is where you go when no one else in the world will have you, and you came here, so you were home.”

She wanted to tell him everyone makes mistakes and let him work out whether that had been hers or his. She wanted to tell him she couldn’t even remember doing it, that it had just been the latest in a string of bad decisions she’d made while she was too high to think. She wanted to tell him anything that would hurt him enough to make him mad enough to tell her to just go.

Her throat hurt, too tight to speak, almost too tight to breathe. She rubbed it and said nothing.

“And the second time…the time I took you to the basement. Not when I helped you bury your aunt, although I think I might have touched you then or at least come near…but when I took you there to look for her. You may never know how close I held you that day, Ana, or how terrible a feeling it was for me.”

‘I’ll bet,’ she thought, scornful in her own mind, but all she could do was huff a little through her nose and pull more stale smoke into her lungs, holding it like the burn was something to savor.

“I loved someone once,” Freddy said, staring into the mop bucket as suds popped and dispersed. “I thought he loved me. I still think he did, but only for what he thought we were. Understand, I never tried to hide the truth from him. It never occurred to me to think he didn’t know what he had c-c-c-created. Forgive me,” he said, rubbing at his stuttering jaw. “I shouldn’t be talking about these things. Suffice to say, he meant to make toys. He loved us…but only as long as we were toys. And when he learned the truth…well.” Freddy’s shoulders flexed minutely, shrugging off an old memory. “I’ve had a lot of time to come to terms with that. What is different can be repellant, just by its own alien nature. I understand that. Some days, I forgive him. Some days, I even realize there’s nothing to forgive. But some days…it’s still difficult to accept that he made me this way…and then rejected me for exceeding his expectations.”

“I’m not like that,” Ana heard herself say. Her voice was hoarse, but didn’t break. She smoked some more, to give herself an excuse to cough. “I don’t hate you.”

“Oh I don’t think he hates us,” Freddy said at once. After a considering moment, he added, “I think he regrets us. And that’s worse. That’s much worse. Do you regret coming here, Ana?”

She didn’t trust the first answer—the only answer—that came to mind, but when her silence dragged out, he eventually looked at her and she had to say something, so she said, “It doesn’t matter.”
He frowned, his ears pricking forward. “What do you mean?”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t regret near enough of the bad decisions I’ve made and I probably regret more than a few good ones. I make terrible life choices, Freddy, haven’t you noticed?”

“But do you?” he pressed.

She looked at him, unaware that she was very slightly shaking her head until she said, “No.”

“Even now?”

“Not even. I am a trash-fire,” she muttered, holding out her joint, which had gone out, “of bad judgment. Light me up.”

He did and this time, he did not step back again.

“Okay.” She boosted herself up to sit on the counter, putting a few inches more distance between them, but symbolically bridging the gap. “You want to talk? Go ahead, but I warn you, this isn’t something we can talk out. It’s not like I’m confused about anything. I know why you lied. I’d have done the same thing in your place. Hell, I’d have done a lot worse. It’s just...It’s like you said. There’s understanding, there’s forgiving and there’s understanding there’s nothing to forgive. And then there’s still being pissed in spite of it all.” She shrugged. “It is what it is and I already know I’m not leaving, so I guess I’ll get over it. Just not tonight.”

“Can I help?”

“I don’t see how.”

“What’s the worst part?” Freddy asked. “Right now?”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded, nothing but brooding concern on his face.

Bonnie’s face tried to well up in her mind, but she pushed it back down and said, “Freddy, I showered with you. I practically waved my naked boobs in your face on a dozen different occasions.”

“I never noticed,” Freddy assured her, but looked away so he wouldn’t have to meet the knowing stare she sent his way. After an awkward second of silence, he made a rumbling sort of coughing sound and added, “I’m more of a leg man anyway.”

Ana laughed. To her own ears, the sound was overloud, abrasive, but Freddy didn’t look at her. His ears swiveled sharply around, aimed at the hall; he glanced in that direction instead, frowning.

“And how are my legs, Freddy?” she inquired. “Or didn’t you notice them either?”

“I noticed,” he said distractedly, still looking at the empty doorway instead of at her. “But I’m not about to comment. Is that really the worst thing, though?”

“I’m not an exhibitionist. I hardly ever get naked even with guys I like. And don’t tell me you don’t see why it’s a big deal. You’re the one who was constantly telling me to put my clothes on and I know it’s not because you were afraid you couldn’t control yourself around my sweet ass. You knew that if I knew I was exposing myself, I’d be fucking mortified. But I didn’t know. I mean, yeah,” she said, furrowing her brow as she struggled to untangle some slowly thickening
thought-lines, “I knew I was showing skin, but I didn’t know that you knew…that…I knew. Fuck me, Rider,” she said, glaring at her joint. “This shit is half a year old! My point is…I don’t know. I thought I was safe.”

Freddy’s expression never changed, but his hat shivered as his ears twitched, suppressing movement he didn’t want to show her. “Are you afraid we’ll hurt you?”

“No, of course not,” said Ana, but she couldn’t stop herself from thinking of Mike Schmidt…or of Mason, who no one had seen in a week. “I don’t mean safe-safe, I mean…I said things. Things I never would have said if I’d known anyone was listening. And I don’t just mean the…” Ana bared her teeth, trying to mask her discomfort with a smile. “…the personal stuff. I mean the rest of it, all of it. Things I had no business saying to anyone.”

“It’s all right.”

“I called you a thundercunt.”

“I remember.”

“Well, then don’t tell me it’s all right.” Ana smoked, stoking anger while she still could before her muscles and mind relaxed in spite of herself. “I never would have said that if you’d been literally anyone else in the world.”

“You had every right to be upset. I stole from you. I destroyed your property.”

“So? You think that’s the first time that’s ever happened? Please. I work with some shady ass characters on a regular basis. I’ve passed out drunk in the same room with guys who would steal the lint out of their own mom’s bellybutton. I’m not saying I’m cool with it, because there’s certain things you don’t shrug off and certain people who you don’t let push you around, but those were not those things and you are not those people and I knew it. More to the point, the reason you threw those shirts out in the first place is because they were highly inappropriate for me to be wearing on a job, which I also damn well knew,” she added, pointing at him for emphasis. “So yeah. I was pissed because my shirts were gone and I was pissed because my sense of decency was being called into question, but I wasn’t screaming-obscenities-in-a-freezer pissed, not by a long shot. Not until it was a talking teddy bear schooling my ass on manners. No offense,” she added with a scowl of apology. “That was just what I thought at the time.”

“None taken,” Freddy said with a shrug.

“Seriously, stop saying that. I know you’re offended. I came into your house—no, I broke into your house, and then I moved myself in like I owned the place, all the while talking down to you and calling you names and…and that’s not okay! I’m no different than all the other people who come here!”

“Understandable, under the circumstances. I encouraged you to believe it.”

“I’m not!” she insisted. “What, you think just because they bashed Bonnie’s face in and I put it back together, that’s any kind of difference? It’s the same thing! I treated you like an object! I came into your house and treated you like a thing!”

“Understandable, under the circumstances. I encouraged you to believe it.”

“That’s just it, I don’t know what I believed. Looking back, it seems so obvious. You were barely hiding it. And I don’t exactly make a habit out of…you know,” she said vaguely. “Stuff with Bonnie. What I’m saying is, if I thought you were real, I wouldn’t have done half the stuff I did
with you, and if I thought you weren’t real, I wouldn’t have done the other half. So what was I thinking?”

“That you were safe.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she said, annoyed. “You want me to shut up, just say, ‘Shut up.’ I won’t fucking melt. But don’t talk down to me.”

He was already shaking his head, his eyelids slanted outward in weary resignation. “I’m not, Ana. For once, I think I think I understand you perfectly.”

“My point is, I threw a tantrum. I swear to God, Freddy, that was probably the first tantrum I’ve ever thrown in my entire life.”

“I believe you. You’ve always struck me as very self-controlled.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic, but I am, actually. And yet I threw a tantrum at you and do you know why?”

“Because you could,” said Freddy, perfectly in time with Ana’s grandly self-effacing, “Because I could! Wait, what?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I’ve been a talking teddy bear for a long time. Do you honestly think there’s anything about the psychology of the tantrum that I don’t know? For example,” he said as his rigid features subtly shifted to show an exasperated sort of affection, “I know that the fact that your tantrum was disrespectful and melodramatic does not bother you half as much as the simple fact that it was actually witnessed.”

Ana smoked and looked at the open doorway to the store room. Dirty light slanted across Mr. Faust’s pneumatic arm, the beam growing thick and thin and thick again as the wind blew on the loosened loading dock door.

“After all, it doesn’t matter what a teddy bear sees, even a talking one,” Freddy continued. “You didn’t have to hide who you were. That’s what you mean when you say that you were safe and believe me, I understand. I was never as careful with you as I should have been, but I knew we were safe, as long as you thought you were just playing with oversized dolls.”

“And now?”

“Now we have to trust each other.”

“Scary thought.”

The cameras in his eyes whined as he studied her. He looked back at the kitchen doorway, dark and still. His ears swiveled, listening to nothing. When he looked at her again, his face was plastic-hard and unreadable. “He made me to make people laugh,” he said in a low, neutral tone that nevertheless hummed with whatever intense emotion hid behind it. “And I have come to hate the sound of laughter, because I only hear it now when we are in danger. He made me to hug children and to comfort them when they cry. I still want to, but it’s all I can do to touch them or to be touched by them…by anyone. He programmed me with over two hundred songs, and they’re all just noise to me now. The jokes aren’t funny. The stories are only words. The magic—” He popped his arm casing, pushed the tip of a multi-colored chain of scarves into one side of his fist and pulled a bouquet of natty paper flowers from the other side, tossing it away without even looking at it. “—is all fake. I’m fake. So yes, Ana. Yes, it is a scary thought, because now I have to be myself when I’m not sure I remember how or even if that man is worth being, and if I mess it up,
you’ll leave. I don’t want you to leave,” he said, with static cutting a harsh line to underscore his last words, although his expression never changed. “I have nothing left except my family. And you are my family. You were given to me, God help us both, and I may not have had a choice about that, but I choose to love you. And to keep you. For as long as you let me.”

Ana could only stare at him, frozen, until the dying ember of her joint reached her skin and she threw it away with a hiss, sucking thoughtlessly at her thumb only to spit onto the floor when she tasted the cleanser she’d been planning to mop with.

“Stay there,” said Freddy and walked just far enough into the store room to get one of the hand towels from her shelf of cleaning supplies. He ran some water over it, wrung it out, wet it again and folded it into a neat square, which he brought to her.

She hadn’t realized how dirty her hands were until she wiped them off. Blushing—why was she blushing?—she mumbled, “I came here straight from work. I should have gone home, grabbed a shower—shit, don’t think about me in the shower. Forget I said that. Sorry, I’m a little stoned.”

He grunted (an oddly satisfied sound), took the towel when she offered it and returned it to the sink. There he went through his fastidious little ritual again—wet, wring, wet, fold—and returned to her with the damp towel.

“I’m fine,” she said, holding up her hand in polite refusal.

Freddy nudged her arm aside and reached for her head.

Ana recoiled at once, her hand raising in a gesture that was half-defensive, half-threatening.

Freddy paused, then showed her the towel to prove it had not magically turned into a knife. “I just want to wash your face.”

Ana’s mouth briefly dropped open. “Okay, I admit we kind of had a moment going there, but what am I, three? Why would you ever think that was a thing to do?”

“You’re wearing—”

“Stop. Yeah, I’m wearing make-up. Just because I don’t feel like explaining a bunch of bruises to the nosy asswipes at work does not mean there’s anything wrong with me! I’m fine. And ‘I’m fine’ means you back off. Come on,” she said, not as harshly as before but for sure not invitingly. “Don’t make it weird, bear. We’re trying to get along.”

His ears twitched. “Yes, we are,” he said evenly. “In that spirit, you might allow me to see the damage that was done to you in my house, under my watch, so that I can finally be certain it was not as bad as I’ve imagined.”

“It wasn’t.”

“You were covered in blood.”

“It wasn’t mine.”

His ears twitched again. “It certainly wasn’t ours.”

Oh, he wanted to go there, did he?

“It was Mason’s,” she said, not accusingly but not looking away either.
“I suppose it could have been,” he agreed, meeting her gaze with the kind of poker face only plastic features were capable of. “I don’t remember any of the men having injuries, but I had other things to worry about at the time.”

“Such as dumping their bodies?”

He showed neither surprise nor reproach at this accusation, but simply said, “Such as picking Bonnie out of the quarry without falling in with him. I didn’t kill them, Ana. I won’t insult you by claiming concern for their well-being, but I didn’t kill them.”

She listened, but his cooling system remained steady, if labored, and his ears didn’t flinch at suppressed guilt. ‘Which only means he doesn’t feel guilty,’ said the dark part of her heart. Aloud, she said, “You’re standing by that bullshit story you told me, huh? Mason got a phone call and they all ran away. Happy ending. Nobody dies.”

“That’s what you call a happy ending, is it?” he asked, without much expression but with a hum in his speaker to betray some strong emotion despite his outward appearances. “You were beaten unconscious while I was off in another part of the building, trying desperately to keep my family safe. I didn’t even see which one of them got you, because I wasn’t standing between them and you, as I should have been. And Bonnie, was that a happy ending? I suppose I should say it was,” he said, still in that same detached way belied by that soft scratch of static. “Once he was out of the water, I can honestly say I thought the worst was over. Even when he lost his voice, I never doubted you would fix him and any other damage he might have sustained. Once he was out of the water…” Freddy’s speaker crackled and he said, calmly, “He was underwater for seven minutes and forty-three seconds while I stood there, waiting, wondering…How deep is the quarry, Ana, do you know?”

She did, actually, due to her re-acquaintance with the mining museum on the other side of town.

“There’s ledges,” she stalled. “The old roads, you know, where the pit-ponies pulled the carts up and down. So depending where he fell in, anywhere from a few feet to, I don’t know, maybe twenty or thirty?”

“And if he’d gotten turned around in that mess and kept falling off ledges instead of climbing out? How far to the bottom? The very bottom?”

“I don’t know,” she lied.

“Yes, you do. You said so once. Right out there,” he added, swinging one arm out to indicate the kitchen. Water from the towel squeezed in his fist splattered against the side of the oven and trickled down, leaving tracks like tears in the dust. “On the morning after the night we first met, don’t you remember? When your friend called and you told him you couldn’t get home because the storm had washed everything out to the quarry, which was ‘hundreds of feet deep in toxic sludge.’ Your words,” he told her, not harshly, but not very gently. He paused to give them time to settle on her conscience, then continued in a pensive way, “I was not aware that I had memorized them until that moment. For seven minutes and forty-three seconds, they were the only words, the only thought, I had. It is difficult to see him now, to see the damage that was done because I… couldn’t prevent it. But at least I can see it on him. You’re still underwater, Ana. I’m still waiting.”

Before she could answer, the light in the store room changed, distracting both of them, but it was white light slanting down from a high corner angle, not golden sunlight coming in as an adventurous hand pushed the loose door back. The camera in there was on.

Ana shook out of it first. Shoving her hair back, she exposed her forehead and the dramatic
goodbye Mason had stamped into her face before leaving. “Fine,” she said tightly. “Look, but
don’t touch.”

Freddy was slow to bring his attention back to her from the open store room, but when his eyes
finally reached her, they stayed. Water dripped from the towel onto the tiles, drop by slow drop,
while he stared.

“It looks worse than it is,” Ana said and had to suppress a grimace. She had to remind herself she
didn’t need to explain it or dismiss it; Freddy already knew how it had happened. But it did look
worse than it was, that was the truth, and after a week, it didn’t even look that bad. The bruises
under the mask of concealer had taken on that greenish color that looked so grotesque but meant
they were fading. The lump by her hairline had shrunk and the bloody mess that came from being
slammed into the tiles a few times had healed down to one big scab and a couple small ones. She’d
have a new scar when it was all over, but another scar more or less was nothing to get hung up
over.

“I wish I could have stopped them,” Freddy said, his eyes still moving over her face like there was
so much there to see. “I did try. There were so many of them.”

“Don’t apologize. It wasn’t your fault they were here.”

“It wasn’t yours, either.”

“Which part?” she asked sourly. “The part where they came here looking for me, the part where
the reason they came at all was because I beat the shit out of Mason’s boys earlier, or the part
where the reason Mason found out about that was because I didn’t beat them hard enough?
Seriously, why are you so dead-set on having me around?” she asked with a short, acid laugh. “I
am literally the worst person who has ever set foot in this building.”

Freddy glanced back at the store room. Perhaps his ears could pick up sounds hers couldn’t,
because the camera’s beam shifted, shining more fully on the empty doorway between the two
rooms. “No, you aren’t.”

“I’ve hurt people,” Ana said, bringing Freddy’s gaze back to her. “You should know that about me
before you get too heavily invested in this family thing of yours. I’m sure you’ve seen some bad
shit here, but like the old saying goes, you ain’t seen nothing like me. If…Look, real-talk here, but
if I hadn’t been laid out in Pirate Cove that night, those guys never would have dumped Bonnie in
the quarry, because I would have been cutting them apart with a fucking bandsaw. I am not
kidding.”

The only change to his expression was a very slight shift toward…something. Sympathy, maybe.
Sadness. Whatever it was, it wasn’t surprise. Without speaking, he raised the damp towel to wipe
at her cheek.

“Did you hear me?” Ana asked, pushing his hand away.

“Yes.”

“And…?!” Ana let out a sharp, incredulous laugh. “God, of all the petty reasons you’ve ever had to
want to throw me out and suddenly me killing a guy isn’t enough?”

“Wanting to do something is not the same as doing it. No one knows that better than we do here.”
Freddy’s fan revved in a sigh, blowing hot air at her through his joints. “Ana, once upon a time,
you told me that we don’t do the things we do because we are who we are. You said we become
the people who can do the things we do.”

“I did?”

“Yes. And I find that comforting.”

“You do?” She snorted. “You missed the hell out of that point, then.”

“No, I understand how you meant it. But I find it comforting nonetheless, because if nothing else, it means that people can change. I don’t care what you’ve done,” he said, looking her in the eye. “It doesn’t matter who you were or even who you are, out there. In here, in my house, I know you. And you don’t scare me.”

Ana smiled and this time, when Freddy went to wipe her face, she let him. The towel was cheap and coarse, even wet, and his hands sure weren’t much better, but there was a place on his hand, small, maybe just the pad on one side of one finger, that was worn as smooth and soft as old paper.

“As I hope we don’t scare you,” Freddy said, dabbing at the scraped place on her forehead, pressing the folded corner of the towel to the slight bump for a second or two between wipes to soften the scabs before cleaning them away. It stung a bit, then tingled—concealer getting in the raw wound, she guessed—then gradually numbed over.

“I don’t scare easy.”

“I can imagine the things you must have heard about this place. About me.”

“Yeah, well…Is that thing ever going to turn off?” she asked suddenly, looking at the store room door in the world’s least subtle attempt to change the subject.

“Yes,” said Freddy, undistracted. He took her chin between his fingers and turned her to face him again, returning his attention to the scrapes on her forehead. “The motion-sensor keeps retriggering because of the broken door, that’s all.”

“Yeah, but it’s aimed at this room, not the loading dock door.”

“No, it’s aimed at the shadows on the wall where the sunlight is hitting the shelves. Just ignore it. It’ll eventually time out and move on. See?” he said as the camera did just that.

“Is the rule about not taking down the cameras one of the immutable ones?”

“Unfortunately, yes. We cannot allow you to interfere with the security system. If we see you—” Was it her imagination, or was there the slightest emphasis on those words? “—we have to remove you from the restaurant and without a manager’s override, we can never allow you to come back.”

Ana scowled, then sighed. “And here I am, already trying to think of ways around that. I told you I’m not a good person. But I’m trying. I won’t touch them, Freddy. I promise.”

His only answer was a faint humming of servos as he almost imperceptibly shook his head.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Oh…yes, I do.”

“I know I haven’t given you a lot of reasons to think I’m trustworthy, but I can be, under the right circumstances.” She thought about it and her mouth quirked up in a lop-sided smile. “My drug dealer trusts me.”
The focus of his gaze shifted from her forehead to her eyes. His were unamused.

“Hey, if you knew anything about drugs and what they do to people, you’d know that was high praise, right there.”

His eyelids leveled out in his you-must-be-kidding expression. “Ana, I lived through the Sixties and the Disco Decade. What exactly is it you think I don’t know about drugs?” He looked at his hand, then pressed the towel to her forehead, over the rawest part of the wound. “Or the people who use them…and those who use them to control others?”

“Rider doesn’t control me. He just…” The task of putting her full history with Rider into words and then relating those words to Freddy loomed over her, suffocating. “It’s complicated,” she concluded. “But he doesn’t control me. It’s always my own choice. I wouldn’t even call them mistakes. I made the best of the shitty hand Life dealt me, that’s all.”

Freddy grunted, holding the towel in place. It must have started bleeding again while he was cleaning it. “Sometimes there are no right choices. All we can do is make the choice whose consequences we feel we can live with.”

“I don’t want to scare you, bear, but that sounds like something I’d say to justify a really bad decision.”

He smiled, but it was…well, a mechanical thing. It never touched his eyes.

Even with his fingers gently cupping her chin and his other hand pressing the towel firmly to her skin, she felt the space between them seem to grow.

“I like the way you talk,” she said, surprising herself a little. She hadn’t meant to say it. It took her a moment to feel out the shapes in her thickening mind and figure out the train of her thought. “Not that it’s so much different. Just, you know, quieter. And more together. You always kind of sounded like a ransom note before, no offense. The old-school kind where they cut the letters out of newspapers and paste them to the page…Holy shit, what are these words coming out of my mouth? It’s nice to finally hear your real voice, I think, is what I’m trying to say. I’m sorry I’m so high. I swear, it was just the one joint. I did not come here already blitzed out of my ever-loving mind. God, you must think I’m such a fuck-up. What do you want from me?” she asked suddenly, plaintively. “You must want something. You’d never put up with my useless ass if you didn’t. What do you want from me?”

“I want to be your friend.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, bear. I ask a legitimate question and you give me the Saturday Morning Cartoon answer? Fuck you! I’m sorry,” she said immediately. “I didn’t mean that. My mouth can’t shut up right now for reasons. But it was kind of a horseshit answer.”

“It’s the truth. We are family. I didn’t have much of a choice about that, but I can choose to be your friend. I don’t think I’m there yet…but I want to be.”

Déjà vu all over again. It was Mr. Faust’s voice, and now Mr. Faust’s words, or nearly the same ones. The same sentiment, anyway, expressed on the subject of the prodigal grandchild that had entered his home, uninvited but not turned away.

“To be fond of me,” Ana said and laughed, just a little. “And feel that I am sincerely fond of you in return.”

“Is that so impossible?”
“No, it’s very practical. And achievable. It’s just…a lot to ask out of me right now. Even if I wasn’t high as giraffe balls.”

“I know. Which is why, right now, all I want is for you to be here tomorrow.”

Ana shook her head at once, but couldn’t immediately answer aloud, as she was otherwise engaged in a yawn. “I’ve got to go home,” she said when she could. “I’ve got work tomorrow and…and it just…I don’t feel right about it.”

“Being here?”

“I have a house,” she reminded him. “I shouldn’t be crashing here, making you take me in when I…when I…” Another yawn. “When I have a place. It didn’t matter before, because I thought it didn’t matter, but it does nuh…” She yawned hard enough to hear the tendons in her jaw creak. “Now,” she finished and shook her head. “Shit, I’m sorry. I haven’t been sleeping very well, you know…out there. It just suddenly caught up to me. Isn’t that always the way?”

“The way?”

“Of stress. Stress is…Stress is a strange thing. Like a trap. Like a spring. Like a spring…trap. Oh my God, shut up, Ana,” she said to herself, yawning. “It’s like…you can feel the tension, and you think any second you’re going to snap and spring out into action, because that’s how it feels, like it’s coiling tighter and tighter and there’s nowhere to go but explosively outward. You’re just waiting for one more turn of the crank and the Puppet jump out. You know?”

“Yes.”

“But when it happens…when it happens, there’s just that one jump and then you just slump there. All that coiling and you don’t go anywhere. It’s more like a slinky than a spring, now that I think about it. Slinky-trap.”

Freddy grunted, reminding her he was there.

“Do you know what a slinky is?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m surprised you do, though. Do they really still have them?”

“Yeah. Sort of. I haven’t seen a…a…” Yawn. “…a real one in a long time, but they got the cheap plastic knockoffs in all the…the, like, dollar stores and shit.”

“Dollar stores.”

“Yeah. You know. Where you find all the off-brand and discontinued stuff no other store can sell. Generic cigarettes and kitchy shit, stuff like that.” Ana made a vague waving gesture and rubbed her eyes. “Where five bucks’ll buy you a 2-liter bottle of Valley Splash soda in a flavor like pineapple or chocolate, a genuine Bat Hero action figure on a plastic motorcycle with wheels that don’t turn, a tube of unpatterned wrapping paper, a box of cake mix with a price sticker over the expiration date and a gallon-sized tub of vanilla ice cream that is both freezer-burnt and half-melted. That was the year I gave David a surprise party,” Ana recalled. “God, he tried so hard to pretend he was having a good time and it was awful. So awful. So…yeah. Dollar stores.”

“They used to call those five and dimes.”

“Inflation’s a bitch, bear.”
“Indeed.”

“What were we talking about?” she asked, muffling yet another yawn against the back of her hand. Her vision swam; she blinked to clear it, but the sense of swimming remained even if the background stayed fixed. “I don’t…Was it my aunt’s house? I had a…had a basement full of…Bat Hero guys and…Super SpaceMaster guys. David loved action figures, so Aunt Easter, she bought them…she…” Ana weaved, frowning up at him across a chasm of spinning dust and shadow.

“Some of them were open,” she said, almost clearly. “Aunt Easter bought them for David, sure…but…who was playing with them? Adults pose toys. Kids play with them. These weren’t posed. They were…They were played with. I…I think I have to lie down.”

Freddy set the towel aside and put his hands out. Ana fell into them as perfectly as if this were a move they’d practiced together for years. It was beautiful, in its own way—the darkness spiraling from the outside in, pulling her down into its warm heart and holding her with plastic arms. She heard Freddy humming, but the sound was indistinct, as if she were underwater and swiftly sinking.

And all at once, she was fifteen years old, in the car, in the lake. The water was warm and heavy in her lungs. She couldn’t cough, couldn’t breathe. She tried once to kick, but her legs would not respond; the window had never broken. There was no Freddy’s and never had been. She had drowned after all. Her frantic swim, the long walk to Rider’s house, the years and years that followed, the phone call, her return to Mammon, finding Bonnie, Mike Schmidt finding her, and all of it, all of it…just the last confused crackle of the synapses in her brain as she died.

Then there was nothing, not even dreams.
Foxy waited in the hall, leaning against the wall next to the door, out of sight but close enough to listen in as Freddy and Ana talked. The girl was a bit stiffish at the start, but she wanted to talk and put up only a token resistance to the offer of a relaxation aid. They sparred awhile after that, or rather, the girl did some cutting and stabbing and Fred stood there and took it, wearing down her guard while pretending to be defenseless until the moment was right to lay her out.

It was a long wait, longer than it had to be, with the only entertainment being the growing discomfort in Freddy’s answers, not so much in his voice as in his silences before he spoke, knowing Foxy was there, listening.

At last, although there was no hint of it in the things Foxy heard, the wicked deed must have been done, because the effects were unmistakable. Whatever the Purple Man’s father used to spike his ‘special’ presents with back in the day could put a child under in ten seconds; Ana was older, bigger, and maybe the stuff was just old, but even so, she held out less than a minute. She began to ramble, then to yawn, then followed that unique little whuffing grunt as Ana fell face-first into a furry chest.

Foxy waited a few seconds more, just to be sure, then said, “Ready for me, Fred?”

His answer was a grunt. Freddy’s grunts could be expressive, but this one told him nothing.

shrugging himself off the wall, Foxy headed on into the kitchen.

Freddy was there by the prep counter where Ana still sat, her arms dangling and cheek pressed to Freddy’s shoulder. His arm was crooked around her, holding her as much as steadying her, while his other hand rested on the back of her head. His ears quivered now and then with his tremors as he endured this touch, although he could have easily put her off. He choose to hold her and to suffer.

Fred’s discomfiture aside, she was even sort of cute, snugged up there. A child in Freddy’s arms had a way of looking like a doll, but Ana merely looked like a child—the child she must have been, all hair and elbows, sleeping off a sugar crash. With a little imagination, the bruises on her face could have been smudges of frosting.

It should have been peaceful, but even in sleep, her brows were pinched with troubles, and Freddy’s shivering joints and stony expression belied any illusion of tranquility suggested by their embrace.

“Ye all right, mate?” Foxy asked, trotting over.

No answer. Although he must have heard Foxy’s metal feet crossing on the kitchen tiles, Freddy did not look around. He continued to hold Ana, making Foxy wait another full five minutes before, with a sigh, he said, “Come and take her.”

Foxy did, hupping Ana up and over his shoulder so she dangled down his back. She did not struggle, did not moan. She hung like one dead. “Just like old times, eh?” he said, turning around.
“That isn’t funny. Wait.” Freddy touched Ana’s limp arm, then gently pulled her shirt down where it had ridden up, exposing a pale band of skin, and tucked it under the waist of her jeans. “All right, take her. Not to your cabin.”

“Oi, that stings,” said Foxy, shrugging the girl up higher on his shoulder to emphasize the complete lack of distinction he made betwixt her and a sack of flour. “She’s bleeding unconscious! I may not be a gentleman, but even I has a limit!”

“So do I.” Freddy pointed a finger into Foxy’s face. “And if you go looking for mine tonight, I promise you, you’ll find it.”

Foxy snapped off a salute with his hook and carried Ana away. In truth, he would have rather taken her to the Cove and had a number of good reasons to have done so: she’d already broken the camera there, he could have made her reasonably comfortable if she stayed asleep, and he could have restrained her if she unexpectedly woke up. However, the inevitable fight with Bonnie over such a suggestion was not worth having, even if he thought he’d win it, which he didn’t think he would, with Freddy in the mood he was in.

So Foxy took her to the security office instead. The photos he’d be using for comparison were already there anyway, and to be honest, it was easier to carry the girl than all those fiddly slips of paper when all a man had were bare metal finger-bones and a hook.

Once settled—even that was no easy thing—Foxy got down to business. He had forgotten how his 3D facial mapping software worked (to be honest, he’d forgotten where it even was) so it took longer than estimated to make a full scan of sleeping Ana’s face and save it to his temporary album (plus a copy, to his personal album). Not much longer, just a few minutes, but add to that the time it took to research age regression and then to figure out how to use the software installed in his own bloody head so he could manipulate Ana’s image and a fair chunk of the night was gone before Foxy could even make a proper start on the job he thought he’d have finished with by now. But at last, assuming Foxy had successfully regressed the scan he’d taken and the picture he now had was indeed a fairly accurate approximation of Ana as a child, it was done.

Not so much a pretty girl, he thought, but that was hardly surprising. So often, the disproportionately large eyes and tiny mouths that made a child ‘cute’ stretched out into a rather fish-faced adult. Conversely, the stunning symmetry and strong bone structure of adult beauty often came from a child who looked as though their face had been unpacked from a box two sizes too small to ship it.

Ana wouldn’t have been as bad as all that, but her regressed image gave him a face that could be most generously described as ‘waif-like’. Nothing he did with the hair options really fit her, so he gave her a wavy fall in a slightly lighter shade of brown than she had now, and then gave her a few more, overlaying them until she peered out at the world from behind the mess of it like a dog cringing through a fence. He had no way of knowing if that was close to her actual hairstyle then or not, but it sure looked right. And familiar.

All that hair…and those eyes.

He zoomed in on them almost absent-mindedly as he studied this internal image. Too big and too wide-set, pale and bright as winter ice, but lost in shadows. He gave her a few more lashes—marvelous full, dark lashes, had Ana—and a few dots of reflected light. Watchful eyes, untouched by childlike wonder, solemn.

Nothing about her was childlike, nothing but her size. Her lips would have been too full then, pouty and perhaps unnervingly voluptuous to the adult eye. Her forehead was too big and too high (yet
another good reason to give her those bangs). Prominent cheekbones and a pointy chin—what on another child might have made for a charming heart-shaped face—instead made her seem gaunt.

Maybe she’d been a plump child, rounding out those sharp edges with a cozy layer of baby fat, but he doubted it. Given what unsavory tidbits Ana had already let slip about her upbringing, it was far more likely she’d been underfed, making her even more homely.

And, oddly, even more familiar. What had begun as a nagging twinge of unclear recognition grew to a strong, yet baseless certainty, so much so that Foxy’s first pass through the pictures was not to sort out possible Davids, but to see if wee Ana herself might be hiding in one of these shots. She claimed she had never been in Freddy’s as a child, yet he remained convinced he knew her. He couldn’t think where or under what circumstances, but he was dead sure he’d known the child staring back at him from the other side of his brain.

But he couldn’t find her in these pictures, not on his first pass through them and not on the second, third or tenth, so at last, reluctantly, he started looking at boys, searching for ‘David’.

He started with the David he knew, because even though his conviction that Marion Blaylock and Easter Stark were one and the same had wavered once he got a good look at young Ana’s thin, woeful face, he still had no other explanation for how Ana could have acquired the things only Marion or the Purple Man had taken home.

Finding David Blaylock’s photo wasn’t hard. Foxy had never even considered that his picture wouldn’t be here. David had practically lived in the restaurants. Foxy had seen his first steps, heard his first word (“Pizza,” of course), and helped him with his schoolwork. He may have slept at home, wherever home was for him, but David had lived at Freddy’s…and died there. The surprising thing about finding the boy’s photo was only finding one of them and the image was not a helpful one. Foxy made an effort regardless, but soon was forced to put it aside and look elsewhere for Ana’s David.

Hours passed, each one with little hours tucked away inside, stretching out when pulled just like one of Freddy’s trick scarves. First night of real freedom in who knew how many years and this was what he was doing with it. Beautiful woman lying at his feet and everything.

Clunky footsteps on the tiles in the hall heralded Chica’s arrival well before her soft knock sounded on the wall beside the open security door. “I wondered where my chair had gone,” she said, peeking shyly in at him.

“It were this’n or that’n,” Foxy replied, ‘thumbs’ing back at Ana’s canvas folding chair with his hook as he shifted around in the chair where he sat—the chair from the Reading Room, the only chair in the building designed to hold an animatronic’s weight. “I’m all right with the drugging and lying, but I’d rather not break her shit if’n I can help it. Funny where we draws our little lines in the sand, ain’t it?”

“Where is she?” Chica asked, looking around the small and plainly empty room. “Did you put her to bed already?”

“Sort of.” Foxy leaned back and motioned with his hook toward Ana, curled up small under the desk and hugged around his leg.

Chica’s eyes lit and all but formed little pink hearts. “Aww! She’s so cute!”

“Says ye, lass. Ye ain’t the one whose foot she’s drooling on.”
“Men. Is it really so much more fun to complain about something than to fix it?” Chica went to the cupboard. Rummaging through the Lost and Found box, she located a cast-off kid-sized jacket with an absorbent lining and folded it into a loose pillow shape. “Here.”

Foxy took it and tucked it under Ana’s damp cheek. She snored once, loudly, then resumed her deep, whuffing sleep-breaths. When he straightened up, Chica was holding one of the photos.

“I think I know this one,” she said. “Timmy…Timmy Gaffer? Godfrey?”

Foxy looked. “Aye. G-Something anyhow, I don’t recollect exactly, but aye, that’s Timmy. And that’s Bobby Pearson and wee Lee Whatsisname there besides him. I tells ye, lass, it be bloody amazing how many of ‘em I still knows by name.”

“He’s so short in this picture, but I remember he grew wa-a-ay up. This is High Street, isn’t it?”

“Aye.”

“So…wow, he must be fifty by now.”

“At least.”

“That’s so strange to think of this little boy maybe having grandchildren.” Chica picked up a few more photos and shuffled through them. “So how’s it going?”

“Eh,” said Foxy, which said it all in his opinion. He beckoned, using the same gesture to put down one newspaper clipping and pick up another.

“No luck?” she guessed.

“Depends on what ye call luck, don’t it? Most of these are useless to me, s’far as scanning goes,” he added, tapping one of the piles arranged before him on the desk. “Low resolution, bad lighting, not enough contrast. Alls I can do is eyeball it and guess.”

“And…”

“And I hates guessing games. I got a few set aside there that I could convince meself show some resemblance, but hell, what’s that prove? Humans don’t have the most distinguishing features in the first place. Flat uninteresting faces, no ears t’speak of, and not much variety in the way o’ coloring. On top o’ that, it’s like ye say, the family trees around here—”

“—make thin forests.” Chica put that picture down and picked up another, one he’d set apart from all the others. “Is this David?”

Foxy gave her a grimace of tolerant annoyance and picked up the next picture on his to-be-scanned stack. “Aye.”

“I thought so. Even through the mask, I could tell. And the way Marion is hugging him…It is Marion, right?”

“Mm.”

“She looks so different in the uniform. You’d think that would be how I’d remember her best. It was how we usually saw her. But…I don’t know. The uniform sort of makes everyone look the same.”

‘Makes everyone look like him,’ thought Foxy with an inward growl of agreement. It was what
made it so easy, some nights, to play the Game. If you weren’t fully in the black, you could see yourself doing it, see the blood and the look of terror turning to pain, and almost believe it was the Purple Man at last in your power.

Almost.

But hell, if you had to play the Game anyway, you might as well enjoy it, so almost was good enough for Foxy.

“So,” said Chica and looked at him.

“So what?”

Chica gave him a slow-blink and held up David’s photo a little higher. “So?” she prompted meaningfully.

“So he’s wearing a bloody mask, ain’t he? Eyes are all squinted up, can’t be read. Mouth is stretched open. What have I got, a chin? Give me that.” Foxy tried to snatch the picture back, but Chica held it up out of his reach. Wisely, maybe. Grabbing was how things got torn. When he lowered his hand, Chica gave him the picture freely.

He held it for a few seconds, not looking at the boy’s features so much as the boy himself. Behind the paper Freddy-mask he wore, all that could be seen of him was his gap-toothed grin, the dimple on his cheek and the gleam in his eyes, but it was David. The only other human Freddy had ever called family and why not? He’d grown up among them, from squalling babby to grim, would-be hero—the boy who wanted to slay a monster and free his mother from the curse of a killing love.

Chica was watching. Foxy put the picture down.

“I could maybe talk meself into seeing sommat there,” he said gruffly, “but when all’s said and done, it’s just a chin.”

“And Marion?”

“Face is all scrunched up and smiling, hat’s pulled down…I don’t know. Hardly worth trying.”

“But you tried anyway.”

“Course I did.”

“And?”

Foxy blew rude noise through his speaker and leaned back in Chica’s chair, so he could gesture at the picture on the desk and Ana below it at the same time. “Can’t see Marion’s ears or forehead, and her eyes and mouth are all out of shape, what with the smiling. So what’s that leave? Nose. Similar, I’d say, but hard to tell, since Ana’s nose has been broken at least once and maybe more. Nice nose, lots of character, but not the one she was born with. Cheeks look likely to me eye, but again, Marion’s grinning ear to ear, puffing her bloody cheeks up like a chipmunk on one side and pressed up on David on t’other. Can’t be sure. Two tiny pointed chins and there again, I says they’re alike, but I ain’t pinning Ana Stark to the Blaylock tree by her chin.”

“I see what you mean,” Chica said sympathetically.

“Bloody program wants twelve to seventeen points o’ comparison,” Foxy grumbled, unthinkingly scratching at his chest. “I can see three and fudge four more, but I can’t rightwise call that a match.
Hell, I can only count four betwixt Marion and David going from this bloody useless photo.”

“I’m not all that surprised, actually. He only looked like his mother until he was standing next to his father.”

“But when he were standing with her, ye could tell the puddle he were dipped from, couldn’t ye? Ye didn’t need no facial scanners or age markers or none o’ that nonsense. Ye looked and ye could see it. Ana…Ana’s got a wee chin and high cheekbones and that’s about it. All the same…”

Chica waited and finally said, “What is it?”

“Girl, ye’ll think I’m crazy, but…” Shaking his head, Foxy bent under the desk and pulled Ana out, boneless as a bag of melted butter, up onto his lap and into the crook of his arm, where he could tip back her head and show her drooling, peaceful face to Chica.

Chica looked politely at her, then at Foxy…then back at Ana with frown. “Oh, that is the weirdest feeling…”

“Ain’t it?” Foxy barked out a laugh and poured Ana back under the desk. “She’s always struck me as a wee bit familiar, but I never gave it much thought. Ana swore she’d never been to Freddy’s, yet there be still sommat in me that insists she’s a dead-ringer for someone. Not someone I met ten or twenty years ago, but someone I know.”

“Aunt Easter,” Chica guessed.

“No, no, not Aunt bloody Easter. I don’t know anyone named Easter and that’s an odd enough sort of name, I’d remember it. I keep thinking it’s got to be Marion. It’s got to be,” he insisted as Chica began to shake her head, “because ye catch her in the right light and laughing, and the resemblance is damned uncanny. No, I ain’t the best at telling one human from another, but look at her!…and then ye look at her again from another angle,” he said slowly, shaking his own head. “That serious little scowl of hers, that far-off look she gets when she’s deep-thinking, and she looks nothing like Marion, not a’tall, but damned if she still don’t look like someone. Someone I should know. Someone I seen a thousand bloody times. So I figure, it’s got to be here!”

In his frustration, he slapped at the pictures on the desk, resulting in a loud bang. He checked below even before Chica could finish shushing him, but if Ana had reacted at all, she was already dead-under again.

“How long does that stuff keep ‘em out?” he asked, nudging her with his toe to no effect.

“I don’t know. I only ever brought them to him. I never saw them again after that, so…” Chica shrugged, rubbing one hand along her de-feathered elbow and casting a troubled glance at the cupboard, where Babycakes slept. “Even if I had an answer for you, there’s so many variables. Body mass, metabolism…I imagine Ana has a higher tolerance to opiates than most of the kids who got a ‘special’ prize. Not to mention pharmaceuticals can have a paradoxical effect on children as opposed to adults, and vice versa. Then there’s the question of how old it is. Some drugs get weaker when they age and some get stronger.” She shrugged. “Plus, Ana could just be really tired. She’s always been a heavy sleeper.”

“Ain’t always been a drooler.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Eh, reckon I wouldn’t either, if it comes to that. I only had the one night…two nights,” he amended, thinking of the night after she’d come to fix Bonnie’s face, chatting with him in the
Cove until she nodded off, right there on the bottom bench of the amphitheater.

Told him she’d had a crush on him, her first crush, and said he looked dashing up there on that stage, in his old coat and hat…

Foxy glanced down at himself, touched the tip of his hook to the widest crack in his chest, and then shook his head and picked up another photo. A crowd of hip-high kids around a table, jumping and screaming as Chica set a birthday cake before a little girl wearing bunny ears. So she was out, but how many of her guests were potential Davids…?

“Look at this,” he growled, waving the photo at Chica once before thumping it down on the desk before him. “Six more faces I gots to suss out. I tell ye, I finally understand all them kiddies I heard grousing over homework. ‘If’n it be so damned boring,’ I’d think, ‘just do it and be done. Quit yer bitching.’ Now look at me. Praise the powers, I’m nearly at the end o’ this rot. I never been so bored in me entire life.”

“Six? There’s more than that,” said Chica.

“I’m only counting the lads, luv.”

“So am I.” At his puzzled glance, she reached down to tap at the background. “There’s all these boys, too. And this one and this one, they might be boys.”

Foxy stared.

Chica shrugged. “You can’t assume Ana’s cousin was the subject of the shot. He might just be someone in the frame. You have to look at the kids in the background, too.”

Foxy dropped his eyepatch and covered his other eye with his good hand. “Load the cannon and fire it up me ass,” he muttered, then heaved a sigh and scraped all his neat sorted stacks together again into one big heap. “Here I were just thinking how marvelous a thing it be to hear yer own true voice again and ye had to go and say a sensible thing like that.”

“Sorry.”

“Eh, it’s me own fault. Got so focused on the details, I couldn’t see the whole picture. Literal-like. So how’s it with ye, lass? Kiddies ever come around?”

“Oh, the ones at the quarry went home hours ago. Some others came by after it got dark, but they turned around when they saw Ana’s truck.”

“Quiet night, then?”

“Quiet night.”

“And Bon? I expected him to be leaning over me shoulder all night, making sure I weren’t taking liberties with his girl, but I ain’t seen hide nor hare.”

Chica’s eyelids dropped and leveled. “How did you mentally spell that last word?”

“Ain’t saying.”

“Punning is the very lowest form of humor.”

“Old habits die damned hard, lass. Where’s Bon? Freddy pop him in the freezer or what?”
“He’s out on the loading dock.” Chica tried a shrug, rubbing again at her elbow. “He says he’s okay.”

“But you say different?”

Chica looked at him.

“What?” Foxy asked through a laugh. “I ain’t allowed to show concern?”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“All right, I admit I’ve enjoyed needling at him a time or two and that were wrong o’ me. Bad Foxy.” He rolled his eyes, grinning, and picked up the first of all those blasted pictures. “In me own defense, there’s precious little entertainment in this place and there’s old Bon, being silly in love.”

“Sillier than when it was me?”

Foxy snapped his fool mouth shut and peered closer at the picture in his hand, pretending he’d found something in it needing all his attention.

“Oh stop. I know you knew.” Chica sighed, looked at what she was doing to her elbow and clasped her hands in front of her instead. “Even Freddy knew, I think. He’s never said anything, but…gosh, he’s everywhere, isn’t he? We thought we were being so careful, so discreet, that we really got away with it. After all, this place is so big and there’s so many dark corners to sneak off to.” She shook her head with a small, sad-eyed smile. “It wasn’t until I started bumbling in practically on top of Bonnie and Ana and had to sneak back out again that I really realized how impossible it is to keep secrets in this place. It’s not that big after all.”

“No, it sure ain’t.”

She fell quiet, giving Foxy just enough time to think he’d avoided the worst, and then she said, “It was silly though, him and me.”

“Oh hell, lass. I didn’t mean—”

“No, no, it was. I can admit that now,” she said with a sudden sunny smile and a wave. “Even at the time, it wasn’t like we fell in love. It was just…I don’t know.”

“Ye don’t need to explain it,” said Foxy, shuffling through papers uncomfortably and wishing someone, even Bonnie, would pop in and interrupt them. “Ye were lonely. I get it.”

“It wasn’t just that. I mean, sure we were, but that wasn’t all it was. It was just…here we were again. He takes us out of storage and puts us into new bodies and there’s this moment when we look good and everyone’s laughing and happy and it actually feels good to be alive, and then that part ends and here we are! Again! And all those happy little children who want to hug us today are only going to grow up and come back and think it’s funny to smash us apart and…and everything else that they do.”

Foxy looked at pictures of smiling children, laughing children, screaming children.

“And we kill some of them,” Chica said softly, relentlessly. “And the others grow up more and have kids of their own and then what? Then we come out of storage and get new bodies and do it all over again. It all got to be a bit too much for me to deal with alone and Bonnie saw that. He wanted to help, so he…I…I don’t know. We were spending so much time together and somehow, I
thought…” She spread her empty hands with a sheepish little cringe. “‘Humans seem to like it. Maybe it’s fun. We don’t have all the parts, but we can just pretend.’ And you’re right, it was… very silly.”

Foxy scratched hard at his muzzle, his damned mouth. His hook took up curls of plastic that fell onto the newspaper clippings in front of them, rusty-brown, like dried flakes of blood.

“Silly and sweet,” said Chica. “And it did help, I think. I guess I always knew it wouldn’t last, but I love him, of course, like I love you or Freddy, and that made it easy to, you know…think it was something else. For a while. I’m not sorry it happened or anything. I’m not sorry it ended, either. It’s just a part of my life…that’s over.” Chica shrugged, looking at Ana, there under the desk. She smiled, her eyes wistful. Her fingertips tapped just once; she laced them together again, tighter. “I think the only really funny thing about all of this is how good it actually felt to see him so happy with her, and how much it hurts to see him out there on the dock, just waiting for her to wake up and break up with him.”

Foxy made a face, shook his head, but managed not to say anything. And folks said he wasn’t mannered.

“You know she will,” Chica said.

“I know she can’t,” Foxy corrected archly. “Can’t break what was never whole in the first place.”

“He loves her.”

“Well, that’s his headache. She were only a girl playing House with a grown-up sized doll. He knows it and he’s got nothing to bitch on about. He had fun while it lasted.” Foxy put the picture down on the new reject pile and picked up another. David Blaylock and Marion. He put that one facedown by its ownself and picked up a new one. “They can still be friends for as long as she sticks around, which won’t be much longer, mark me words. He’s going to waste all the time he’s got left trying to twist what was into shapes it’ll never fit instead of enjoying her for what she is.”

Chica tipped her head to the side, thinking loud thoughts, but letting none of them out. What she said at last was, “Do you want me to take her out of your way? I can put her to bed if you lift her for me.”

“Eh, she’s fine where she is.”

“Foxy, she’s on the floor. Come on.” Chica held out her open arms.

Foxy glanced at her, knowing she was right but reluctant all the same. He had Ana’s facial scan. Technically speaking, he didn’t need her for anything else, and it surely wasn’t as though she was stimulating company in her present condition. And yes, he supposed there was something vaguely wrongish about leaving a woman senseless and drooling on the floor under a man’s feet while he occupied himself with tedious paperwork. But on the other hand…

On the other hand was a shiny, shiny hook.

Foxy pulled Ana out and passed her into Chica’s waiting arms like he didn’t even have to think about it, like he genuinely did not care and would hardly even notice if she stayed or went or what. Oh, he’d notice, all right. He’d notice she wasn’t drooling on his damn foot all night. Let her leak all over Bonnie for a change, because Lord knew, the big-eared git would be sitting beside her soon as Chica set her down, holding her limp little hand and waiting for her eyes to open, just so he’d be the first thing she saw when she came around.
He hoped the drugs made her pukey. And when she let go, he hoped it got all in Bonnie’s cracks and crevices and started baking on his bones.

“Do you want me to come back?” Chica asked, hesitating in the doorway. “I could keep you company, if you want.”

“I’ll never say no to the company of a blushing lass,” he replied mechanically. “I’ll put ye on me knee any time and give them pretty feathers a fine ruffling.”

“Oh stop.”

“I always been curious what ye kept under that bib.”

Chica made a huffy clicking noise in her speaker and waddled off with Ana slumped against her shoulder (and drooling on it). Even in sleep, Ana’s brows were pinched and troubled, dreaming restless dreams.

That sense of almost-recognition lit up in Foxy’s head again, but it just wouldn’t light bright enough. Shaking it off, Foxy picked up the next newspaper clipping.

Grand opening of Fredbear’s Family Diner, with three humans in suits pretending to be Freddy, Bonnie and Chica before they were ever born, and before Foxy himself was even a twinkle in the Purple Man’s eye. And there was the man himself, before he could be properly called a man, just a Purple Boy really, with another boy beside him, gangly with puberty he had yet to shrug entirely off, and a man’s arms around them both, assuming the proud father’s role for this important occasion. A happy family, the three of them, taking a celebratory heritage photograph before the days of killing dawned.

Foxy started to set it aside, then brought it back and really looked at it. Then he picked up the picture of David and Marion and put them side-by-side.

If he’d had lips, they would have curled and it would not have been a smile.

The camera on the other side of the security window came on, swiveled slowly around and came to rest peeking in on Foxy. Foxy looked back at it, cold and hot at the same time, then turned both pictures around and put them up to the glass.

The camera’s lens changed focus, studying them, then slowly, deliberately, it moved up and down, up and down. Nodding at him, the son of a bitch.

“Ye really are a sick son of a bitch, ain’t ye?” Foxy muttered, glaring at the camera. “Did ye know? Aye, ye knew. I can’t believe I never picked up on it before. Coo and it sure ain’t subtle. I really am piss-awful at seeing faces. And I reckon it’s true what they say—ye don’t see what ye don’t know to look for.”

He took the pictures down and looked at them again, then shrugged and scanned the photo. If he couldn’t get a usable image of David or Marion to work with, this was better than nothing. He had to fuss with the image a bit, zooming and enhancing and cleaning up the contrast, pixel by pixel, but at last it was all the better it was ever going to get, so he pulled up Ana’s saved image—not the child he’d spent an hour regressing, but the one he’d pulled it from—and put them side by side on his internal screen.

Out of twenty-four pre-programmed points of comparison, he was able to match them in eleven places, but leaving the software aside, Foxy could just look and see…the resemblance…
Foxy looked.

Foxy saw.

His battery surely chugged along like always, while the heart he didn’t have stopped beating, sank cold into the bottom of his guts and stayed there.

That couldn’t be right. He refused to let that be right.

He took another scan, zoomed, enhanced, pinned—

—and matched. In fifteen places, this time.

Foxy blinked out of the program and just stared at the photograph with not a single thought in his whole spinning head. After several minutes, he thought, ‘She’s got her father’s eyes,’ and then thought nothing for several more minutes, until—

“Foxy?”

“Jesus!” he barked, jumping back in the chair, whacking his head on its hard frame and throwing the photograph wildly into the air.

Freddy reached out in one of those effortlessly graceful movements only stage magicians and ballerinas could make and caught it. He looked at it and if Foxy breathed, he’d have held his breath, but he didn’t, so all he could do was watch.

After two of the longest seconds in a night of long-ass seconds, Freddy started to hand the picture over, only to stop and look at it again.

Before Foxy could say anything—he had no idea what to say—Freddy sighed and held the photo of the Grand Opening up with a subdued, slightly shamed expression. “You don’t need this one, do you? No one else is in the shot.”

Foxy’s speaker crackled once. “No,” he managed. “Help yerself, mate.”

“I can’t help but think she’ll throw it away. I didn’t mind when she took them all down before, but tonight…” Freddy frowned at the photo some more. “Tonight, it bothers me that I don’t have any other pictures of him. Of Father, I mean. I don’t care about him.”

“Ye don’t need to explain yerself to me.” And before Freddy could ask—because if he asked, Foxy would have to answer, because if he didn’t answer, Freddy would make it an order and then Foxy would not only have to answer, but he’d have to tell the bloody truth—Foxy said, “Look, mate, I been back and forth through these pictures, and I can’t find a one of ‘em with more’n a nodding resemblance. It were a good idea and all that, but I’m ready to run up the white flag.”

Freddy nodded, but frowned. His troubled gaze strayed to the desk and the stack of photos and newspapers there. “I’m sure she was looking at one of them,” he said, fanning a few out, David and Marion right on top. “One in particular.”

“I don’t doubt ye, but there’s other reasons than recognizing someone, ain’t there? Could be she were just looking at kids having the good time she never had. Could be she were looking at ye or me or anything a’that.” Was he babbling? He felt like he was babbling. Looking Freddy straight in the eye, Foxy steeld his nerves, steadied his ear-pins, and lied. “She might have been looking at anything, but I’m telling ye, Fred, I’ve looked and I swears to ye, she’s got no family here.”
“That’s not true,” said Freddy, still looking at the photo in his hand and still frowning.

Out in the hall, the watching camera switched off and on again. Deliberately. Like a wink.

Freddy’s eyes registered brief irritation, but that was his only response. The most effective weapon against the Purple Man had always been to ignore him. “She has us,” he said, then opened his abdominal casing and tucked it away. The camera watched him go, as if aware the show wasn’t yet over, and sure enough, at the doorway, Freddy stopped and came back. He picked up David and Marion’s picture.

Foxy forced his ears up and forward, as if merely curious. He could hear the left one rattling softly with the strain of appearing so casual.

“Take Chica’s chair back to the Reading Room. I don’t want her trying to carry it,” Freddy said, opening his abdomen. He folded the photograph over, separating David’s smiling face from that of his mother, then placed it inside himself with the other one and left.

Foxy waited until he was sure Freddy was good and gone, then released the hold on his ears and let himself sag back against the chair. Useless instincts buried deep beneath the code of his programming had him pull in an extra tug of air just to vent it hard, like a sigh of relief. He got up, went to the door of the employee’s lounge and looked at the camera there. Without planning to, he said, “Fred thinks yer following her around because ye want to know who she is. But ye already know who she is, don’t ye? Better than Fred does.”

The camera moved up and down, up and down.

“Ye want her to find ye, don’t ye?”

The camera didn’t nod, but it winked again. He knew Ana, all right, and he knew that whatever she was looking for, she’d look until she found it no matter what anyone else wanted.

“Well, she won’t,” Foxy said, cold down to his bones. “And she never will. Could be she knows ye. Could be she’ll ask after ye. And when she does, I’ll tell her ye died and were dumped in the quarry. I’ll tell her ye were a thumb-sucker and a bed-wetter while I’m at it.”

The camera whined softly, narrowing its eye at him.

“I’ll tell her Marion mourned ye and took to drink after her son were taken from her, and it were a bad time for her, aye, but eventually, she met a man who helped her get clean and stay strong. She fell in love and him with her, and he had children and she mothered them all. She was happy, I’ll say, happier than ye ever made her. I’ll tell her he took her away from this town to a place she could finally be free of it and ye. I’ll tell her David’s pap came and fetched him when he were a lad, but he came back for the Grand Opening here, a grown man with three happy babbies of his own, and one of them, the girl, he named Ana. I’ll tell her how he talked to his wee girl of the Ana she were named for, how they used to play right where this building stands, and how much he loved her and wishes her well, and then I’ll tell her he went home again with his fine family, and all is well with him. With both of them, mother and son, children and grandchildren, and all of them. All but ye. Because yer dead. Oh aye,” said Foxy, snapping his eyepatch down and squaring his shoulders. “I’ll spin her a tale fit for the stage, I will, and she’ll never doubt it. She’ll never look for ye. She’ll leave this place never guessing ye were right below her feet.”

He wasn’t sure what he expected. Howls of rage, scarcely audible through the floor, but still sweet to the ear. But no. The camera switched itself off and on, then off again and this time, it stayed dark.
Foxy put the pictures and snips of newspaper back in the cupboard. He moved Chica’s chair into the hall and tucked Ana’s chair up to the desk. He shut off the light and stood in the doorway for a while, just looking at the dark window between the security room and the manager’s office.

He’d told the Purple Man a good story and he hoped it twisted in whatever he had now instead of guts, but a story was all it was and one he’d never tell Ana. He couldn’t, not without telling the others so they could all get the lies down straight, and Freddy would want to know the reason why. No half-truths, no tactful omissions. Freddy would give an order and it would all come out. Not just the bloodline drawn betwixt her and David, but the whole gnarled family tree, twig to root, mother…and father.

Would he hurt her? Break his vow to that invisible bloke with the beard and trained pigeon-people Freddy claimed to believe in over…what? Nothing Ana herself had done, only the accident of her birth?

Freddy had never held David responsible for his parentage, nor loved him any less for it, but whatever else he’d been, David had been a child, all his own sins well ahead of him. Ana was no innocent girl. She had blood on her hands already, and Freddy had not always been so forgiving of that fact as he was inclined to be now. If the blood in her veins were made known…

Freddy may love Ana, but it was a green love yet, a fragile thing; this could break it, if anything could.

No, this night’s work had been the Devil’s own and Foxy meant never to tell a soul what he’d learned. Ana might muck it all up herself if she took it into her head to ask her own questions, but Foxy didn’t think it likely. Ana knew the value of secrets and kept hers close to the heart. Likewise, Freddy might get mopey and take too good a look at those photographs, but Foxy wouldn’t bet on that either. Hadn’t they hung in the lobby ten years and more without any of them seeing the plain truth painted large over those tiny faces? And Freddy could carry his morbid keepsakes for months or even years without looking at them. Sometimes Foxy thought Freddy kept them solely so he’d never have to see them.

And if, in spite of it all, the truth came out, Foxy could probably still come through it clean. Neither David’s nor Marion’s features were sharp enough for his scanning software to match with Ana’s. As for the other photo, why would he think to scan it? He’d been looking for Ana’s cousin, not…not her father.

Foxy summoned up the image of child-Ana he’d made and took a hard look at her face, knowing it would never be just hers again, not to him.

“But it will be to yer big-eared eunuch,” Foxy murmured and deleted the file. He picked up Chica’s chair and set it on his shoulder, heading for the Reading Room. “And people say I got no feelings.”
Ana had no dreams as she floated, drowned and lost forever at the bottom of the lake, fifteen years ago. As Mia Rose had promised, there was no heaven, no God and no forgiveness at the end. All was black and comfortably empty.

She rested, in peace.

Then the hand came down—rotten gold satin stretched over metal and bone. It caught her, pulled her up through the black water, up through the plastic doll bodies floating with her, up and out of the cardboard box marked Lost and Found. Springtrap Bonnie had her now.

His body twitched and shivered, the distorted image on a damaged tape, and yet his hand was real enough as he pulled her into his world—a world where Freddy’s had never been open, where it had always been burnt out, broken and haunted.

He threw her down on a desk and pinned her there, leaning over her. Blood and oil trickled through his grinning metal teeth, shiny and black in the flickering grey light of the security monitors.

“Welcome home,” he said. He had no voice, only static crackling through his speaker in the shape of words. “Oh, I missed you, baby girl.”

She did not struggle, did not scream. She’d missed him too, after all. She’d loved him then and love doesn’t die. It festers and rots, it goes mad and bites, it can even kill, but it never just dies. Ana knew this. She knew monsters. She had lived among them and knew their ways. But she did not fight this one. When he kissed her, she kissed him back.

“That’s my girl,” he said, fetid breath blowing hot into her mouth. Static swelled and then receded, letting her hear his true voice beneath, dry and dead: “Come on. Open your eyes.”

They were open, weren’t they? The face above her swam, purple and gold.

“Come on, baby. Look at me.”

The light from the security monitors briefly intensified, washing her sight out to white, then shut off, throwing her into blackness. She could see nothing but his eyes now, only…only they weren’t his.

The desk beneath her softened, roughened. The walls blurred, became a curtain. Ana rolled over, out of the security room at the Fazfright attraction and onto the stage in the party room at Freddy’s. The effort left her sweating, sick to her stomach. She didn’t know if she was awake or asleep. She didn’t care either. All she knew was that she was here and she didn’t want to be.

She fell away.

“Ana.”

She spat out a mouthful of sour lake-water and choked in a breath, hot and pungent. Dragging her dry eyes open, she peered into two blinding white lights. Headlights? Had she been saved from drowning just to be run over? Typical.
But as her eyes adjusted, she saw it wasn’t a car bearing down on her somewhere on that long walk to Rider’s place after her mother’s death. It was just Bonnie, and as soon as she recognized him, the rest of Freddy’s snapped into reality around them both, and she was Ana again, with all the baggage that came with that, good and bad. Mostly bad.

“What—” She collapsed onto the small soggy jacket she had apparently been using as a pillow. “What’s wrong?” she croaked, facedown and curiously unwilling to move. Her head ached, no doubt from the strain of suddenly tripling in weight. “Is…Is someone here? My truck…I left my truck out…someone…someone saw it?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just…It’s four o’clock.”

“What?”

“You said today was a work-day, right? Friday?”

Friday? The word held no immediate meaning. Friday. Fry-day. Frying what? For a moment, Ana’s head threatened to split, to throw back into that part of the past when she still worked at the bakery and four o’clock meant she was in the back of the shop, frying up doughnuts three dozen at a time. Except she was lying on the party room stage in Utah, three hundred miles away from the Rise and Shine. Shit.

“Call Maddie,” she mumbled, pressing her palms to the padded stage and heaving herself up at least far enough to get her knees under her. “Tell her I’m running late, but I’m on my way.”

“Um…okay, I guess. What’s her number?”

“I don’t know. It should be in my contacts list under…wait. I don’t have a smart phone yet. It’s only 2003. Fuck me, what? Friday. I’m in Mammon.” Ana clapped one hand wetly to her face and tried with some success to press some sense into it. “Four o’clock?”

“Yeah. Um, when you were here before, that was when I was supposed to get you up. I wasn’t sure if you still wanted that or not, but I figured it was better to wake you up now and maybe let you go back to sleep than let you sleep and maybe make you late to work.”

“Yeah,” said Ana, although most of that had gone in one ear and straight out the other without leaving any impression. Then, belatedly, it did. “Yeah, right. I did. But no. Shelly’s got me starting at six now. Outdoors maintenance.”

“Oh. Shit. Sorry. Go back to sleep, baby.”

“No, it’s cool.” With effort, Ana crawled to the corner of the stage and sat, legs dangling over the edge and shoulder propped against the wall, resting up for her next big move. Her head was killing her. It wasn’t the worst headache she’d ever had, but the stuffiness and phantom weight added unfathomable dimensions to the mild pain there was, making her helpless against it. “I’ll get cleaned up and go to Gallifrey’s, get a decent breakfast for a change. Hit the gas station, fill the tank, all that good stuff. It’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” said Ana and the very next thing she knew, Bonnie’s hand was on her shoulder again, shaking her back to life.

“I dreamed this,” Ana mumbled, lifting both hands against the tremendous pull of gravity to help hold her head up.
“Uh, no you didn’t, baby. You went back to sleep.”

“No, I didn’t,” said Ana, confused only that he would say something so patently absurd. Was his speech program glitching out? He was on automatic now, he wasn’t supposed to be on any speech restrictions. “Autonomous,” she corrected herself, frowning.

His ears came up and went crooked, mirroring her confusion in his own rabbit way. “What?”

“You’re autonomous, not automatic. And I did not go back to sleep.”

“Yeah, I am. And yeah, you did.”

“Prove it.”

“Okay.” He took her wrist and gently turned her arm so that her watch was lit by his eyes. “It’s five o’clock.”

Ana stared at that, open-mouthed, long enough for the littlest hand to go halfway around before she finally sputtered, “How the hell did that happen?”

“You went back to sleep.”

“I did not! Stop saying that! And get out of here, I got to get ready for work!”

Bonnie retreated and as soon as he was out of the room, Ana pulled yesterday’s clothes off and slapped around on the stage in search of her pack. The lack of light did not bother her; she’d dressed in the dark plenty of times. As soon as her fingers touched the familiar canvas of her old army surplus duffel bag, she pulled it onto her lap and started opening pockets. She found a stick of deodorant, put it on, found a clean shirt and put that on too. Felt like her sugar-skull shirt, too tight, but it would do for now. They sold souvenir Mammon Canyon shirts at the gas station; when she stopped to fuel up, she’d buy one. Where was her wallet?

Ana fished for it blindly in her pack, then patted at the stage around it, and finally began to explore on her hands and knees. Where was it? It had to be here. Mason couldn’t have stolen it, she’d had it when she went to buy the stuff to clean Bonnie up afterwards. And then she’d put it in her pack, she knew she had.

‘Okay, so don’t panic,’ she told herself, although she barely felt alert enough for concern, let alone panic. ‘Stop and think. Where did you leave it?’

She thought. She closed her eyes in the already-blinding black to think harder. She lay down to think harder still…

The next thing she heard was Bonnie behind her, saying, “Should we…Should we call someone?”

“I’m fine,” Ana said or tried to say, but the words that sounded so clear in her head left her mouth as a nonsensical, “Mugh-ffmp.”

“You said she woke up for you before.” That was Freddy, his deep voice made extra-rumbly with concern. “Do you mean just that her eyes opened or…?”

“I mean she was awake. Moving, talking, the works.”

“Talking,” Freddy repeated. “Was she lucid?”

“Define lucid,” said Bonnie with a snort.
“Having full use of one’s faculties,” Chica chirped at once, her voice as yellow as her feathers used to be. “The quality of being clear and easy to understand.”

“I don’t mean literally define it, for God’s sake! I know what the word means!”

“Sorry. I know you do, clearly. I wasn’t trying to be cute, it just popped out. Autonomy is a funny thing. I have all these habits I never knew I was developing.”

“And yeah, she was lucid. Sort of. Like, we’d be having a conversation and suddenly she’d say something really weird, only in a completely normal way. Like…she kept forgetting where and maybe when she was, but she still knew she was here. She knew me.”

“I’m fine,” Ana said again, and this time managed to put the right letters in the right order to form real words. With effort, she sat up, realizing only after she’d done so that she had been lying down. “What the thing?” she asked, but that wasn’t quite right, so she tried again. “Why is the thing? The thing that this is? Happening, I mean.”

Bonnie put his hands up in a See? motion and looked at Freddy. “Like that. Is that lucid? You tell me.”

“I’m fine. What time is it?” Ana consulted her wrist, taking way too much time to decipher the configuration of the tiny hands and tinier numbers. “Holy shit, five-thirty? What the fuck? What keeps happening? Who is stealing my time?”

“You fell asleep again,” said Bonnie.

“That is horseshit! I do not do that!” To prove it, Ana climbed all the way to her feet and promptly fell into the curtain and then off the stage. She was vaguely aware of pain accompanying the landing, but very odd pain, not so much in her body as slightly behind and above her, more like an aura than a sensation.

Bonnie stepped forward, but Freddy reached her first, lifting her in spite of her protests and more or less forcing her to sit on the edge of the stage again.

“You need to call in sick,” Chica said solemnly. “You should not be driving.”

“I’m fine,” Ana insisted, annoyed now. “I’m just tired. I’ll drink some gas at the coffee station and I’ll be fine. Oh my God, I can’t…Guys, please, turn off your eyes. It’s way too bright in here.”

Chica and Bonnie instantly obeyed. Freddy left his on and actually leaned in closer, moving her hands away from her eyes so that he could shine his directly into her skull.

“I hate you,” she moaned, then somehow remembered he was alive even though she hadn’t quite forgotten it. “No, I don’t. Sorry. I’m a terrible fucking houseguest.”

“You’re not a guest,” Freddy said, peering into her eyes—first one, then the other. “You’re family and you’re home.”

“I’m going to throw up.”

“I will, however, remind you that I am the head of this family and you will speak to me with respect.”

“No, I mean I’m seriously going to hurl. Move, bear, or you’re going to get it on you.”
Freddy backed up at once, freeing Ana to lean forward, waiting either to puke or die.

She did neither. Her empty stomach cramped and groaned, but gradually settled. Her head swelled and swelled, but the longer she hung over her knees, the painless pressure reached its limits and settled into a tolerable throb.

At last, she raised her head. When that failed to kill her, she gathered her strength and stood up. Her stomach clenched mutinously, but it had no ammo to threaten her with and she ignored it. Her watch told her it was 5:40 now. And she still had to put gas in the truck and buy a new shirt.

“Unbelievable,” she muttered, rubbing the sleep out of her face. “I’m actually going to be late to work. That belt-hitching son of a bitch will never let me forget this.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Bonnie asked and Chica corrected, “Are you sure you should be driving?”

“I’m fine,” Ana said, and this time, she meant it. Picking up her day pack, she renewed her search through its many pockets. “I feel like hell, but I’m fine. Does anyone know where my wallet is?”

Freddy opened one of his wrists and produced it, as well as her phone, although he didn’t hand them over.

“Oh stop,” she said, taking them anyway. “You want me to say I did this to myself? I admit it. I haven’t been keeping hydrated and I know what summer’s like in this town. That doesn’t mean I don’t know better, I’ve just had a few other things on my mind.”

“I know,” he said quietly.

She looked at him, then behind him to Bonnie, who stood watching with his ears facing forward but tipped back and wide-set. Anxious. Concerned.

The urge to burst into tears flared up from nowhere, so sudden and so devastating that she clapped her hands over her face, like a child who thought he couldn’t see her if she couldn’t see him. The threat was gone in the same instant, the very same, leaving her empty and tired. So tired.

Bonnie took a step toward her. She couldn’t see him, but she knew the sound of that step. She knew the touch of his hand when he put it on her arm—not grabbing, not pulling, only letting her know he was there.

She would have given anything to drop dead and be gone from that moment, that touch, forever.

She would have given everything to live in that moment, that touch, forever.

But she had nothing inside her and nothing to give.

“I’ve got to go,” she said, pulling away and walking out with her head down and her gaze fixed on the swimming floor. “I’ll see you later.”

“Ana—Damn it, Freddy! Let go! I need to talk to her!”

“I’ll be back,” she called, walking faster. She bumped the wall a few times, unsteady on her feet, but momentum carried her where mere strength couldn’t. “I can’t stay, I’ll be late!”

He called her name again, but she bumped through the dining room door and shut it on him.

Flimsy barrier, no better than hiding under a blanket from the monster in the closet, and just like a
blanket, it held him back. Or Freddy did, more likely. In either case, Ana had enough of a lead to reach the store room and if he followed her after that, she couldn’t hear him.

The jerry cans next to the generator were mostly empty, but she found one with a little slosh in it. Hopefully, it would be enough to get her to the gas station. If not, well, maybe the walk would wake her up. Keeping one eye on the dark doorway to the silent kitchen, Ana found the widest gap between the hanging loading dock door and its splintered frame and slipped through backwards.

She tripped over another jerry can immediately and fell. In a split-second, the stuffed-cotton sensation occupying her skull cleared for three lightning-bright thoughts. First, that there was no way to catch herself. Second, that she was only going to fall three or four feet. And finally—very finally—that she was going to hit the broken paved parking lot head-first, with all her weight angled badly on her neck, and she better hope it killed her quick because that was a terrible fucking way to go slow.

Then a plastic arm snapped around her and metal fingers dug in painfully tight at her waist and she was caught. She had two more thoughts then, more fragmented than the first set, just pictures without words. She saw the man who should have been her father, Joe Stark, a man she’d never seen, plummeting from the top of the canyon to where this imaginary mind’s camera was stationed at the bottom, hitting the rocky riverbank right in front of her so it was impossible to miss the wet splatter of brains or the chips of bone. And then she saw, as with a child’s eyes, Aunt Easter and Erik Metzger dancing, and how he’d spun her around and dipped her low, laughing and safe, over his arm.

A figure leaned in, black against the rosy-gold light of the rising Mammon sun. She couldn’t see his features, only his silhouette, but that was enough to see his pointed ears, his pointed teeth and the pointed tufts of fur molded into the sides of his plastic face. She saw all that—recognized it—and still, when shock released its stranglehold on her voice, she said, “Bonnie.”

Those pointed ears flipped around and lay flat. Foxy spun her upright and set her against the rusty rails safeguarding the flydocks to either side of the loading portal. “I’ll get him,” he growled, moving around her.

“No! I don’t…” Don’t what? Want? Need? “I have to go to work,” she said instead and followed it with a furious rush: “What are you doing out here? You almost killed me!”

“That’s gratitude for ye,” he retorted, keeping his back to her. “Left yer truck out in the wide-open, didn’t ye? Ye were having a rough go getting underway this morning, so I thought I’d be a gentleman and dock it proper for ye, spare ye a hike across the potholes. Wouldn’t start, so I found yer spares and poured ‘em in.”

Ana looked and there like a folded paper surprise in a pop-up book was her truck, not where it might have saved her a broken neck or busted skull, but off to one side of the dock, by the stairs. Stupidly, she reached into her pocket, but only found the keys with the Frankenstein string-doll fixed to it.

Foxy glanced at them, then dug into his own pocket and brought out her real keys. “Figured ye’d be out before I got done,” he grumbled, passing them over while staring at the side of the building. “Ye weren’t, so I waited, not that it’s any of yer bloody business how I passes me time. Watched the sun rise. Don’t recollect as I ever saw one before. As for trying to kill ye, ye’d have seen those blasted cans if ye hadn’t been leading with yer arse, so that’s on ye.”

She held the keys, one set in each hand, while she watched him face the broken door instead of her. Something was wrong, something more than just two bad attitudes meeting in the morning. “What
is it?” she asked warily.

He still didn’t look at her, but he didn’t ask what that meant, either.

“Ye coming back tonight?” he asked finally.

She nodded.

His head turned slightly toward her shadow and he nodded in return. “Then it can wait,” he said grimly, ducking around the broken door. “Fair seas to ye and all that happy shit. Oh, and Ana.”

One foot on the first step, Ana looked back, but could only make out the sunrise-tinted glint of one eye in the darkness beyond the door.

“Don’t forget the rum this time,” Foxy said. “Ye’ll need it when ye hear this. And even if ye don’t…I’ll need it to tell ye.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. The little shine on his eye winked out and she was left with the echoing sound of his metal feet walking away.

* * *

Ana got through that day the same way she’d only got through a detox before, grinding out the time minute by minute. It was worse in the beginning—the sunlight, the scream of the lawnmower, Jimmy Morehead’s maddening good humor—but the longer the day went on and the less time she had to just sit around and feel awful, it got easier. Hydration, that was the key. A bottle of regular water, a bottle of coconut water, and a Monster Rehab in the green can; line ‘em up, knock ‘em down, do it again.

By noon, she felt more or less alive. By two, she was beginning to feel human. By quitting time, she actually felt like Ana Stark, enough to make the journey to the Lowe’s in Hurricane. She made her purchases, stopped at the WalMart for a new air mattress and cheap t-shirts, stopped again at the McDonalds for food, and one more time at the liquor store for Foxy’s rum and a bottle of Fireball for herself, because that was sure to be a good idea when she was alone tonight at Aunt Easter’s house, recovering from whatever he had to tell her.

It was almost eight o’clock by the time she got back to Freddy’s. She couldn’t have picked a better time if she’d planned it. Early enough to have plenty of daylight to hang the doors by, late enough that she could leave immediately afterwards and plausibly claim she was tired instead of running away again. Sooner or later, she was going to have to find a better coping mechanism, but for tonight, avoidance therapy was still the best of her limited options.

But Bonnie came out onto the loading dock as she was parking and so the only way she was going to continue avoiding him was by driving away.

She considered it.

Then she finished parking and shut the engine off. Her eyes met those of her reflection in the rearview mirror. “You can do this,” she whispered.

Her reflection did not appear convinced.

Ana opened the truck’s door and climbed out. She shaped a smile and aimed it at Bonnie on the
loading dock. “Want to give me a hand?”

His ears swiveled and folded back at the middle-joints. He clapped three times and ducked his head when she groaned.

“I thought you didn’t have to do that anymore,” she said, slipping under the rusted safety rail on the side of the dock and climbing up next to him.

“I don’t. I just…I don’t know. You do something for fifty years, even if you don’t want to, and it’s hard to quit.” He got out of her way and watched as she opened up the back of her truck. “New doors?”

“Yeah. You want to take those to the lobby, I’ll get going on this one. Shouldn’t take too long to get it changed out.”

“Want me to take the old one down?” he offered, reaching up to grip one corner of the hanging dock door like it was a paper towel he meant to tear off the roll.

“Please don’t. At the moment, I think I can still salvage the frame, but if you flex your big bunny muscles at it, I’ll be here all night building another one. Sorry,” she said, grimacing.

“For what?” Bonnie asked, carelessly tucking one three-hundred-pound armored security door under one arm so he could use both hands to finesse the other door out of the covered bed of her truck.

“That muscles comment. I’m not trying to send mixed signals here, I’m just…not used to watching what I say around you.”

He looked at her. His ears lowered. He looked at the door in his hands and tugged it closer. “Oh.”

“Anyway, no, I don’t need help pulling the old door off. I can use the pneumatic arm.”

Bonnie nodded, ears still drooping. He stacked the two doors together and lifted them onto his shoulder, steadying them with one hand while pretending to investigate the other junk in the truck. “I got another hand free,” he said, reaching for the box containing her new air mattress. “You want this in your room?”

“Um, no. That’s…That’s going home.”

He looked at her again.

“With me,” she explained, suppressing another grimace. “Tonight. When I go home.”

“Oh,” Bonnie said again. A moment later, his ears came up, shuddering a little, as if pushing against resistance. “That’s cool. I just figured, you know, it’s the weekend and you might…stay over.”

“I don’t think that’s appropriate,” Ana heard herself say in the stiffest, most Mammonite voice imaginable.

“Oh,” said Bonnie for the third time. His ears started to lower and came all the way up and forward; one of them made a grinding sound at the base. “Am I…Are we going to see you at all this weekend?”

“Oh yeah. Sure. I’ve got lots to do. I mean, I’ve got plans Sunday night, so…But tomorrow, sure.
I’m going to try and get the store room there cleaned up so you guys can get through easier and… and you know. Start getting my stuff out.” She nodded a few times, inanely, while he stood and stared at her, silent. “That shouldn’t take too long. I don’t have much.”

The wind gusted, picking up red desert sand in funnels and spinning them across the parking lot. Insects shrilled, thousands of them forming one voice, one endless rhythmic scream. Bonnie’s cooling system puffed and hissed, puffed and hissed.

“Is this it?” Bonnie asked.

He was not talking about the doors balanced on his shoulder and she did not insult him by pretending that he was.

“Of course not,” she said. “I’ll be back. I’ll visit. I just…shouldn’t be living here. That’s not—”

“Appropriate.”

“No.”

Now Bonnie nodded. He looked at the doors he was holding and nodded some more. “Okay,” he said and went inside.

Ana waited, staring out at the quarry while the wind whipped her eyes, but he didn’t come back and she only had so many hours left in the day, so she got to work. There were no bikes or cars anywhere obvious out at the quarry, which hopefully meant no one was there, which in turn meant she didn’t have to worry about noise. Good. There was nothing better for drowning out thoughts than the whine of a drill and the scream of a handsaw.

But for that, she’d need her tools.

Ana peeked cautiously inside. No one was in the store room. She listened, but her puny human ears could hear nothing but the wind and the restless thump and rattle of the broken door. She went in, checking the back hall and listening at the doorway of the kitchen. Both were empty as far as she could see in the low light, but she could hear someone moving around in the dining room. It sounded like Bonnie, although since she’d cleaned out his knee and he’d broken all the plastic off his feet, it was getting hard to tell his footsteps from Foxy’s. She didn’t particularly want to talk to either one of them, though, so she picked up a heavy duty plastic crate from the shelves here and took it with her down the back hall to the employee’s break room and from there through the security office and down the dogleg past the arcade and Peggy’s signpost to the East Hall and eventually, the quiet room.

She met no one on the way, which was surprising. Sometimes, it seemed she couldn’t walk three feet without Chica or Bonnie coming to ‘help’ and Freddy…Freddy was always around. Hard to believe she could hike through half the building and not at least catch a glimpse of him on one of his endless patrols.

Maybe they were avoiding her. What a concept. It was almost like this whole situation was awkward and she was actively making it worse.

‘Then it’s a good thing I’m not staying,’ thought Ana and concentrated on packing her crate. She’d done this exact job not too long ago and she knew she was taking more than was necessary, but she felt better for over-preparing. Her missing aunt had possibly been a serial killer and definitely been in love with one, hundreds of people were missing or dead, the animatronics at Freddy’s were alive, and Ana’s life was spinning out of control all around her, but by God, if a screw stripped, she
She was ready for it.

She cried.

She stopped crying.

She finished packing her tools.

When she had everything she needed and then some, she went back to the loading dock, again taking the longest possible route through the back end of the building and again, encountering no one on the way.

Once outside and in sight of her truck, Ana got right to work. Between the free use of power tools, a pneumatic arm and her unwillingness to think about anything except what was happening at the end of her hands, she had the broken door off in minutes. Installing the new one meant rebuilding and reinforcing the frame, however. She took her time with it, mindful of the waning daylight, but determined to do it right. Mason Kellar had proved that even the strongest doors could come down, but most of the kids who’d be trying to get in wouldn’t have his tenacity. If she was wrong…well, Freddy could handle it. Scare them off or…or throw them out or…whatever.

Chica said they couldn’t hurt humans. Mike Schmidt said differently, but he didn’t have to be lying for Chica to be telling the truth. She’d seen Bonnie ‘go black’ before—and Chica, the night of the storm, when Ana had come rushing over in the middle of the night to…what? Hold the roof up with her bare hands? She could no longer remember what her logic had been that night, assuming she’d had any, but she could still see the way Chica had looked at her from the floor of the arcade where she’d fallen, without recognition, without life, and how she’d screamed and lunged, biting at everything between her and Ana—the broken games, the floor, Freddy. And when she’d come out of it, practically her first words had been to point out that Ana hadn’t been wearing pants. She didn’t know what she’d done. If Ana had been careless (more so than just jumping on Chica’s back and wrapping her head in a curtain) and gotten herself bit (like that kid at Mulholland who had booped Toy Bonnie on the nose to hear it honk, and who’d had his arm playfully ripped off in response) or even killed (like three hundred and fifty-seven others, more or less), poor Chica still wouldn’t have known she’d done it. That wasn’t a glitch. That wasn’t bad code. To quote Bonnie, that was what someone considered working just fine.

And Ana guessed she could live with that. The animatronics had been no more responsible for whatever may have happened after hours than a knife or a gun or any other weapon Erik Metzger might have used to play his murder-game. Ana had no illusions; the animatronics might not be able to kill a human outright, but there were plenty of ways around that. They could maim (just bore that kid’s arm right off, so Toy Bonnie could eat it in front of him, singing the Yum-Yum Song between bites, according to Mike), and even if Ana was tempted to believe the rules had been different for the Toys, Mike had seen Freddy—the real Freddy—spanking that bratty teen princess, so they could at least hit, and it wouldn’t take a hard hit from an animatronic to do some serious damage. Beyond that, she had no idea if it was possible for them to interpret the rules so that they could take actions against inanimate objects that had lethal consequences for humans, such as constructing a trap (or a barricade spiked with sharpened table legs). If nothing else, Ana knew they could shut someone into the freezer, which had no way to open the door from the inside. Even if the power went out again and freezing was no longer a factor, all anyone would have to do was wait and the ‘problem’ would take care of itself in, oh, three or four days. And they could definitely clean up a mess and dispose of a body without breaking any rules. So yeah, if someone managed to break in despite Ana’s best efforts at keeping them out, she had no doubt the animatronics could handle the situation. And when it came right down to it, she was in no moral position to judge how they did it.
Thinking these thoughts kept Ana on a higher philosophical plane as she worked on the loading dock door, but when it was done and the locking clamps locked down, she put them aside (not for the last time, she was sure; no matter how many times she closed that door, she had a feeling it was going to creak open in the still, small hours of the night for a long time to come), packed up her tools and took herself out to take care of the lobby doors while there was still daylight to work by.

That was the plan, anyway. And on some level, she’d known it wouldn’t be easy because her stomach had started knotting up and her heart pounding while she was still walking through the kitchen, and of course, as soon as she stepped through the doorway into the dining room, someone was waiting for her. The only thing that really surprised her was who.

Chica visibly braced herself, then took two decisive steps forward, and took the crate out of Ana’s hands. “I’m sorry,” she said and even though she was plainly trying to say it the way everyone in this situation said it—as the candy-coated shell over a nugget of pure hardass—it still sounded like an apology. “But you need to go talk to him.”

Guilty heat burned up from her heart to her face, but Ana refused to drop her eyes. “And you need to recognize that this is between him and me,” she said with admirable calm. “If I’ve got something to say, I’ll say it when I’m ready, not because you tell me to.”

“And in the meantime, you just make him wait?”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“So do I. It’s called experiential avoidance and, as a coping mechanism, it may be attractive, but most experts agree that it’s also extremely dysfunctional and paradoxical in the sense that consciously not confronting certain things only makes you think about them more, so it becomes emotionally exhausting to sustain and only perpetuates negative behaviors.”

“Oh wow, if you’re going to psychoanalyze the rise and fall of my relationship with a rabbit-shaped robot, you might as well start making snacks because we are going to be here for a while. Or better yet, just back off. I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t think you do, actually,” said Chica with a dubious look. “I think you think that if you put it off long enough, he’ll give up and work it all out on his own. And if that’s the case, you should know that, first, that’s just so mean and also a little cowardly, and second—” Chica spread her wings to gather in the entire building at once and the essence of all the others. “—we are super-good at waiting and we don’t get hungry, so maybe you’re the one who should make the snacks.”

“Funny.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

They both took a moment to take in the full effect of a talking anthropomorphic chicken in a bib.

“Well, I’m not,” Chica insisted and put Ana’s tools down with a super-assertive sniff. “So you’ve got a choice: You can walk down that hall or I can pick you up and carry you. I’m not going to tell you what to say when you get there, but you are going to talk to him and it’s going to be now, and if you don’t do it on your own, then you and me are going to have to throw up.”

Ana recoiled slightly in spite of herself. “Throw up?”

Chica hesitated, still scowling, but uncertainly now. “Up? Down? You throw something, I’m sure of it.”
“Okay, well, it’s throw down, and no, we’re not doing that. We’re done.” Ana tried to go around her, intending to pick up her tools and continue on her way, but Chica stepped in front of her again.

“All right, just stop. I’m not doing this right now. Whatever it is you think you know about the situation, you don’t.”

“Oh yes I do.” The fierce angle of Chica’s eyelids wavered and the lights behind the plastic caps dimmed. “You’re breaking up with him.”

Ana opened her mouth to hotly deny it and just closed it again.

“And if I know it, so does he,” Chica continued. “So making him wait for it isn’t hurting him any less.”

“Oh, suddenly you’re the expert here, huh? And how many guys have you broken up with?”

“Just one,” said Chica.

Ana shut her fucking mouth with an audible snap and looked away. At the wall, at the floor, at the smudge of sawdust on her jeans—anywhere, but at Chica’s calm, sad eyes.

There were no thoughts to interrupt the perfect unquiet of her mind. At last, just for something else to look at that wasn’t Chica, patiently waiting right in front of her, Ana glanced at her tools and at the cashier’s station across the room that opened on the lobby and the job waiting for her there. After she got the doors hung, she could leave and as soon as she got home, she could drink until she forgot any of this had ever happened.

‘I’m going to be an alcoholic before I leave this town,’ she thought and the thought bounced back like an echo in the canyon: ‘I’m going to die an alcoholic in this town.’

“Fine,” she said. “Where is he?”

“He’s in your room.”

“He’s in the party room,” Ana corrected, walking away.

Chica’s hand closed on her arm—hard plastic and cold metal. It was not a painful grip, but it could have been, easily, and even if Chica’s eyes were not angry when Ana turned to look at her, they weren’t entirely kind either.

“If you’re going to be mad at someone, be mad at me,” Chica said. “Don’t go in there and make yourself feel better by making him feel bad.”

The analytical part of Ana’s brain could observe that this was not an unwarranted fear, considering the history between her and Freddy, but the rest of her was just stunned. “I would never do that!” she sputtered finally. “What the hell, Chica?!”

Chica released her at once and backed away, having the decency to look a little flustered. “Well, I wouldn’t ordinarily think so, but…it’s what you’re doing, isn’t it? Symbolic deconstruction?”

Ana stared.

“It’s a form of parataxic transference,” said Chica with another little wince. “You won’t call it home anymore. You won’t let Freddy call you family. You won’t keep your room here or even let me call it that. You’re systematically unmaking everything that ever made you happy about being here. And Bonnie’s the biggest part of that, so—”
“What, are you writing your thesis on all the ways I’m fucked in the head? Where the hell are you getting all this?”

“Sorry.” Chica tapped her fingertips, then laced them together and clenched them tight. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had to separate what I think from what I say. My programming usually does that for me. I guess I should turn my guest interaction protocols back on until I’m used to free speech.”

“No, don’t do that. We’re good. It’s just…shit,” Ana concluded.

“I know,” Chica said sympathetically. “And I’m sorry. I really am. For…everything.”

There was no answer, so Ana just left.

The camera was on in the West Hall, but instead of tracking her as she trudged toward it, it shut itself off. And naturally, the next stop on its preprogrammed route was the party room. Its light shone around the edges of the sign she’d taped to the glass inset of the door like a mocking beacon, even brighter when she peeled the tape up and took the sign off. She put it down so that the part that said Ana’s Room and all that faced the wall and looked inside.

She didn’t see Bonnie, but she kept looking anyway. The party room was messier than she remembered, even though she knew she hadn’t cleaned up since Mason and his minions had ransacked the place. Clean and dirty clothes were strewn over the tiles, sprinkled with loose change, crumpled receipts and wadded napkins, unopened condoms and tampons, pens and batteries and bottle lids, as if someone had unzipped every pocket of her day pack and done twirlies with the strap…but the pack itself was nowhere to be seen. And she’d dressed out of it that morning, hadn’t she? Yes, she had. So where was it? It should be on the stage…and where was the stage?

It took her an embarrassingly long time to realize the curtain was down.

So. She guessed she’d found Bonnie.

The hinges creaked like a cheap video game sound effect when Ana opened the door, so he must have heard her, but he kept quiet. Maybe he thought it was Freddy, whose laboring mechanisms would cover the noise Bonnie’s own were making. Ana was tempted to let him think so, just close the door and report sort-of honestly to Chica that she’d tried, but now that she was here, that was strangely hard to do.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Oh God, it’s you.” Something heavy scraped behind the curtain and thumped heavily down again—Bonnie, trying and failing to get up. “I’ll give you a million prize tickets if you pretend you were never here.”

“Sorry, Bon,” she said, stepping inside and closing the door softly behind her. “I threw out all the prize ticket reels. They were moldy.”

“Oh. Well…” That scrape again, a sharp whine of straining gears, and an even heavier thump. The curtain billowed slightly as he sighed through his joints. “I guess you might as well come on up, because I’m not coming down.”

The camera on the wall panned slowly, keeping her in the spotlight from the door to the stage and stayed there even after she crawled behind the curtain. Its light through the ratty velvet cast an uneven purple glow across the stage. It was only a few shades darker than Bonnie’s normal color,
but it made him look very different, almost a stranger. A shadow-Bonnie, sinister.

She was not aware of how long she’d been staring until Bonnie suddenly said, “Sorry. I don’t mean to stare, but wow, that’s a weird look for you.”

Startled, Ana looked down at herself and saw her t-shirt, her skin, the highlights of her hair and probably even the whites of her eyes, all turned Fazbear-purple.

“It’ll time out and shut off in a second,” said Ana and instantly felt like an ass for explaining how the security system in his own house worked.

But she was right. The camera did shut off.

Bonnie turned his eyes on so they weren’t just sitting in the dark, but they were still left staring at each other from opposite sides of a very small stage.

Several excruciating seconds passed, measured by the hiss and tick of Bonnie’s cooling system.

“I’m not a pervert,” he said suddenly.

Ana closed her eyes until she thought she could look him in the eye again. “I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. I never should have said that. I wasn’t thinking, I was just…reacting. Badly.”

“What? Oh. That. I’d forgotten all about that. No, I mean here, now.” Bonnie gestured vaguely at the stage where she’d slept last night and her pack, open beside him. “I’m saying I’m not in here looking for souvenir panties or anything. I just wanted…you know. A dark room with a door on it, so I could sit and be pathetic where no one would see it.”

“Want me to go?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Hey, if you want to run out on me again, just do it. Don’t ask for my permission when you obviously don’t need it.”

And they both sat there some more, listening to ticks and hisses.

“Why’d you do it?” he asked at last. “Why’d you leave like that? I’ve known you for months now. Did you seriously think I was going to hurt you?”

“Bonnie—”

“I let you take my leg off,” he said accusingly. “You fell asleep in my arms. We kissed so many times and so many ways, we had to name them! Me being alive was supposed to be a good thing, and yeah, okay, maybe that was a stupid thing for me to hope for, but you went from hugging me to ‘Oh my God, he’s going to eat my face,’ like that!” He brought his hand up, fingers flexing, but stiff metal joints and broken plastic couldn’t snap. He gave up, ears flat. “You know what I mean.”

“I didn’t think about it like that. I just—”

“Ran away from me.”

She shrugged, drew up her knees and hugged them. “If it’s any consolation, I’d have freaked and run no matter who it was. You or Freddy or even Chica.”
“Freddy lives,” he muttered and his ears drooped. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed. It wasn’t a particularly happy sound, but there was real humor in it. “Believe it or not, it was literally just yesterday that I was telling Freddy how it didn’t matter that you’d heard all the stories about us, because you didn’t believe them.”

“I didn’t. I don’t.”

“Sure.”

“Hey, I didn’t come back to pound a stake through your heart and set the building on fire, did I?”

“No, you came back to get your stuff, board up the building and leave again.”

“I’m not leaving,” said Ana and until she said it, she hadn’t really known if it would be the truth. It was. The revelation left her slightly light-headed. “And I’m not boarding the building up. I’m renovating.”

“So you can leave us in a good place,” he said, but his ears came up a little.

Ana rolled onto her knees, crawled across the small stage, and sat again beside him. “So you can live in a good place,” she told him. “But I can’t live here with you, Bonnie. I should never have moved in in the first place. I have a house and I need to go there and start fixing those problems instead of hiding from them here and…I don’t know. Something, something, avoidance coping mechanism, super-dysfunctional.”

Bonnie clapped both hands to his face and groaned, “Chica, goddamn it!”

“No, she’s right. I can’t keep running from it. And I shouldn’t have run from you. I did know better, Bonnie. I mean it. I did. It’s just…” She sighed and waved one arm at the empty stage they were sharing. “Almost every story about this place starts with the dumbass who doesn’t believe in ghosts breaking in. And there I was when suddenly something I thought was real, wasn’t. And something I thought wasn’t, was. You don’t get to pick what you believe in when that happens. It’s everything or it’s nothing and it couldn’t be nothing, so I ran. Does that…” She let her arm drop with a helpless laugh. “Does that make any sense at all?”

“I guess so,” said Bonnie while his ears said, ‘Not really.’

“You didn’t do anything. It’s this stupid town,” declared Ana disgustedly. “You never had a chance.”

“With you?”

“With anyone! People have been saying Freddy’s was haunted since before it even opened.”

Bonnie’s ears lifted a little higher. “Really?”

“Yeah. I know a guy who swore to my face that people could hear music coming out of the first pizzeria at night, while it was still being built.”

Bonnie tipped his head, his features shifting in their limited way to give him the appearance of a crooked smile. “Oh yeah?”

“Guitar music,” she amplified. “Like someone was learning how to play.”

“Oh, I was born knowing that,” he told her, then shook his head, his ears folding forward, but too
low—relaxed if not entirely happy. “Sort of. It’s crazy, what we knew and didn’t know, both at the same time. Like…Like the radio was playing when I was first switched on. I could hear the music…” He trailed off, his eyes flicking back and forth as he gazed at the floor, and finally continued, “…but I didn’t know what it was. I knew the words ‘music’ and ‘song’ and ‘play’ meant, but I didn’t know what sound was until I heard it. When he gave me the guitar, my hands knew what to do with it, and that sound came out of me, out of something I was doing, but even then I wasn’t really doing it. I was just watching, you know. In amazement. I broke every string at the first strum,” he added and shook his head. “I knew how to play, just not how hard to press. But yeah, that was me your guy heard. Not learning how to play, just learning…what it was.”

“I’m surprised you were there at all, if the place was still being built. Getting dust in your joints and all that. Not to mention leaving the workers alone with the expensive toys.”

“We were in the basement during the day,” Bonnie said with half a shrug. “No one knew we were there. We were supposed to stay there and be quiet, but you know how it is. We were young. Everything was amazing. We’d wait for Dad to come visit and as soon as he was gone for the night, we’d go up like the pack of disobedient bastards we were and poke around in everything.”

Dad. The way he said it put Ana in mind of a well-worn photograph—one that had been crumpled up and thrown away more than once, but always recovered, smoothed out, and carried in some secret place close to the heart.

“And I could not stay off that stage,” he was saying through a bittersweet sort of laugh. “God, if only I could have seen me now. Although…I don’t know. Maybe I was programmed to love it, because I still sort of do. Not now, when it’s just an empty fucking room, but when the kids are there and they’re looking up at you and so incredibly into it, even if it’s just Wheels on the Bus…I don’t know. There’s a part of me that’s sorry I’ll never do that again.”

“I still can’t wrap my head around that, that it was really you all those years ago,” said Ana, turning the subject down a less painful path. “I mean, watching you guys on those tapes were my earliest memories and that wasn’t even the first version of you. All this time, I thought I was corrupting a minor, but you’re old enough to be my father.”

“Come on now.”

“No, for real. My mom was still in diapers when the first place opened. She grew up watching you on stage. You’ve been around for all of my life and most of hers.”

“It’s not as bad as you’re making it sound,” he protested mildly. “I’d have been in diapers too, if that was a thing for us. I was only, like, two or three months old when the first place opened.”

“See? You were the same age! The legit definition of ‘old enough to be my father!’”

“I like to think I’ve aged pretty well. I mean, sure, my face fell off once or twice and I admit I’ve gone bald, but I’ll never get fat.”

“I guess not.” She stole a teasing glance at him, or tried to, but her eye lingered until it couldn’t be called anything except a stare.

He was just the same. His eyes, his ears, his smooshed-down hackeysack nose…every crack in his face was right where she’d left it, and yet everything was new. Not strange, just…different. Like the difference between knowing the definition of the word ‘music’ and hearing it. She had known Bonnie, on tape if not in person, all her life. She had been living with him for weeks, had seen him every day, talked to him, laughed with him…kissed him. And now, finally, she was meeting him
for the first time, seeing everything that was different and everything that was the same, and she
couldn’t stop staring.

He didn’t seem to be sure if he should notice, but the longer it lasted, the more ridiculous it was to
ignore and at last, he turned his head boldly and looked at her. His ears straightened, but stayed
tipped forward, hopeful. He touched her hand, then closed his fingers carefully around it and held
it.

She let him for a few seconds, because it felt so good, and because it felt good, she took her hand
back and scooted away. “I don’t think we should do that anymore,” she said, facing straight ahead
at the blank wall on the far side of the room.

“Sorry. I’m not…I just…It’s weird. Okay? I know that. But it’s not…” He looked at his empty
hand—four fingers, cracked plastic, purple—then up at his ears, then at her, helplessly. “It’s not
impossible…is it?”

“Bonnie, you’re…”

“An animatronic,” he finished for her. “Yeah, I know. But that’s not all I am. I’m…I was…I still
want to be your man.”

“I know and I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was doing. I mean, obviously I knew I was…kissing
and…” She couldn’t finish, couldn’t even look at him. “I didn’t know what it was doing to you,”
she said stubbornly. “If I had, I never would have done it. I’m sorry.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop right there. If loc ‘closet’ within parameters ‘alone with guest: quantity
one/one’ plus ‘kiss,’ then run program ‘stupidinlove.exe’? Give me some credit. It wasn’t some
behavioral pathing program thing, I fell in love.”

“It wasn’t real! I didn’t know! I can’t do this,” she said, yanking the curtain back and falling in the
dark to the floor. She got up, her pulse pounding in her skull, walking fast on shaky legs toward the
door.

“You don’t have to run. I’m not going to chase you.” Bonnie tried to follow her, fell back on the
stage and gave his bad knee a punch to loosen it. “I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. Damn this thing.”

“I’m not running! I’m leaving! I can leave without running!”

“Since when?” Bonnie shot back and immediately said, “Wait. I didn’t mean that. I…Don’t go,
Ana. Not yet. If this…If this is the only time we’re ever going to talk about it, at least let me say it
all.”

Ana kept walking, then tried to keep walking, and then stopped. She looked at him, her lips
pressed together and her throat too tight to let her talk anyway. She waited.

Bonnie made it onto his feet. After a few false starts and a lot of pacing, Bonnie faced her with his
ears set high and said, “I’m not good at words…and this isn’t the sort of thing that should be open
to debate anyway. I’m not trying to convince you of what to do or say…or feel. Honestly, I don’t
want anything from you that you only gave me because you felt trapped or tricked. Just don’t tell
me it was nothing and ask me to agree.”

“Bonnie—”

“I love you,” he said fiercely. “And that? What I just said? That’s real. If it’s all me, fine. You
don’t have to say it back and if you don’t mean it, I’d rather you didn’t, but I mean it and before
you walk out of this room, I want to hear you tell me you know I love you.”

“How can I do that?” she asked hoarsely.

“It’s easy. Just nod your head and say, ‘I know.’”

“But you don’t.”

His eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

She tried again, her throat tight. “You can’t.”

“Look, I know what I am. And I sure don’t need you to point out all the ways that what that is falls short of being human—”

Dismayed, Ana could only shake her head, mouthing the word ‘no’ without sound.

“—but it’s a thinking, feeling thing, even if it’s not biologically alive. So if it’s over because you were playing around and didn’t think it was real, that’s one thing and I can live with it, but if it’s over because there’s even a little part of you that still thinks I’m not real, so nothing I feel is real, then that’s different!”

“You think I’m doing this because I don’t think you’re real? Don’t you get it? It’s because I know you’re real now that I can’t keep doing this! Because I know you’re real…” Ana’s voice cracked. She fought in another breath, determined to finish, to say it all, if only once. “…and you don’t know I’m not.”

His ears came up a little, then lay down lower. “What?”

“The person you’re in love with? She’s not real. She’s…She’s just a figment of my imagination. That’s not Ana Stark. Ana Stark is who I am out there—” She pointed a trembling finger through the walls at the world. “—and you could never love her. No one could. No one should!”

Infuriatingly, Bonnie’s reaction to this pronouncement was to fold his arms and send a short huff of static through his speaker. “That’s a little extreme.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you really knew me. You have no idea the things I’ve done!”

“Yeah, well, I don’t care, either. Because out there—” He mimicked her point; his arm was steady. “—doesn’t exist in here. And nothing you could possibly tell me about what Out There makes you do is going to scare me off. I know who you are, who you really are. And I love you.”

She turned around, put her hand on the door.

“I’m not going to chase you,” he reminded her. “And you don’t have to say it back. All I want is to know that you know.”

Ana stood. Her breath fogged the inset pane of glass in the door, little grey smudges that came and went. In the hall, thin threads of evening light slanted through the boards and sheets of plastic. Any second now, Freddy was going to walk by, a physical reminder that Time was always marching on and didn’t give a damn.

“Ana.”

“I know,” she said. It hurt, but not enough, so she said the rest: “I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to mean anything.”
“To me?” he pressed. “Or to you?”

She faced the glass again. “I’m losing daylight.”

He sighed. “Got to fix those doors, huh?”

She nodded.

“Go on then. I guess it all got said. All the important stuff, anyway. Are you leaving when you’re done?”

“I have to go home.”

“Are you coming back?”

“Is this going to work, Bonnie?” she asked. “The just-friends thing? Because if it’s not, tell me now.”

He laughed, sort of. “I made it work once before.”

She rolled her shoulder, testing acceptance like a stiff muscle. “Then I’m coming back. But it can’t be like it was, so if that’s what you’re waiting for—”

“Hey, the only girl who gets to give me her opinion on what I should be holding out for in my relationships is the one I’m dating. And that’s not you anymore, so…” His ears drooped. He pushed them up with a broad, strained smile and opened his arms.

In retrospect, she realized it sent the wrong signals. At the time, she didn’t hesitate. She stepped up and let him enfold her. If she cried a little more, it wasn’t very hard and didn’t last very long. He never knew.

“A long time ago, one of the valves going into my battery case got cracked,” he whispered, just a scratch of static through his speaker, soft on her ear. “I had to have it replaced, which meant removing the whole thing so he could get at the right place with his tools. So…I’ve literally had my heart pulled out of my chest before and this…this isn’t that bad. It’s all relative, right?”

Ana said nothing.

Okay,” he said and released her, stepping back with that same smile. “I’m just going to hang out here if that’s all right.”

She nodded. “You going to be okay?”

“Not tonight,” he said cheerfully. “But yeah. I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow?”

“Probably. But not Sunday, I’ve got plans. And probably not on a work day, but next weekend for sure.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” she said.

And that was that.
ANA spent most of the weekend cleaning Aunt Easter’s house, ripping off wallpaper and tearing up carpet, so she’d be ready when she finally decided where to start. The kitchen needed it the most—she’d torn out the cabinets and appliances months ago, but the walls were stained, the floor was wrecked and even the ceiling needed repair. On the other hand, the bathrooms didn’t need much work and she already had what she needed to do it. But then, the foyer and parlor were going to be the first thing she saw every single time she came home and it might help push back at least part of the crushing wave of despair she felt entering the house to fix them up. But then again, if she was going to be living here, she needed a damn laundry room.

As a result, she worked herself to exhaustion, filled the dump trailer, and accomplished nothing.

On Sunday, as Ana was sitting in Mammon’s laundromat getting a cheap back massage from a badly-balanced drier, her phone rang. Jimmy Morehead’s name popped up on the screen. Confirming dinner plans, she figured, and added Be on best behavior, no cussing, to her mental list of rules for the night as she answered. “Hey Jimmy. Thought you’d be at church.”

“He is,” the woman on the other end replied. “So are the girls. It’s just me.”

“Hey Kaya. Don’t tell me you’re canceling,” Ana said, trying to sound like she was teasing, or at least not as hopeful as she was. “I washed my hair and everything.” Wash hair, she added to the mental list.

“Oh no. No. That’s kind of why I’m calling. You see…” A sigh. “Jimmy just called from church to warn me he let it slip who was coming to dinner, so long story short, half his family is going to show up tonight. Just to visit him, you understand, and definitely not to gawp at you.”

“Oh no. No. That’s kind of why I’m calling. You see…” A sigh. “Jimmy just called from church to warn me he let it slip who was coming to dinner, so long story short, half his family is going to show up tonight. Just to visit him, you understand, and definitely not to gawp at you.”


“That would liven things up all right. But no, although if you’re going to the store—if you’re not, don’t worry about it, but if you are, could you pick me up some paper plates and cups and all that party stuff? I’d do it myself, but I’m re-enacting the parable of the loaves and fishes here and I just don’t have time. And it’s totally all right if you don’t have time either. I don’t need anything, I just really don’t feel like doing dishes for thirty people tonight.”

“Thirty people?”

“Closer to twenty, in all honesty, but it sure won’t be less than that. And half of them are kids, so there’s that.”

“You went from one guest to twenty and all you’re asking me for is paper plates? How about I pick up a couple sides and a bucket of chicken at the deli counter?”

“Oh, if you want to see me have a nervous breakdown tonight, by all means, make me serve freshly store-bought Walmart food to my Mormon in-laws on a Sunday. No, I can whip up a bathtub-sized green bean casserole in my sleep by now. I’ll cut up another watermelon, shuck some more corn, pop another batch of biscuits in the oven and there’ll be plenty.”
“Are you sure? Maybe ice cream or fruitcicles or something?”

“Well…” Another sigh. “Last Thanksgiving, I committed the unforgiveable sin of serving store-bought pies, so ever since, Liz—you know, the one who gave me Lambert?—has taken it upon herself to bring dessert so that, in her own words, ‘We can at least end the meal on a high note.’”

“Wow. What a bitch.”

“James told her not to bring anything, again, but I know she will, so if you could find the nearest bakery and buy, I don’t know, a couple dozen gourmet cupcakes that are dusted with edible gold and taste like spiritual orgasms, but could still pass as being home-made, that would be great.”

“I’ve got a better idea. What time are they showing up?”

“Dinner’s at six, so Liz will probably show up at four so she can offer to help and then take over and tell everyone how much she had to do so that I could be ready on time.”

“And church gets out when?”

“It just started, so about three hours.”

“Cool. I’ll be there in an hour. Relax, no pressure. I’m just going to give you a hand setting up.”

Ana put her phone away, took her clothes—still damp—and left the laundromat. After a quick shopping trip in Hurricane, she was once again on Morehead’s doorstep, ringing the bell. Kaya answered, looking cheerful in a frazzled way, already apologizing for bringing Ana ‘all the way out’ over nothing, she wasn’t really upset, was just venting, and she was sure Liz was a wonderful woman, etcetera, but all her protests stopped when Ana set her first bag of purchases on the counter, brought out a cascading cupcake tower stand and said, “I used to work at a bakery where the cupcakes were five bucks a pop.”

The overcast skies parted and sent a ray of sunlight down onto Mammon, so the whole kitchen seemed to light up with the hope in Kaya Morehead’s eyes. “You did?”

“Yup. Tonight’s flavors will be sparkling strawberry lemonade, peanut butter and banana, and the ever-popular devil’s food and vanilla panda-cakes. I’m going to teach you some decorating techniques so the Liz-in-law can catch you in the act and there won’t be any doubt they were home-made. Pretty sure that bitch will never darken your door with her desserts again.”

“Oh I could just kiss you right on the lips,” Mrs. Morehead breathed, her hands clasped above her breast.

“It’s gonna be that kind of party, huh? Also, you didn’t mention a theme, but I figured it was bound to be barbeque, right?”

“Well, yes. See, I’ve been marinating the lamb since yesterday, but I was worried about toughness and I thought it’d be safest to go with kebobs, plus I pulled out some burger patties just to make sure there was enough to go around.”

“Good call. So I thought, hey, nothing goes better with summer barbeque than tiki, so—” Ana put the other bags on the counter and took a few items out. “Coconut cups, tiki plates, tropical tablecloths, serving platters, cutlery, and I got some of those torches with the bug repellant out in the truck. For the kids, we got goofy sunglasses, leis, grass skirts, tiki masks, an assortment of cheap plastic treasure crap and I wasn’t sure what your position on squirt-guns is, so I got some animal-shaped ones, but I could still take them back if the symbolic violence or whatever is going
“Okay, I know the no-soda thing sets a tone, but we’re not that bad. If the kids want to chase each other around with spitting alligators and—” Kaya picked up one of the ‘guns’ and tossed it down again. “—hippos, let them. And thank you. You really didn’t have to do all this.”

“Those guys are coming over to stare at me, remember? I want some schadenfreude too. Hey, you got a pool,” she remarked, glancing out into the yard where an epic-sized frame pool had sprouted up between a vibrant summer garden and an empty dog kennel.

“Yes, James finally broke down. All the girls’ friends have one, according to them, anyway. Do you have a swimsuit?”

“Not yet,” said Ana, making another addition to her mental list. “But I will when I come back. Okay, let’s get started.”

Four dozen cupcakes later, Ana was back on the road. Once over the canyon bridge, she headed for Hurricane again, but changed her mind halfway there and spun the truck around. She went to the mall in Washington instead. This was no family barbeque anymore; this was Ana Stark’s coming out party. She’d kept her head down and her legs crossed long enough. If Morehead’s family wanted a look at her, she’d give them an eyeful.

* * *

Even in Utah, it was possible to find shops and services open on Sunday. Ana spent a hundred dollars on the suit and two hundred at a day spa, where she spent the rest of her afternoon as well, arriving back at the Morehead’s door at the fashionably late hour of half-past six.

She was the last to arrive. Jimmy’s driveway and the sidewalk in front of his house were packed with minivans, so that she had to park clear around the corner and halfway down the block. Even there, she could hear the sound of happy kid-cries, but she couldn’t smell burgers yet. Maybe they were waiting on her. Good thing she’d come prepared to make an entrance.

Ana stopped at the foot of the driveway to make a few last-minute adjustments to her costume. Clothes like this weren’t really meant to be worn, let alone walked in. On impulse, she also pulled out her phone and snapped a few selfies, sending the best of them to Rider along with the message, Checking in. Don’t call I’m partying w the Mormons

She hadn’t taken three steps when her phone buzzed in her hand.

She’d been waiting for it, hence why the phone was still in her hand, and her anticipatory smile became a laugh when she saw the picture Rider had sent back: just his hand, unzipping his jeans, and the message take yr time. I’ll B busy for a while

There was a moment’s deja-vu when Ana stepped up to the door with her daypack on her shoulder and a rolled-up towel under her arm, and it only got stronger when Kaya opened the door and her smile of greeting froze into an open-mouthed stare.

“Say the word and I’ll leave right now,” Ana said politely. “Last thing I want to do is embarrass you.”

“No,” said Kaya as a spark of defiance flared in her eyes. “You know what? I kind of want to see this. Do come in and make yourself at home.”
Ana came in, setting her daypack among the purses and diaper bags lined up under the family coat-hook. It looked different from them in more than just the obvious way, not old or worn or scruffy, but almost alien. An outsider, not even trying to fit in, only waiting out the time before it could move on.

As Kaya returned to the kitchen and the frenzy of preparation that went into making any relaxing family barbeque happen, Ana followed the sound of Jimmy’s familiar cheerful voice where it engaged with others, unfamiliar but just as cheerful, in Sunday afternoon talk: conservative politics, church, kids and baseball.

Until Ana walked into the living room.

And all talk stopped.

One of the kids, who, at fourteen or so, no doubt considered himself too grown-up to chase his smaller cousins around the backyard, but was young enough to be bored by the adult talk, sat up from his sullen slouch too fast and spilled his entire coconut cup of mango-guava juice down his chest and onto the carpet. No one else noticed.

As it was a casual event, Ana had chosen simple attire. High-waisted booty shorts in liquid black, so tight that body paint would have left more to the imagination. The inked gears and wires of her chest tattoo peeked over the top of her lace-up corset, to which a few dozen tacky silver chains had been creatively attached, and from them hung a number of dismembered doll arms and legs. Oh, and thigh-high leather boots with stiletto heels. All the bare skin she was showing, and there was plenty, was spa-soft and smooth and rubbed down with luster-oil so her tan lines weren’t quite so evident. Her hair was loose tonight and even though she’d saturated it with taming products, the wind had already blown it into that freshly-fucked style that was its natural state. She looked, if she did say so herself, like a hot plate of god-damn and a chocolate spoon to lick it up with.

“Hey Jimmy,” she said. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No problem,” said Jimmy’s mouth while his eyes said, ‘Why are you doing this to me?’

“Hi,” said the fourteen-year-old. His voice cracked. “I’m Ryan.”

At that moment, the sliding glass door to the backyard opened and a whole herd of shrieking children tumbled in with a beta male behind them with his shirt off in an effort to impress an unimpressed alpha female sunbathing on the patio (who hopefully was a friend and not his cousin). “The coals look good to me, Uncle Jimmy,” this newcomer announced, projecting confidence and years of charcoal observation experience. “I think it’s time for the oh my God.”

Six voices came together in one parental war-cry, “Ethan!” which attracted all the attention the boy’s own mild epithet had not.

“Well, you all know me, I think,” said Ana, heading over to offer handshakes to anyone who wanted one. Few did. “But just in case you don’t—”

“We know you,” said one of the women, the matriarch to go by the grey in her well-done hair and the lines on her sensibly made-up face. There was nothing particularly unkind about the way she said it, although there were teeth in her smile when she said, “You’re Ana Blaylock.”

Ana mentally drew her sword and squared off, although she kept it off her face and out of her voice. “Close. I’m Ana Stark.”

“Well.” Mother Morehead looked her up and down, still smiling. “If you say so. And how is your
mother?"

“Dead.”

This was where anyone else would offer the obligatory condolences, but instead: “So you’re the last of them, are you? Finally.”

“Mom,” said Jimmy, stricken. Just the nicest person, he’d told Ana. Loves everybody. Never a mean thing to say about anyone.

“Now why would you say that?” Ana asked mildly. “I’ve got a cousin out there somewhere and as far as anyone knows, my aunt joined the road crew for Slipknot and has been touring the world.”

“Yes, of course,” said the older woman, plainly meaning, ‘You have got to be kidding.’ “I’m afraid I just assumed—”

“Yeah. You people do a lot of that.”

To be fair, there weren’t a whole lot of ways to answer that, and yet Mother Morehead went with: “Well, we still have you. And looking so…healthy. But are you sure you’re dressed appropriately?”

“Now that you mention it—” Ana unfurled her towel with a snap and held up her new swimming suit. A one-piece, technically. It had a full back anyway, but the front was just a bunch of black ribbons creatively interlaced to form the illusion that the wearer was not naked. “—I do have to get changed.”

* * *

Ana was often invited over whenever Rider had a brother in town and he was usually able to talk her into showing up despite her deep dislike of being the interloper at family gatherings. And that was Rider, a man Ana knew, trusted, respected and even liked. She had initially agreed to tonight’s dinner only because she couldn’t think of a tactful way out of it, but she had to admit, she was glad she came. The pool was too shallow to swim in, but the water was cool and swimming had never been the point. She was here to bask in other people’s discomfort and if her imperviousness to it made them even more uncomfortable, so much the better. If it wasn’t for the fact that she genuinely sort of liked Jimmy, she’d have brought a flask and gotten drunk right in front of them while she talked about atheism. She didn’t. She was practically a model of good manners. She just modeled it in a skimpy outfit.

For all the icy stares and whispering, no one directly confronted her and the only really dark spot over the whole night came when Jimmy dropped his grilling tongs. He tried to catch them as they fell, but failed and rather than go all the way inside and wash them off or get another pair, he attempted to flip a burger on the broad blade of a knife that he already had out there for testosterone-related reasons, and then dropped that too. Even that wouldn’t have been bad, except that Jimmy again unthinkingly tried to grab it as it fell and this time, he succeeded, although he didn’t catch it by the hilt.

Ana was not watching the grill when all this went down, but she heard the female exclamations of concern and hearty male uh-ohs and shouldn’t-have-done-that’s. More than that, she heard the uniquely toneless quality of his voice when Jimmy said, “It’s okay. It’s not deep. I’m all right,” and knew what it meant.
So did his wife, who left off setting up the kid’s table at once and came rushing over to wrap Jimmy’s bleeding fingers in a clean dish towel and hustle him away. One of the men took over the grilling. Three of the women competed to clean up the blood. One of the kids asked what happened.

“Oh, your Uncle Jimmy gets a little funny when he gets hurt,” the good ol’ boy at the grill replied. “He’s done it his whole life, since he was younger than you. There’s a word for it, I’m sure, but I just call it being a crybaby.”

“There’s a word for that, too,” Ana remarked.

“Hey, I’m allowed to give him a hard time. I’m his brother. You’re just his…”

Ana waited, one eyebrow raised.

“Coworker,” Big Brother concluded and all the Moreheads and their spouses smiled at her and looked at each other.

When Jimmy returned, fingers bandaged and color back in his face, dinner was announced. A prayer was said; the oldest and youngest all folded their arms and bowed their heads while Ana and the teenage set exchanged silent glances. Burgers and kebobs were enjoyed. The cupcakes came and rapidly went and soon the only ones left were the ones on the three huge platters Jimmy’s sister had brought. Only six of those had been eaten—one each for the sister, her husband and their four children…and the youngest cried because he wanted a panda-cake.

Afterwards, the wives invaded Kaya’s kitchen to ‘help’ while the husbands sat around the living room and talked about God, and the kids divided themselves according to age between coloring at the kitchen table, splashing around the pool, or lounging on sun chairs looking bored.

Ana spent most of her time in the shade on her towel, sipping mango juice and pretending not to notice the kids when they crept up to investigate her. Most of them ran off as soon as she made eye contact, but there was one brave little thing in a tutu who hooked herself boldly over the branch of the shade tree where, unbeknownst to her, the protein contributor to tonight’s tasty kebobs had been hung up by his ankles and butchered. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Minnie.”

“I’m Ana.”

“I like your hair.”

“Thanks.”

“How did it get so long?” the child asked.

“I never cut it.”

“Who drew on you?”

“A couple ladies in Santa Monica did this one,” Ana replied, tapping the uppermost edge of her chest tattoo. “I don’t remember their names. And this one was done by a guy named Dogmeat in Los Angeles.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“That’s why I remember it. But he sure can draw.”
“He sure can,” the girl said seriously. “Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore,” said Ana, offering her arm for grubby fingers to explore. “When I got it, yeah, a little. Mostly around the wrist and elbow. Anywhere the needle’s going to hit the bone is going to hurt, but it wasn’t so bad, and after that, it’s no worse than a sunburn and only that for a few days.”

“I’m going to get one when I get older.”

“Minnie!”

The little girl looked back, then looked at Ana and fiercely whispered, “I’m going to have all the tattoos! And I’m going to have blue hair because it’s my favorite color and drink all the soda and be a ballerina and a dragon!”

“You do you, kid,” said Ana, amused, and the girl ran off, roaring, with her hands hooked into claws.

The older kids were a bit more subtle, but they did their share of circling, especially the boys. Most of them settled for palming their cell phones to take stealth-shots, a few of the bolder ones attempted conversation. One of them, God bless his misguided little soul, tried to score points by indicating how he really needed a cigarette.

“You smoke?” Ana asked and upon receiving a proud nod, added, “Gross.”

And away he went.

As the evening progressed, the younger kids lost interest, although she remained new enough to be worthy of observing every cartwheel and to approve the coloring on each tiki mask. The older boys continued their skulking from a distance, but the girls moved in and were surprisingly chill. They asked if she really worked with ‘Uncle Jimmy’ or if she just, like, answered the phones and stuff. When Ana ran down the short list of her areas of expertise, all listened solemnly, not skeptically.

“Is it hard to work with guys all day?” one asked. “Do they, like, creep on you?”

“It’s been known to happen at some places, but nobody here has given me any real grief,” Ana replied, reasoning tact was warranted more than truth in certain situations. “They’re all there to do a job, just like me.”

“My mom says you’re a lesbian,” said another.

“Tell your mom I’m flattered by her interest, but I’m not into girls.”

“Do you have piercings?” asked a third.

“Just my ears now. Used to have my eyebrows done, but I work around machinery too much and it was a hazard, so I took ‘em out and the holes grew in. Also my belly button, but it got stupid-infected. You can still see the scar.”

They all looked.

“You have a lot of scars,” one of them observed.

“Yeah,” Ana said simply and felt her back, safely concealed, prickle. “You get beat up a lot in my work.”

“Are these tracks?” someone asked, looking at Ana’s arm.
“What?” She looked and after a moment, laughed. “No, that’s from back when I did welding. Wasn’t wearing my protective gear and I caught some sparks. They look nothing like tracks.” They looked nothing like welding blowback either, but if the girl could have recognized old cigarette burns, she would have asked if that was what they were. “Why do you ask?”

“My mom says you do drugs.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t, so tell your mom she’s going to have to keep looking for a dealer.”

“What does this mean?” another girl asked.

Ana looked at her arm, where the girl was tracing the complicated knotwork of the roots of Yggdrasil, and the wolf and wyrm entangled there, biting. “Nothing,” she said. “It’s just some stuff from Norse mythology.”

“My mom says you’re a Satanist.”

“If I don’t believe in the invisible sky fairy, why would I believe in the invisible fire goblin? Seriously,” said Ana, turning fully to face this girl. “What is with your mom?”

“Oh, she’s always got a stick up her ass about someone,” the girl replied.

Giggles all around at this daring pronouncement.

“It’s true. I bet you the second we’re in the car, she’ll be on her phone telling everyone she knows that you were here. Not that there’s much to tell,” the girl continued, looking Ana up and down. “Here I thought I was going to meet this super cool Satanic lesbo party-bitch. You’re just a regular person.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“I guess you’re still sort of cool. Come on, Ashleigh,” she said to a younger girl. “Mom’s getting ready to go.”

Ana glanced back to see one of the women wrapping up her mostly untouched platters of cupcakes for transit.

At this signal, the other women gathered in the kitchen to hug, fill sippy-cups for the road, exchange schedules, make promises, praise cupcakes, and finally call children and migrate toward—but not out of—the door.

While Ana waited for the crowd to thin, Jimmy made his way through the husbands and onto the patio. He dropped onto a sunchair and looked at her. “Sorry,” he said.

“Hey, don’t tell me, tell your wife. If I had that horde show up in my house on three hours’ notice, I’d get a divorce.”

“She’s used to it, unfortunately.” He looked over the lawn, strewn now with party favors and tiki masks. “And I don’t know why you did all that, but thanks. I’m going down in awesome-uncle history for this one. And those cupcakes? No way Kaya made those. Did you buy them too?”

“Baked ‘em.”

“Cheese and crackers, Ana, we’ve got to get you married! You’re way too good a cook to be building bookshelves.”
“I like to think I’m way too good a carpenter to be baking cupcakes.”

A faint blush touched Jimmy’s broad, good-humored face. “Well, yeah. That, too.”

“Relax, we’re good.” Ana made a point of checking through the glass door at the innards of the house. “Looks like they’re finally taking off. I guess I should get out of here.”

“Aw, don’t go yet. We’ve barely said two words to each other.”

“No, that’s cool. I’ve got laundry in the truck.”

“Oh come on, is that the best you could do? I’m serious,” he added with a convincing frown. “I invited you over to hang out and get to know you, not run you through the Morehead gauntlet and flush you out the door.”

The back door slid open. “They’re gone,” Kaya said. “You two help yourselves to whatever and just leave the dishes in the sink. The girls and I are going upstairs to play a little Lego Harry Potter before bed, okay?”

“Okay, hon. Thanks. I owe you so big.”

“Add it to the list. Ana, it was great meeting you again. Thanks so much for the schwarma froo-froo. I really appreciate it.”

“Schadenfreude food. Schaden-food.”

“One-up-cakes,” Kaya agreed, smiling. “Goodnight.”

She closed the door again, leaving Ana and Jimmy with the empty yard and some guttering torches.

“Well, I’m going to put some clothes on,” Ana announced. “You want to grab us some cold drinks or something, that would be great.”

“Sure thing!” And up he sprang to open the door for her.

Ana collected her day pack and retreated to the bathroom. After snapping a mirror-selfie for Rider (gd y u no dress like that 4 me ??? he wanted to know, just like he’d never seen her in a swimsuit before, hell, like he’d never seen her naked), she changed. Not into her previous outfit—that had served its purpose—but just into her usual jeans and a tee.

When she emerged, Jimmy was outside, laid back in a lounge chair, watching the stars come out over the neighborhood rooftops and sipping from a bottle. A brown bottle.

“Tell me that’s a beer,” Ana said, stepping out onto the patio.

“Sort of.” Grinning, he offered her another.

Root beer. Of course.

“I thought you didn’t drink soda,” she said, gingerly settling into another lounge chair. Cheap plastic things. Rider had the real deal out at his place and even they had a tendency to collapse if you breathed on them wrong.

“We don’t let the girls drink it,” he corrected. “I keep some in the garage-fridge for special occasions.”
“And they don’t dip into your secret sarsaparilla stash?”

“They’re good girls. And there’s a good lock on the fridge.” He had a swallow, sighed, and looked at the stars.

“How’s the hand?” Ana asked, nodding at the bandages wrapping his fingers.

“Oh, fine.” He laughed a bit self-consciously. “Was that the stupidest thing you ever saw or what?”

“Not even in the Top Ten,” she assured him. “Could have happened to anybody.”

“Anybody dumb enough to drop a knife and try to grab it.”

Ana shrugged agreement, but said, “I don’t want to set you off again, man, but are you really okay?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing. I keep the knives pretty dull around here. I’ll have a bad night, but I’ll be fine tomorrow.” Jimmy glanced at her. “I know what you’re thinking.”

Ana’s attention had been drifting toward the tiki jungle pattern on the tablecloth, which reminded her of the monkey kingdom pyramid she’d taken out of the gym, which reminded her—as all things eventually did in this town—of Freddy’s, looked sharply back at him. “What am I thinking?”

“That I’m in the wrong business for a guy who can’t stand the sight of blood.” He grimaced through a smile. “Kaya was so disappointed when Wyatt dissolved Green Thumb instead of turning the reins over to me. I’d been working for him as long as she knew me. She saw the dependable guy who was always on time and never horsed around. You know who Wyatt saw?” Jimmy leaned in and tapped himself on the chest with the neck of his root beer bottle. “Jergens. Jimmy Jergens, that was what he called me, starting when I was sixteen years old. Because my hands are baby-soft.”

“You should hear some of the things they call me,” Ana told him. “Don’t let it get to you.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but…it matters, you know. When you live in a small town, what people think matters. And right now, people think I can’t do my job.”

“You know better than Shelly does, if you want my opinion.”

He threw her a distracted smile, drowning his sorrows in root beer. “Thanks.”

“I’m serious. You want to show the haters up? Quit Shelly and give him some competition. I think I can almost guarantee you can underbid him and still make bank. People in this town can call you whatever they want, but in the end, they’re going to go with the guy who’ll do it for less.”

“What do I know about running a company? We’ve got kids, we’ve got a mortgage. I can’t just jump into something like that and hope I figure it out before we go bankrupt. And let’s face it, it’s not just the book-keeping end. I’d need to hire a crew, which means training and managing and all that. Then there’s equipment costs—”

“Anything else?”

“Well, yeah, now that you mention it. There’s the teeny, tiny factoid that, you know…” He sipped a little at his drink, avoiding her eyes. “…maybe I don’t want to mow lawns for a living. Maybe I never wanted that. Maybe I took a summer job when I was a kid and even I can’t believe I’m still
“Okay, well, that’s different,” Ana said mildly. “You should have led with that. But if you’re so unhappy, you should really consider getting another job.”

“Easier said than done,” he sighed. “Opportunity doesn’t knock very often in this town.”

Ana made commiserating sounds and sipped her soda, watching him out of the corner of her eye and reading between the lines of trouble on his face. “Doesn’t look like you’re a hundred percent on staying in this town,” she observed.

He started to shake his head, but ended in a shrug. “I never saw myself living anywhere else,” he said, avoiding her eye like it was the worst kind of confession. “I love it here, quarry-smell and all, but…”

“It’s not what it used to be,” Ana guessed.

“That’s just the thing, isn’t it? It’s exactly what it used to be, I just didn’t know how to see it. But I’m a dad now. I’ve got two little girls that mean more to me than life itself and I…I find myself thinking I should really get them out of here, you know, before they start teaching sex ed.”

Ana acknowledged this with a neutral nod and said nothing.

“But go where?” Jimmy went on unhappily. “And do what? I mean, I could sell the house, no problem. No one talks about it, but around here, everyone knows you can pretty much write your own price tag, as long as you don’t get ridiculous with it. So I could manage the move, maybe even get a better place so the girls could have their own rooms, but how do I support them? I’m a straight-C high school graduate whose entire work history is doing stuff I don’t want to keep doing. I’d be flipping burgers or stocking shelves…or mowing lawns. But you’re right,” he sighed, even though Ana had not said anything. “I’ve seen one company go under. I know the signs. Even with Slater and the others gone, I know Shelly’s looking for more ballast to throw over, and I’m up. Me and my baby-soft hands.”

“Don’t give yourself such a hard time. Phobias are legit.”

“It’s not a phobia,” he said with another of those careless shrugs. “I’m not scared of blood. It’s not like I feel faint or puke or start hyperventilating or anything, I just get a little anxiety because I know what’s coming. It’s the nightmares that get me.”

“Nightmares?”

“Well, nightmare,” he said, stressing the singular form of the word. “Different versions of it, but it’s essentially the same one, just…over and over. You’d think that would make it easier, but as many times as I’ve had it, I still wake up screaming. Scares the kids, scares Kaya. But it’s not a real phobia,” he emphasized. “I’ll get over it. Believe it or not, it’s already a lot better than it was when it first came back.”

“Came back?”

“Oh yeah. I had the same one when I was a little kid, but I got over it. I will again.”

“Have I got this right?” Ana asked curiously. “You’ve been having the same nightmare since you were a kid?”

“Essentially.”
“Where did it come from?” Ana asked. “Did you have, like, an experience with blood or…?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. Not that I remember, anyway. I probably saw a scary movie. I was an impressionable kid. Loads of imagination and older siblings. You know how it is.”

“Sure,” said Ana, who was an only child and who did not consider herself terribly imaginative, except when it came to humanizing inanimate objects…who were not all that inanimate after all.

Shaking off the pull of those thoughts, she asked, “So what is it? Your nightmare.”

“Oh come on.”

“Come on yourself. I told you my dream the other day.”

“Yeah, but…”

“But what? You think I’m going to talk it around?”

“No,” he said (although he paused before he said it). “It’s just, you know…I’ve never told anyone but Kaya. And I haven’t told her all of it.”

“Maybe that’s why you keep having it,” declared Ana in a perfect imitation of someone who knew what they were talking about. “Monsters never crawl away and die on their own. You got to pull them out into the light and make them look you in the eye.”

He didn’t answer. She did not push, but she didn’t exactly drop it either. She just waited in comfortable quiet and at last, he said, “You really think that will help?”

“I was in therapy once,” she told him. “And although the guy was a total flake and every word that came out of his mouth was a nugget of fresh horseshit, I don’t consider it a waste, because it did feel good to actually talk about some of it. Things can seem a lot bigger than they are when they’re all in your head. Just to say stuff out loud can sometimes put things in their proper perspective.”

“Why were you in therapy?” Jimmy asked with a touch of apprehension.

“My mom died,” Ana said simply, leaving out the exact nature of what had not been an accident, no matter what the official report said. “I was in the car with her when it went into the water. I got out. She didn’t.”

“Oh wow. I’m so sorry.”

After so many years, Ana had learned not to answer that particular remark with, ‘I’m not,’ no matter how she felt about it. She merely nodded and said, “So tell me your dream. You don’t have to say anything that makes you uncomfortable and I’m sure not going to tell you everything in it is secretly about sex or whatever.”

“Oh gosh, I hope not.” Morehead laughed, looking as much shocked by the idea as amused, then said, “Okay, why not? It’s such a kid-dream, though. And there’s hardly anything to it. You’re going to think I’m a huge wuss.”

“Probably, but I promise not to call you one.”

He laughed again, then wiggled back in the lounge chair until he was entirely prone and said, “Okay. How do we start?”

“It’s not rocket-science. Just start with the first thing you remember in the dream.”
“Well, the first thing is, I’m always me. You know how in dreams, sometimes you’re a different person and it makes sense in the dream, but not when you wake up? I have those too, but in this dream, I’m always me. And the me I am can be different ages at the start, like I’m almost always the age I really am in real life when I walk in, but things start to warp and get bigger around me pretty soon, so that I turn back into a little kid. And that part, the regression, it’s weird, because it’s almost not even…I don’t know…significant? It’s just a thing that has to happen, like in a video game, when you can talk to someone a hundred times, but unless you’ve got the star key or whatever, you can’t trigger a certain quest? It’s like that.”

“I said I wouldn’t call you a wuss, but I’m afraid I do have to call you a nerd now.”

“Go ahead, it wouldn’t be the first time. Anyway, the start of the dream can play out in a lot of different ways, but the real nightmare can’t start until I’m small. Like, real small. Four or five, maybe.” He took a moment to assess her suddenly pensive expression and said, “What?”

“Nothing. Wild hare, that’s all. Nothing really to do with you, except that’s about the age I was in my dream the other day. In fact, I’ve had a lot of dreams lately where I’m a little kid. I never used to do that.”

“I wonder if that’s a common dream-thing?” he asked, looking interested. “Like how lots of people have the dream where you go to school or work in your underwear and no one notices until you do, and that means you’re insecure? You ever have that one?”

“No, but I know what you mean. I’ve had the falling dream before. You heard of that one?”

“Yes, you get it. So what do you suppose being four or five in your dreams means?”

“I don’t know. Vulnerability? It’s when you’re just starting to go to school, so it’s kind of a scary time even if nothing happens to you.”

“You may be onto something there. Like you have to leave home, but you can’t do anything for yourself yet, so it’s like that time when you’re totally dependent on parents who aren’t even there. Huh.” He turned a surprised sort of smile on her. “Hey, I think we just had a breakthrough!”

“You’re welcome. So where are you in the dream? You said you had to ‘walk in.’”

“I’m at Freddy’s, of course. What did I say? In this town, it’s always Freddy’s.”

“Circle Drive?”

“No, the one before that, the one over on Mulholland. Which is stranger than it sounds, because I don’t remember ever going there. It’s possible I went for an older brother’s birthday or something, but I must have been—”

“Four or five?”

“Or even younger. Anyway, like I say, lots of things can happen at the beginning of the dream, but at some point, I get small and wander off from the main room. The dream starts to get a little scary, like it’s dark and there’s a long crooked hall with lots of doors, and I see someone at the corner where the hall turns, talking to this kid. Sometimes the kid is a boy, sometimes a girl, sometimes one of my brothers or sisters…or, these days, one of my kids. But the guy…I’ve never seen the guy before. He looks…I mean, he doesn’t look…I mean—”

Ana said it for him: “He doesn’t look human?”
Jimmy smiled uneasily and shook his head. “He’s dressed funny, but it’s not just that. He’s too tall, too thin. His face is bone-white. If you’ve ever seen pictures of this Slenderman guy, it was a lot like that, except mine had a face. I don’t really remember what he looked like. He was kind of hard to look at. It was like one of those theater masks, you know the ones I mean? Only I don’t even remember if he was the laughing or crying one.”

“Or both,” said Ana, thinking of the Puppet.

“Right. Anyway, this guy takes the kid’s hand and opens this door that has magically appeared in the corner there. They go inside and disappear, but the door doesn’t quite close and even though I’m already creeped out, I follow them. By the time I get there, they’re gone. There’s no light in the other room, but there’s enough light coming in from the hall that I can sort of see shelves and boxes and a table. It smells like my garage. I mean, I don’t actually smell anything, it’s a dream, but you know how you just know stuff in dreams and it takes the place of real sensation? It’s like that. It smells like my garage, so it’s sort of got that familiarity, but…you know.”

“Not a big fan of the garage either, huh?”

“I was a kid. Dark, cluttered spaces with spiders and weird smells were not my favorite things. So I’m there in this little dark room and as my eyes adjust, I see all the mascots lying around. Only they’re…awful.”

“How so?”

“You remember how they were at Circle Drive? They looked sort of like that, only really cheap bootleg versions. Blocky. Ugly. And on top of that, they were missing pieces. Like Chica had no hands, Bonnie had no face and that sort of thing. And they were just slumped around the room. I don’t know, I don’t think I’m describing it very well,” he said with a rare frown. “It’s not like they were empty suits or dolls. It’s like they were dead.”

“I get it.”

“I don’t think you can,” he started to say, then looked at her again. “Okay, maybe you do. Anyway, I didn’t want to be there, but now I can see one of the shelves is pulled out from the wall and there’s an opening behind it. Not an open door, just an open place. And I go through because…?”

He spread his hands, shaking his head. “Dream-logic.”

“It helps that kids are dumb.”

“Yeah. So I go through the opening into another room, this one only a little bit bigger than the staircase dropping out of the floor. There’s a light down there, enough to let me see the steps, but I don’t go down. I can still hear the other kid crying, like from far away, but when I put my foot on the first stair, the kid gets louder, asking for its mother and saying it has to go now, and then it stops using words and just starts screaming. Not movie-kid screaming. That raw, scraping sort of scream that…that you just instinctively know is bad news. Sometimes I wake up here,” he added. “That scream…when you’ve got kids of your own, it just stabs you in the gut and twists. As a dad, I can’t imagine hearing that scream and not running toward it, you know? Because that kid isn’t just scared or hurt, that kid is terrified and that kid is going to die if you don’t save it. But if another kid heard that sound, they’d run away, for the same reason. Because there’s something down there.” Light from the guttering citronella torch flickered in his shadowed eyes. “And it eats children.”

“What do you do?”
“I go down there, of course. I’m telling you, if this actually stems from anything, it’s got to be a movie, because that is some grade-A horror movie horse-hockey right there.”

“Agreed,” said Ana with a smile that was equal parts disdain for horror movie antics and his unironic use of the word ‘horse-hockey’. “Go on.”

“I go down the stairs and in front of me is a long hall, but we’re not in Freddy’s anymore. It’s more like a hospital. White tiles, white walls, bright lights. I can still smell the garage, though. And something else, something sour. There’s a few doors here and there, but only one is open and naturally, it’s the one at the end of the hall where all the screaming is coming from. And now the screaming is…I don’t know. It’s breaking up, turning back into crying, but it’s not getting smaller, if that makes any sense. Somehow, it’s only getting worse. When I reach the door and look in, I see…”

Morehead fell quiet, staring across the yard at the pool. His bandaged fingers found the arm of the chair and gripped. The bottle in his other hand shook slightly. Either way, his knuckles were white.

Ana did not interrupt. She had the feeling that in this case, ‘Are you all right?’ would be as damaging to the moment as ‘You gonna talk or what?’ and once broken, it could never be restored. She didn’t want to hear this, no more than little dream-Jimmy had wanted to see it, but like him, she had to.

“The kid is there,” Morehead said finally, in the low, dimmed voice of a bad actor told to imitate hypnosis. “But I don’t see him. The thing, the man, whatever it is…he’s bent over, completely covering him from sight. He’s moving. I can’t see what he’s doing, but I can hear it and it’s…awful. Wet. I look and see—he’s got the kid on a…like a table or something, I should have said that first—and when I look, I see blood dripping off the sides, like…like, all four sides. Not a lot. It’s just dripping. But it’s real. I mean it feels real,” he said with a hard shake of his head and an even harder laugh to dispel his former sleeptalking-tone.

“Is that when you wake up?” Ana asked, gently herding him back to the dream by pretending she believed it really was one.

“Sometimes Kaya will wake me up because I guess that’s when I start making noise and, you know, thrashing around. But in the dream, I don’t scream. I don’t make any noise. I don’t move. I just watch. I listen. The kid is just braying now, the way kids do when they’re just…you know…done. And the thing is talking, kind of whispering and moaning. I can’t make out what he’s saying, but I can tell he’s talking faster and suddenly he rears up and does…something, and I hear this sound…this thick, ripping sound…and the kid makes a sound, like a pukey groan…and the blood just gushes out over all four sides of the table and hits the ground. It splashes. It’s so much blood, it splashes back. And it falls and falls and falls and that thing is still moving. I mean…I mean…”

The thinnest hint of anger began to shiver up through Morehead’s voice. “I mean, what were my brothers doing, watching a movie like that?”

“Have you ever talked to them about it?”

“No, are you kidding? I had the worst, I mean the absolute worst screaming nightmares when I was a kid. The cops showed up one time because I woke the neighbors. If my parents found out they let me see a scary movie, they’d have thrown the TV out and grounded all three of them for a month. They still might. My folks are no joke.”

“Can you remember the actual movie at all?” Ana inquired.

“No, but…I couldn’t have just imagined something like that.”
Ana nodded, taking a tasteless sip of her warming root beer. She believed him.

“But I still don’t scream in the dream. I see the blood…I can even smell it…but I don’t scream. I just run. And I mean, I haul ass up that hall,” said Morehead, stuttering only a little over the dreaded a-word. “I fly up the stairs and through that opening into the other room, where I crash right into the shelves that were pulled out from the wall. They tip over and everything that was on them—like lightbulbs and garage junk like that—slides off and smashes everywhere. It’s so loud and I freeze to listen because I know something’s down there and it had to have heard me.”

Once more, he lapsed into silence, letting Ana live the moment as he described it, but she didn’t think he was being dramatic as much as reliving the moment himself.

“And then I hear another noise right in the room with me,” he went on at last. “A whirring, grinding mechanical sound. When I turn around, Freddy—the old ugly one—he’s right behind me. Standing, I mean. I don’t move. I can’t. He’s between me and the door, so there’s nowhere I can go except down into the basement where the thing is and I know it’s coming. So I don’t move and Freddy grabs me. He picks me up—sorry,” he interrupted himself with a laugh. His voice had cracked.

He cleared his throat a few times, knocking on his chest, then continued, “He picks me up and it’s a dream, so you don’t really know these things, but I know three things right away. I know he’s hot, like being pressed up against the dryer when it’s going. I know he stinks really bad, like the garbage can under the sink. And I know he could crush me in his hands like a pop can if he wanted to. You can just feel the strength, the way only machines are strong. But when he picks me up, he puts one hand on the back of my head and just the way he does that makes me think he’s not going to hurt me. He holds me and asks me what my name is and when I tell him, he says, ‘Jimmy, you need to be very brave and very quiet.’ Then he goes over to where Chica’s sitting. Her head turns, like she’s coming alive too, and even Bonnie is moving now, looking at me without a face. Freddy leans her away from the wall and opens up her back. He puts me inside her and closes her up again. Then he says something to her, but I can’t hear him over the sound of all these mechanical things. She leans back against the wall so there’s no way I can get out now. I’m trapped in this tiny place…”

“Are you claustrophobic too?” Ana asked when the quiet had stretched out too long.

Morehead stirred and managed a squeaky sort of laugh. “No. You’d think, right? But no, I’m fine in closets and stuff. The smell will set me off sometimes, that hot-garbage smell. Kaya thinks I’ve got a thing about germs because I scrub out the bin so often to keep it from stinking, when it’s really about that day. That dream,” he corrected and went quiet again.

Ana got up, found the bottle of citronella oil and refilled the closest torches.

Jimmy watched her and when she came back to her chair, as she’d hoped, he picked up the threads of his story right away. Sometimes all people needed was a signal.

“It’s like hiding in a cupboard,” he said, unaware that he was talking to someone who had spent a significant amount of time in a closet. “It’s all hard edges and bad smells, and it’s hot as hell, but I can breathe just fine and even see a little through the cracks in her body. The first thing I see is Freddy taking one of the other shelves and tipping it over, too. He starts throwing stuff around and stomping on stuff, just trashing the place. And I know how this is going to sound because I just saw a kid die…I think…but this part is just as scary to me. It feeds into that kid-part of you that’s more afraid of getting into trouble than getting hurt. But even in the dream, I know what he’s doing. He’s not just making noise or making a mess, he’s…owning it.”
“Taking responsibility,” said Ana.

“Yeah.” Jimmy sat for a while, peeling the label off his root beer in narrowing strips. “He scared me, you know,” he said suddenly. “When I was a kid. I’d go to Freddy’s and I loved it, sure, but Freddy always scared me. I was fine with the others, even Foxy…and you’ve got to admit, Foxy was always a little scary.”

“Pirates are supposed to be scary.”

“I guess, but…but anyway, the door opens and it came in, the Slenderman thing. I couldn’t move much, but there was a hole or a crack or something, right here—” Jimmy rubbed his chest just under his collarbone, his smile taking on a sarcastic slant. “—and I peeked through it. I must have gotten that part from the movie. You know how there’s always a keyhole the kid can look through, so he can see the bad guy but the bad guy can’t see him? You never actually see keyholes like that anymore.”

Ana merely nodded and did not mention her aunt’s house, the Metzger mansion, where all the doors had keyholes like that. Easiest locks in the world to pick. Ana had been able to figure that out before she was six. That was how she and David had gotten into the forbidden basement, all those years ago…the basement, where monsters supposedly lived under the stairs and behind the walls. They’d looked for them together, she and David, and found nothing, but now Ana had to wonder if they’d missed something after all? Slumped in some corner behind the boxes of Christmas and Halloween decorations, hiding in plain sight as a giant Easter bunny, had animatronic eyes been watching as she and David explored?

“You okay?” Jimmy asked.

Ana nodded and took a pull off her root beer to prove it. “Just thinking of old doors and old locks. Go on.”

“You sure I’m not boring you?”

“Last thing I am in the world right now is bored. Go on.”

“Well…” Clearly unconvinced, Jimmy turned his face back out to the yard and let his eyes unfocus. “I saw the thing. I couldn’t see his face—he wasn’t looking at me—but I could see his body, like a skeleton pulled long and wrapped in black plastic. Oh! I should have said before, how he had stripes, black and white stripes, on the lower joints of his arms and legs. Only now, one of his legs was red, all the way up to the knee. It left little red marks on the floor where he walked. That has to be from the movie,” he declared. “Just…Just the look of it. Black and white and red…all over. Like a joke, the way those horror movies joke.”

Jimmy’s mouth puckered as he delivered this pronouncement on the horror movie industry, as if their bad taste in humor were something he had to physically swallow. He washed it away with root beer. “When the thing came in, Freddy quit trashing the place. I don’t remember if they talked or what, but almost right away, the door to the hall opened and a man came in. I think it’s the same man every time I dream it, but I’m not sure. I don’t think I know him, but he looks familiar. He’s dressed like the Fazbear security guards. Oh, you’ve never been,” he reminded himself with a short laugh. “Sorry. They used to have these guys, kind of half-security and half-performer, to keep an eye on the kids and also do the, you know, Officer Friendly sort of thing. This guy comes in and I think he’s going to save me, because that’s what cops do, right? But he takes one look and closes the door real fast and he doesn’t even see me, he just looks at the thing and says—”

Jimmy broke off and looked back at the house, so fast and so unexpectedly that Ana looked too.
For one very bad moment, she saw the Puppet looming just on the other side of the sliding glass door. Adrenaline spiked through her, freezing her in place and crushing the air in her throat, which was fine, because if she was one of those who could jump and scream, she would have felt pretty damn silly when her head cleared and she saw it was just an oddly-shaped light fixture in a dark room with some random reflections overlaid just so to suggest the skeletal lines of the Puppet’s body.

“He said,” Jimmy continued, lowering his voice to a guilty whisper, “‘Jesus fucking Christ, Dad.’”

“Dad?” Ana echoed, her own voice hoarse as she struggled to recover from her own overactive imagination.

“I’m one hundred percent sure that’s what he said, what he always says, all the way back to when I first had the nightmare, when I was little. That was, like, the first f-word I ever heard. Except,” he cut in with a swift, uncertain smile, “for the movie where I must have picked it up. Funny how I can remember this, but not that.”

He ended that sentence on an upward lilt, like a question, and looked at her for the answer.

“Kid-logic,” said Ana. “Even if you saw it first on TV, you probably saw it in your living room. That’s too close, so you repressed the movie completely. Let it all happen at Freddy’s. Freddy’s is already scary, right?”

“I loved Freddy’s.”

“But Freddy Lives,” Ana reminded him. “Whether you loved him or not, you knew the stories. Might as well lump all the monsters into one place, right?”

She watched him think that over.

“You know, I actually think this is helping,” he said finally. “I’ve talked it over some with Kaya, but she doesn’t understand. She’s not from here, she doesn’t know Freddy’s. She keeps trying to fix it by pointing out all the impossible stuff, like how Slenderman is just a stupid internet urban legend and the mascots were just guys in suits. But I never said he was Slenderman, just that he looked like him, and Freddy was not a guy in a suit. When the new place opened, I finally got to show her—I’m sure that was at least half the fight right there—and she just looked right at them—right at them!—and said, ‘Those are guys in suits. I don’t care how realistic they look, if they’re walking, they’re guys in suits.’ Foxy was right there, too. He heard her say it. He looked right at her and you could just see that he heard her. Then he looked at me and I was so embarrassed.”

“And that was the other half of the fight,” Ana remarked wisely.

“Oh, no doubt. Sure, it’s funny now, but at the time…” Jimmy shook it off and settled back into his chair once more. “Anyway, the dream. I’m hiding in Chica. The thing, the Slenderman-thing, is saying something about Freddy making all the noise and the guard is mad about something else. They get louder, but I still can’t hear it. It’s like it’s not all in English. Finally the guard grabs a hose, like a garden hose, off the wall and sprays the thing down. He tells him to get out or get back to work or something like that, and once Slender-thing’s gone, the guard turns to Freddy and tells him to sit down and shut up, and then he honks Freddy’s nose and leaves. As soon as they’re gone, Freddy gets up again and pulls Chica away from the wall. He opens her back and lets me out, but he doesn’t let me leave yet. He takes a knee and puts both hands on my shoulders and I’m like a doll when he holds me like that. He’s huge. His face is the only thing I can see. He asks me if I came with someone and I say yes, my brothers. He tells me to find my brothers and stay with them until we leave, not to go with anyone else, not even—” Jimmy’s voice cracked again. He laughed
to clear it and finished, “‘Not even if he looks like me. Especially not then.’ I can’t…I can’t begin to describe how creepy that was. Like…”

Mutely, Jimmy held out his arm for Ana to see the fine hairs there sticking straight up and the skin beneath breaking out in what Aunt Easter used to call goose-pimples. Rider, more direct, called the same stuff fear-flesh.

“After all these years,” he said cheerfully, taking his arm back. “Anyway, he makes me promise and then he says something else weird. He says, ‘Did you know the other boy?’ I shake my head and he kind of gives my shoulders a squeeze and says, ‘Then there was no other boy. You didn’t see anything, Jimmy. You had a bad dream. Go find your brother, go home, and go to sleep. Everything will be all right when you wake up.’ Then he opens the door and lets me out. And I run. I think I pass the security guy in the hall, but I don’t even stop. I run straight to the arcade where my brothers are and by the time I get there, I’m crying so hard, I can’t talk. They keep asking what’s wrong and I see the security guy coming up behind them and suddenly, I choke on my own crying jag and throw up. Everybody goes ‘ewwww,’ the guard backs off, and Ben—it’s always Ben, which is weird because we’re not all that close. He’s ten years older than me. We have nothing in common. But Ben takes me to the bathroom and cleans me up. Sometimes I dream the rabbit comes in and watches, but it’s not the real Bonnie. In my dream, he’s…not right. Ben picks me up and we all go home, I guess, but if the dream hasn’t ended yet, it always does when we leave the restaurant. The last thing I always see, if I make it to the end, is the security guy in the dining room with the rabbit on one side and some weird, dream-version of Freddy on the other, just watching me go.”

“But not the Puppet?”

Jimmy twitched and heaved himself around in his chair, eyes huge and glassy with a kind of stunned wonder. “Puppet,” he breathed. “My God, that’s what it looked like! Like a…Like a wooden doll on strings! Only there were no strings. And it was big, of course. Like it was my size and I was its size or…or something. Wow.” Slowly, his brow furrowed. “I never would have thought to call it that. How did you…?”

Ana gave the bottle in her hand a sour glance—just couldn’t hold her root beer, could she?—then looked Jimmy in the eye, thinking fast. “I’ve seen it before. In an old horror movie. One of those bad Italian splatter-gore flicks from the late 70’s.”

The relief that fell over him was almost painful to see. He took a breath, choppy and shallow, then took another and whisper-shouted, “You’ve seen the movie?”

“I’ve seen a movie. It had a puppet.”

“What did it look like?” Jimmy asked, his eyes round with hope and knuckles white where he gripped his beer.

“Like you said, really tall and really thin. No clothes, but he was painted black, with white stripes from here to here and from here to here.”

“What else?” Jimmy demanded, leaning forward.

Ana didn’t know whether she was about to make this better or worse for him, but she’d already put her foot in it, so for better or worse, she pushed on. “He had no hands,” she said, “only long claws where his arms ended. He had no feet at all. He walked on the pointed ends of his legs. There were two big white buttons on his chest, here and here. And he wore a mask. A white, smiling mask with blue lines.” She traced an invisible line from her eye to the corner of her mouth to
demonstrate, then drank her root beer as Jimmy sagged back into his chair and laughed the kind of laughter that is one thin crack away from crying.

“You’ve seen it,” he kept saying, almost unintelligible behind that giddy, tearful laughter. “You’ve seen the movie.”

Ana looked at stars and thought of Mike Schmidt. Not until this moment had she fully appreciated what it took for him to tell her his story that long night. She understood his motivation (even better now that she knew he wasn’t just a liar), his conviction, his investigative chops, even his strange sense of humor, but she’d never appreciated his courage. He’d told her his story, maybe not the true story, but as true as he knew it to be, and he’d told it to her plain. If it scared her, if it upset her, if she punched him in the face or called him out as a crazy person, so be it. He told the truth.

And Ana lied.

“Oh Jeez,” Jimmy gasped at last, both hands wiping shakily at his eyes. “Oh, you have no idea how good it is to know that. Oh man. Oh, you really don’t know. God, just to have a name…the Puppet. Jeez, and it’s such a stupid name, too. Was it as scary as I remember it?”

“Not really,” said Ana. “It was gory, I’ll give you that, but it was hokey as hell. All the Puppet’s scenes were stop-motion animated. It was like if Nightmare Before Christmas and Nightmare on Elm Street did a crossover and you watched Jack Skellington foot-stab a co-ed to death. It was too silly to really be scary.”

Jimmy threw his head back and laughed and laughed, until a window opened upstairs and his wife called merrily, “You two are having way too much fun!”

“Sorry!” Jimmy got himself under control as the window closed, and offered Ana the broadest in a whole series of broad smiles. “Do you know what the movie was called?”

“I don’t remember. Something Italian. I can still sort of see the box, not that that helps.”

“Was the Puppet on it?”

“Nope. Screaming girl in a ripped skirt and bra, long shadow with claws and the title.”

“Did the letters drip like blood?” Jimmy asked, grinning.

“Nope. Jagged, like they were cut into the box with claws. But they were red.”

“Jiminy Cricket. Well!” Jimmy gave his empty bottle a shake, waited for her to drain hers, and then took it from her. “Can I get you another for the road?”

“I never drink root beer and drive,” Ana replied, standing.

“Then I’m going to go on up and spend some time with my girls. Thanks for coming.” He put his hand out; his handshake was extra-hearty and still a little clammy, but it was better than the hug she’d been half-dreading, so she shook without comment. “I promise we’ll do it again sometime when my family isn’t around to make things more interesting.”

“They were fine,” said Ana. Once you started lying, it was hard to stop. “Hope I didn’t freak them out too much.”

“I’m sure you gave them exactly what they came for,” Jimmy assured her wryly, walking her through the house to the front door. “Good night. And seriously, thanks for coming. You have no
idea how much you’ve put my mind at ease. It’s not like I ever really thought…well, you know. But I was a kid and…you know.”


He’d believed the lie. He rolled his eyes at the truth.

“Yeah,” he said. “You don’t think that nonsense gets in very deep, and then you have twenty-five years of bad dreams over one R-rated movie because Freddy Lives. But you know what? I’m actually looking forward to going to sleep tonight. I don’t think I’m ever going to have that dream again. And if I do, now I can say, ‘It’s just the Puppet,’ and go back to sleep.”

And maybe he did. She hoped he did. But Ana’s own sleep that night was thin, filled with dreams of long black claws and striped footless legs painted red with fresh blood, and when she woke, heart pounding and cold sweat beading on her skin, telling herself it was just the Puppet didn’t help at all.
Foxy could not remember a time when his life had not been ordered, structured, routine. Although he wasn’t consciously aware of it, he could never really lose track of time. Punctuality had been programmed into him. If he ever forgot to check the hour, a clock display would pop right up across his internal vision, first in blue—a friendly reminder—then in red. If he continued to ignore it, his program would take control, reducing Foxy’s disobedient consciousness to the role of silent passenger in his own body.

And frankly, that wasn’t such a bad way to pass the time. He liked to think of it as sleeping. But now that he had all his own will on the matter, Foxy found he could no longer ‘sleep’ away the hours onstage. He had to sit and wait them out like any flesh-and-blood bloke. It made him feel very human and the feeling was not particularly pleasant.

On the other hand, humans didn’t have much of a grasp on time, for all that they’d invented it and carved it down into manageable bites. They couldn’t even come to a proper consensus on what a day was. Some went strictly by the calendar, where the days divided precisely at midnight. For others, the days ended when the sun sank in the west and did not begin again until it peeped its golden eye over the eastern horizon. Yet others thought so much of themselves that the day didn’t start until they said so; if a Friday, it was Friday until they dropped off to sleep, whether on the windward side of midnight or the lee, and Saturday couldn’t start until they woke up. For Foxy, the days were carved apart at six a.m., at the end of the Game, whether anyone was playing or not.

There must have been a time when that was not true—there’d been weeks or maybe months between the moment Foxy had been switched on and the Grand Opening of the restaurant, the start of the Game—but he couldn’t remember much of those days. He must have saved some of it. He saved everything new and kept it until it no longer had the slightest power to make him feel… anything…but he’d overwritten all of those days long ago, or buried them so deep he no longer remembered where to find them. He’d probably put them in folders with cryptic names, like Ana, with her ‘gardening’.

Today, a Monday, came at six o’clock as all days did, but there was no last cut across his consciousness, severing him from the night’s protocols and directing him to the stage to shut down until it was time for the restaurant to open. He could do anything he wanted, provided his aspirations extended no further than the pizzeria. And they didn’t, really. They had once. Back at Mulholland, the Purple Man had brought someone in to paint up the walls in Kiddie Cove and she’d done a right job of it, painting a beach with the ocean and palm trees and whales and the like, and there on the painted sand, way in the corner behind Foxy’s fake ship where no one could see it but him and Foxanne, she’d put in a buggish sort of creature tucked up in a pop can. Chica said it was a real thing, called it a hermit crab. Said they lived in shells and the like, and pop cans too, and when they outgrew their old homes, they found a new one and moved in.

It had struck a chord with Foxy at the time. Mulholland had been much bigger than the place on High Street, where he could remember feeling fierce-squeezed from time to time, performing in a closet with a curtain drawn across and playing the Game in a building that could have fit in this one’s dining room—kitchen, shitters and all. Mulholland had seemed so gloriously spacious at
first, room for all, even when those ruddy Others moved in, but by the time the painter had hidden her little secret crab in the back of Foxy’s stage, he had already begun to feel the pinch and an itch to roam. Circle Drive, which he knew to be smaller in numbers, seemed so much bigger without the Others, but after a few years, it had grown small around him. And after that, back to the vault in the basement of the Glass House that had once been home, his first home…that he had hoped would be his last. That shell had been too small even before he slipped it on, as welcome as it had been in its own bleak way.

Perhaps its confinement had killed the crabby bits of him, crushed it dead within Foxy’s shell, because when he’d been moved here, to this proper palace of a pizzeria on the edge of the great wide world, he’d felt…nothing. No itch to wander further than the quarry where they dumped their kills, no desire to see what lay beyond these red flats or those distant blue mountains. No hope that he would ever see another Grand Opening and no anticipation of disappointment if he should be proved wrong. What rare whims of wanderlust that passed over him were adequately answered merely by a turn through the arcade, or in extreme cases, a few minutes on the loading dock to look at the stars. He had watched the sun rise on Friday, his first in the whole of his life, and he hadn’t even bothered to save a stillshot for his mental memory book. It was just the sun, after all. There was better light in the building now and he couldn’t even feel the warmth.

No, on this day, his first Monday as a free man, inasmuch as he could be either free or a man, Foxy could not summon up even a half-felt wish to see the world, or even to move from this spot in the bow of his ship, where he had been ever since seeing Ana off on Friday morning. She’d said she’d be back, but not soon, so he didn’t wait on her. All day Saturday and all day Sunday, he sat, not waiting, passing a word or three whenever Freddy limped through on his rounds, but otherwise content to keep as silent as his unoiled innards allowed. He listened to the animatronic crows open and close his sets for him. He watched the colors of the glowing octopus flash and fade. When the lights went out at night, he sat in the dark and listened to his own rusty wheezes and clicks. He thought about time so he wouldn’t have to think about anything else, but the hours were empty and memories had a way of filling them up in the absence of performing.

He thought about David more than he thought he would or should. He thought about Marion only fleetingly and her sister—he wished he could remember a name, but if he’d ever heard it, he’d long forgotten—for hours. He thought about David’s father, a man who—in a sense—was Foxy’s own father. One of them, anyway. He thought about Ana, who was family, not just in Freddy’s heart but by the blood in her veins.

Did she know? Maybe. She played it close, but that alone could be a clue. Perhaps the reason none of them had ever heard the name of ‘Easter’ was because Ana herself had made it up, knowing she’d need an alias to hide her Aunt Marion in. But if she’d known that much, how could she have been surprised to find out they were all alive inside their metal bones? How could that part have been left out of whatever story she’d pieced together?

So Monday passed without him, set by set, hour by hour. Foxy sat and thought (and occasionally hummed along with the music piped through the speakers, although he was never aware of it). He’d have kept at it, until there was no more nothing left to do and no more memories to forget, had not Chica poked her pretty head through the door shortly after seven that evening and called his name.

“I hear ye, luv,” Foxy replied, not yet moving. The seven o’clock set was half over and he had not the slightest urge to perform for all the kiddies who hadn’t come to watch the show. Still felt strange not to feel it, although maybe it was unreasonable to expect otherwise. It had only been three days. “What’s wrong?”
“Nothing. I just thought—”

Further out in the East Hall came the distant rumble of Freddy’s voice. Foxy couldn’t make out
words, but he knew that warning tone.

“I’m not!” Chica protested. “Foxy, am I bothering you?”

Foxy chuckled, sighed, then raised his voice and called, “No, luv. Ye ain’t bothering me. Always a
pleasure and all that rot.”

“See?” A short silence followed, during which Freddy presumably retreated, before Chica
continued, “It’s just that I haven’t seen you at all today or…you know, yesterday or the day before
that, and I thought maybe you were bored.”

“Thought I was bored, eh?”

“Well…maybe.”

“And if’n I was, how would ye correct the situation, lass?” Foxy drawled. “What heady plans have
ye for the sparking o’ me interest? Suppose ye come up into me cabin and we’ll discuss it together-
like?”

“I know you’re teasing, so just stop. Do you want to play a game with me?”

“For years, luv, ye’ve no idea. Every time I sees yer yellow feathers swishing by, all I can think of
is the games I’d play.”

“Oh stop!” she said again, this time slapping at the door in annoyance. “Why do you have to make
everything I say into something sleazy?”

Foxy dug the point of his hook into one of the grooves in the deckboards beside him and carved it
a little deeper, then did the same to one of the grooves on the casing of his thigh.

Time passed, measured by the steady scrape of metal on plastic, back and forth, back and forth.
After seven minutes, he broke through. He cleaned his new crack of loose shavings and, after a
moment’s thought, started another one.

“Please come out,” said Chica softly.

“Ye want someone to hold yer pin-feathers, go ask Bon.” Foxy twisted his hook to pry at the
plastic as he gouged, muttering, “I’m busy.”

“Foxy—”

“I say sail on, woman. I ain’t fit company and I ain’t in the mood to pretend I am.”

“Then don’t. You don’t have to be with me, but do come out. For your sake, not mine. This…This
isn’t healthy. You’re not in a good place.”

He snorted through his speaker. “Yer only just figuring that out?”

“I don’t mean the building. I don’t even mean the Cove. I mean you. I…I don’t want to leave you
alone when you’re like this.”

“What am I going to do, luv?” Foxy asked dryly, pulling at the edge of his new scar until a piece
snapped off. “Slit me wrists?”
More time passed. Foxy opened the crack sliver by shard by chunk until he could see the dull gleam of the metal bone beneath.

The sight of it was sobering. What was he doing? He’d opened a bloody canal, two inches from the hip and three from the knee. Any further and his whole bloody thigh-case would fall off. And even now, the urge to keep picking, to prove how close he’d come to disaster by bringing it all the way on, was almost overwhelming.

“All right,” said Foxy, stabbing his hook into the deck to pull himself up. “I’ll take a walk, but I ain’t playing hopscotch or whatever happy henshit ye had in mind, so ye might as well push on without me.”

“Okay,” said Chica. The door creaked as she started to close it, then creaked again as she pushed it back open. “I’ll be in the arcade.”

“There’s a shock.” Foxy hopped the rails and dropped onto the stage below. When he hit, the crack on his thigh unzipped itself another inch on both ends. He was definitely going to lose the case if he didn’t go easy on it. Pushing through the curtain, Foxy ignored the steps and jumped down to the floor. “Don’t hold yer breath waiting for me to come by. I told ye, I ain’t in the mood.”

“Well... if you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” said Foxy, climbing the steep stairs of the amphitheater and aiming himself at the corridor to the West Hall while Chica continued to hold the East Hall’s door open.

“I might go for a walk later,” she ventured.

“Good on ye.”

“Outside, I mean. When it gets dark. If... Do you want to come with me?”

“Ye shouldn’t be putting any stress on yer pin-pumps, girl. Sand and rocks and such. Ye know better.”

“Oh, I won’t go far,” she assured him. “Just around the base of the bluff. I know you probably think that’s silly, but I thought it would be best to stay close, in case I... well...” Her finger brushed along the top edge of her own thigh casing, unbroken but hiding far less stable bones. “Just in case,” she concluded, smiling.

Around the base of the bluff and right over Mangle’s buried box, where she might be singing to herself under her blanket of sand and stones. She was almost always singing when Foxy went out to see her—pulses of static in the rhythm of words, muffled but still clear enough never to be mistaken for insects to anyone would came near enough to hear.

“Ye wouldn’t rather take a stroll out to the quarry?” Foxy asked, so casually.

“Um, no. That sounds... sort of awful.”

“Eh, by moonlight, it just be a pool of dark water.”

“Where we dump bodies.”

“Aye, so? Ain’t like any of ‘em are bobbing on the surface.”

“But I know they’re there.” Chica ducked her head, fingertips tapping. “And I know why. Besides,
there might be people. It’s still summer. And if they come, I couldn’t hide in time.”

“All right then, why not a stroll across the road and up the mountain? No one ever goes there.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, a worried slant to her eyelids. “It’s so steep and rocky…”

“Only for the first wee bit,” Foxy said in his most cajoling tone. “After that, it levels out fair and there’s a stony bluff where we could sit awhile and look at the lights from town.”

Chica blinked. “You can see the town from there?”

“Oh aye,” said Foxy and had to laugh. “It only seems like we’re, how’d Ana put it?—on the edge of nowhere. Truth, if ye set off now, even as ye are, luv, it ain’t but an hour’s waddle to Circle Drive. On a clear day, ye could probably see the top hat on the sign.”

“Wow.” Chica looked past him at the window-lined West Hall, her pink eyes wide and wistful. “We’re really that close? I had no idea.”

Foxy shrugged, affecting unconcern while watching her face intently. Unlike the rest of them, Chica didn’t have ears constantly betraying her innermost feelings, but also unlike the rest of them, she didn’t have the habit of hiding them. Foxy could read her thoughts as easily as if they were hanging over her head in a cartoon bubble: the ground was hard and flat around the base of the bluff, while the mountain was steep and footing uneven; her legs were unstable and the pneumatic pumps in her knees, especially fragile; but to see the lights of town with her own eyes, to see the cars driving back and forth and maybe even hear the distant call of voices…

“Do you really think you could carry me, if…if you had to?” she asked.

“Oh aye. Light as a feather, ye are, luv,” he replied. “I’ll even keep me hands to meself, pirate’s promise.”

“What about Bonnie and Freddy?”

“What about them?”

“Maybe they’d like to come, too.”

Foxy knew better than to laugh, but he laughed all the same. “Ye know Freddy won’t leave the building empty and the only place Bonnie would ever willingly go with me is me own funeral, and only then to dance on me grave.”

“I wish you two got along better.”

Foxy snorted. “We gets along fine, luv. We just does it best in different rooms.”

Chica didn’t smile.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Foxy said with good-natured irritation. “I ain’t the friendly kind and never said I was. Why, after fifty bleeding years, ye suddenly expect—”

“Please.”

“Oh for the love of little fishes, why?”

“Please.”
“What do ye want from me, woman? Ye want me to go pat his stupid head and hold his bloody paw while he bitches and moans about losing a girl he never really had?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

Foxy blew static through his speaker, then sighed and scratched his hook over his muzzle. “Fine. If it’ll make ye happy—”

“No. Not me. Do it to make him happy.” Chica’s eyelids drew down into a determined V. “Do it because you love him.”

Foxy laughed again.

“Because you love him,” she insisted.

“I just said I’d do it. What’s it matter the reason?”

“Because! You love! Him!” She waddled into the room, her wee hands in fists. “And because no matter how much you fight or how mad he can make you, you still remember we’re a family—”

“Give me a bleeding break. Ain’t one Freddy around here enough?”

“—and you care about that!” Chica concluded fiercely. “Don’t make me make you admit it or I’ll march you out there and make you do it to his face! You know I can!”

Foxy showed her some teeth, but didn’t challenge her. He looked away for a while and when he looked back, Chica’s eyelids had leveled out and her fingers were tapping softly together.

“It’s important,” she said. “I like Ana and I hope things work out with her, but…people come and people go. That’s just what people do, even the best people. Their lives are out there. Ours are here.”

“Fifty years we been tucked up together, lass. We ought to know how it’s done by now, eh?”

“It’s easy when you don’t have a choice. Now that we do…I need us to choose to be together. We need to be friends or we’re not going to make it.”

“I ain’t even promised to try and be family with the long-eared git and now ye want us to be friends? Ah, yer brutal.” Foxy walked across the whole of the Cove to take her tapping hand and plant a plastic kiss on it. “But yer right. I’ll ask him along, I promise. I’ll ask Freddy too, but ye know he won’t.”

“I know, but at least he’ll know we thought of him.” Chica took her hand back and waddled over to open the door again. “I’ll be in the arcade,” she reminded him. “Enjoy your walk.”

“Aye, surely,” he laughed. “Been many a year since I had me a stroll about grounds for naught but the purpose and I’m quite keen for it. So many sights to see. Where do ye reckon I should start?”

“The Reading Room,” Chica replied over her shoulder. “The gardens are in bloom.”

“Painted flowers always are,” he said, but he was talking to a door.

Foxy headed out, giving Tux a tap with his hook in passing, and continued down the West Hall at a leisurely stroll. He ignored the activity rooms, even the reading room with its flowering gardens (if Chica asked later, he’d plead hay fever; that might get a smile out of her). Ana had covered over all the windows again and taped them down so no one peeping through the boards could see anything
but black plastic, which was grand except that it also meant Foxy couldn’t peep through them either. Didn’t matter. When he got to the dining room, he saw Bonnie alone on the main stage, trying to play the neck-end of his broken guitar and if there was a better way to announce to the world that Ana wasn’t here, Foxy didn’t know it.

She might come in later, you never knew, but Ana was a reliable sort, despite her predilection for what she called ‘recreational intoxication’. Even if she’d stopped off at the store or the gas station, she’d be here by now. She wasn’t, so she didn’t, and that meant they wouldn’t see her until the weekend, if at all.

Nothing to do now, he supposed, but go back to the Cove and stare at his cabin ceiling. Or maybe find Chica in the arcade and play a little table hockey. Or go out and sit a while with Foxanne, maybe sing with her if she was quiet or push a little more sand over her burial spot if she wasn’t.

Foxy did none of these things. He nodded at Bonnie—Bonnie ignored him—and wandered through the cashier’s station to rattle the lobby doors, but they were locked and he didn’t bother opening them just to see an empty lot. Instead, he leaned up against the wall next to Brewster and did nothing until Freddy limped in some short time later.

Seeing Foxy in the lobby clearly threw old Fred off his rhythm, but he recovered quickly and grunted a greeting as he went over to unlock the doors.

“Ye’ve got a key,” Foxy observed.

Freddy grunted affirmatively, most of his attention directed outward, inspecting every shadow and line of the empty lot.

“Ana know ye took it?”

Freddy grunted again, then seemed to remember he could talk now. “She gave it to me.”

“She got one of her own?”

“Of course. She asked me if that was all right,” Freddy added with a slanted smile. “After all the times she’s broken into my house, now that she knows it’s hers, she wants to know if it’s all right to have a key.”

“Still drawing some hard lines, eh?”

Freddy scowled and locked the doors again. “All things considered, she’s dealing with this remarkably well.”

“And yet, don’t ye wish ye could just give her orders like ye do the rest of us and make her fall in line?”

“Fervently,” said Freddy, either oblivious to Foxy’s sarcasm or pretending to be for humorous effect. Old Fred’s sense of humor had gone dry and crooked over the years, but it was nice to see that he still had one.

After giving the door’s handles a testing jiggle and judging them secure, Freddy returned said key to whatever hidden compartment housed it with a casual flourish he probably didn’t even realize he was making. The carelessness of the gesture, ironically, made Foxy admire it all the more. He himself had no talent for sleight of hand, which was a pity seeing as it seemed right in line with the pirating life. Deception and misdirection and all that. As Freddy turned to continue on his rounds, Foxy said, “Chica and I were talking about maybe taking a walk later.”
Freddy looked at him. “Where?”

“Up the mountain. Kids don’t go there.”

“How far?”

“To the overlook. Ye remember?”

Freddy nodded, frowning. “And I remember it was steep climbing for the first stretch. Are you sure Chica can handle it?”

“She wants to try. I can manage her, if it should come to that.”

“All right then.” Freddy headed off again. “Wait until dark and don’t be gone too long. Have fun.”

“Eh, one more thing, Fred.” Foxy rolled his eyes and said, in the manner of a man badly reading lines, “Want to tag along?”

“And leave the building unguarded?” Freddy gave him a Look, not even bothering to stop walking. “You know better than that.”

“I do. She don’t.” Foxy waited for Freddy to get all the way around the cashier’s station, then said, “She seems to think we need some new activities. Something we can all do together. As a family, she says. So we can remember how to be friends.”

Freddy’s receding footsteps halted. Even second-hand, Chica’s words had a grip.

“For some reason, she thinks killing a bloke and dumping the corpus don’t count,” Foxy continued idly. “But that’s Chica for ye. Ye ask me, nothing says, ‘I trusts ye, let’s be friends,’ like disposing of a body with yer mates.”

In the dining room, Bonnie called, “The family that slays together—”

“That’s not funny,” Freddy snapped. He came back to the lobby, seemingly just to stare at Foxy, but after the stare ran its course, Freddy shook his head, rubbed his muzzle, and finally sighed and said, “Fine.”

“Yer kidding.”

Freddy grumbled, turning around again. “And this is not going to be a common occurrence, so you tell Chica to start thinking of other family activities.”

“I’m not doing arts and crafts,” Bonnie called.

“I wouldn’t limit your options, if I were you,” Freddy retorted, limping away. “A week from now, you could be chairing a round-table discussion of The Very Hungry Caterpillar and its harrowing representation of bulimia as an acceptable means of achieving the unrealistic standard of beauty perpetuated by the media. Have you forgotten The Great Rainbow Fish Seminar of ’92?”

“I sure tried.”

The West Hall door scraped open and groaned shut, marking Freddy’s exit. Foxy gave Brewster a tap on the beak, setting off the thing’s motion detector (“HOWDY, YA’LL, AND WELCOME TO FREDDY’S!”), then pushed himself off the cashier’s counter and went back into the dining room. Bonnie was still onstage, so Foxy wandered over. One of Bonnie’s ears twitched, but then he merely folded them forward over his face and resumed picking at the places strings used to be.
“What about ye?” Foxy asked. “Up for a moonlight stroll up the mountain?”

“Dear Diary,” Bonnie said flatly. “He asked me, he asked me. Whatever shall I wear.”

“Chica wants us to be friends.”

“No problem. We can fake it for one night. Hell, maybe if we fake it good enough, we’ll never have to see each other again. We’ll hold hands, lots of smiles, maybe skip.”

“She’s going to take more convincing than that, mate.”

“So we make out a little. Really sell it. Lots of tongue.”

“Coo.” Foxy moved closer and sat on the edge of the stage. “So…ye coming tonight?”

“That depends on you, big boy.” Bonnie ‘played’ on, his fingers moving with enviable dexterity despite the reduced length of the neck. “But yeah, sure. For Chica. That all you wanted?”

“Reckon so.” Foxy looked around the empty dining room. “Quiet night.”

“Sure is.”

“Might have company later, ye reckon?”

“If you mean the usual bunch of bastards breaking in, maybe, but I doubt they’ll get past those doors. If you’re talking about Ana—” His ears twitched again, hidden motors whining, but stayed forward, pretending to be relaxed. “—probably not. She works on weekdays, so we probably won’t see her again until Saturday.”

“Sleeping over never used to bother her.”

“Yeah, well, things change.” Bonnie stopped strumming and turned the neck of the guitar over a few times, looking at it like the piece of junk it was before tossing it behind him into the corner of the stage. “We broke up. There. Are we done now?”

Foxy ticked silently through the first few items on a damned short list of comforting things to say before settling on, “Sorry to hear that.”

Bonnie snorted, then glanced at him from the very corner of one eye and finally twitched one shoulder in a shrug. “You told me so. Freddy told me so. Everybody told me so and I didn’t even need telling. I’m fine. It just sucks.”

Foxy nodded awkwardly, looking around the empty room.

“Anyway.” Bonnie pushed his ears up with visible effort. “We’re going to try doing the friends thing. It might be weird for a while, but it was always pretty weird, so…hopefully she won’t take too long getting over that.”

“And yer already over it, are ye?”

Bonnie picked at the frayed edges of a tear in the stage’s padding.

“So…when ye said ‘we broke up,’ ye really meant ‘she broke up.’” Foxy gave Bonnie a comradely smack on the shoulder with his hook. “Got it. So what’s yer play, mate?”

“I don’t have a ‘play,’ Foxy.”
“Well, what have ye tried?”

“I didn’t ‘try’ anything.”

“What? She said, ‘Let’s break up,’ and ye just said, ‘Okay’?”

“Pretty much.”

“And then what happened?”

“What do you mean, what happened? We broke up.”

“How exactly?”

“Does that matter?”

“It might. She said, ‘let’s break up,’ and like the giddy chump ye are, ye said, ‘Sure, we can still be friends,’ and then she...?’ Foxy gestured broadly, waiting.

Bonnie pushed static through his speaker as his cooling fan revved, but after a second or two of sulking, he shrugged again and said, “We hugged.”

“Ye hugged. How long?”

“I don’t know. A couple minutes.”

“A couple minutes o’ sustained hugging. A or I?”

“What?”

“Ye hug tipped at the waist like the letter A or get right up in each other’s rigging like the letter I?”

“Where are you getting all this? Like an I, I guess.”

“For a couple minutes?”

“Yeah. She was…crying. A little. I wasn’t supposed to notice.”

“She was crying?! How—” Foxy broke off there to smack his good hand over his eyes, mostly to keep it from smacking Bonnie. “Don’t much sound like she were happy to split, mate.”

“Yeah, well, neither was I, but that was her decision.”

“And ye just went along with it, eh? Didn’t even try to talk her out of it?”

“No, Foxy, I did not argue with her in an attempt to wear her down to the point where she’d give in just to shut me up and stay in a relationship she now had all kinds of reasons to resent. Stupidly, I decided to act like a goddamn adult.”

“Now how are ye going to get her back with that attitude?”

Bonnie’s ears finally lost the fight to keep from flattening. “I’m not.”

“Exactly,” said Foxy, giving Bonnie a meaningful tap with the rounded side of his hook. “So let’s work ye out a plan so’s ye can snap her back up.”

“Foxy, she said no.”
“She didn’t mean it,” Foxy said with a dismissive wave. “Listen, mate. I know women and ye are not going to win this one over with a lot o’ rot about space and respect.”

“You know women,” Bonnie echoed, each word dripping scorn and static. “What do you know, besides the obvious? If Ana had only been here that one night, if it had just been one lousy kiss and a dance in the closet, that would still have been a more meaningful relationship than you’ve ever had with anyone in your entire life.”

“See if I lets ye get to first base with me now,” Foxy said cheerfully. “I’ll have ye know I had plenty o’ repeat customers. Ye add the time up, hour for hour, I’ve probably known a few longer than ye’ve known Ana.”

“Customers don’t count. The fact that you don’t know that, kind of proves you don’t know jack-shit about relationships.”

“Never said I did. Said I knew women. And what they want. And that one——” Foxy pointed across the room at the table where Ana used to sleep. “—wants a man who’ll give her what she needs, not what she says she wants. Eh? Sure and she’ll fight ye, but she can’t win and she don’t deep-down want to. So let her fight, make her surrender, and if she ain’t cuddling on ye by the end, I’ll eat me hook. Come on now, man, what say ye?”

Bonnie looked at him for a long time, saying nothing, doing nothing, his ears already as flat as they could go. At last, he gave his knee a curt smack to loosen it and stood up. “Sometimes, you make it really goddamn obvious which one of them made you,” he said and stalked away.

Alone on another stage in another empty room, Foxy couldn’t help but wonder why he bothered leaving the Cove at all anymore.
Jimmy Morehead might believe his demons to have been exorcised, but Ana knew better: They had merely been relocated. And what better home for them than her aunt’s house, with monsters in the basement and empty rooms full of ghosts?

She sometimes thought she would have slept better at Freddy’s. She’d had some bad dreams there too, but Freddy was always on watch. She’d felt safe there. She still did. Was that ironic or just stupid?

She could have gone back. She knew that. The padded stage in the party room was hers for the asking, for as many nights as she needed. She had only to knock and Freddy would bring her in and tell her she was home.

Whenever she was tempted, she just reminded herself that Freddy said a lot of things that weren’t entirely true. And then she drove past Edge of Nowhere and on up Coldslip Mountain to the only place she had left.

There was plenty of work to do, so she did it. She kept the shop radio on and the volume cranked up until she could hear it even through her earplugs and over the noise of her power tools. Until she could feel it vibrating through the soles of her boots and see it rattling the loose nails and screws that collected on every surface. Until it drowned out even the sound of her thoughts. Between music and work, she was usually able to keep herself in a comfortably mindless state most nights until she fell asleep. If not, well, she could always drink.

She drank a lot that week. Every morning, she told herself she had to lay off the stuff, that it wasn’t worth the headache and wasn’t solving anything, but every night, she managed to pour a little more into her. And it wasn’t worth it and it didn’t solve anything, but it did put her to sleep, which in that haunted house was the worst state of being.

When she slept, she did not rest. She put herself to bed every night on the air mattress on the floor of her old room and every morning, when her phone’s alarm woke her, she was someplace new. On Monday, she was curled up in the dry tub of Aunt Easter’s bathroom. On Tuesday, in David’s closet. Wednesday found her stretched out on the hearthstones before the fireplace in the grand parlor. On Thursday, she came around out in the front yard to the sensation of what was not, after all, the roting hand of the mermaid closing around her wrist, but rather the dry scrape of scales as the snake that had passed a cool summer night sleeping against the warmth of her chest slithered over her arm and set off about its morning rounds. And on Friday, of course, she woke in the pirate ship-shaped bed down in the secret playroom, with Plushtrap snuggled up under her arm, his mouth pressed to hers, stealing her breath.

She had no memory of any of these nightly wanderings or if she did, their threads were hopelessly snarled with those of her dreams.

Her dreams. Her nightmares. Heavy drinking obscured most of them, leaving only fragments that were simultaneously blurred out of context and more vivid than her dreams had ever been before, even sober. For the first time in her life, she had begun to dream with all five senses—they were not just visions she saw, voices she heard, but a smell that seemed to linger even after she opened
her eyes, a taste on her lips when the Purple Man kissed her, a bruise or scratch she could not remember acquiring. Worse were the times that she dreamed of waking up and seeing either the Puppet bending over her, long claws combing through her hair, or the uniformed apparition that was either Erik Metzer or David Blaylock, or both or neither or some other Fazbear security officer or perhaps all of them, brought together in her sleeping brain under the collective name of The Night Guard. These were the moments that haunted her, the ones she drank to forget and inevitably brought into being by drinking too much. She would have been useless at work if it wasn’t for the fact that her work was mowing lawns and watering flowers.

Now it was Friday, scarcely two hours into her shift on the last day before the beginning of her weekend. She planned to spend it at Freddy’s. She didn’t really want to go, except that she did. She’d wanted to go all week long. Every single time she’d had to drive by the bluff where the restaurant perched, pretending to be abandoned, she’d looked up at it and felt her foot want to brake, her hands want to turn the wheel. She missed everything about that place, especially how easy it used to be to want to be there. She wanted it to be easy again, not by undoing the events of the past few weeks, but by magically skipping through the next few and just arriving at that part of the future where all this awkwardness was done and the nightmares ended, and the easiness came not from ignorance but acceptance. She just…didn’t know how to make that happen.

Well, maybe she’d figure it out this weekend. For now, the only thing Ana had to figure out was how to prune the branches on this Japanese maple so it looked like all the others decorating the government services building’s lawn.

Or at least it was, until she heard the drone of the mower start to break up, then cut off, followed by Jimmy’s frustrated pseudo-cuss: “Sugar snap peas!” When she looked, he was already dismounting, waving in a futile effort to clear the air of billows of dark smoke that reeked of oil and gas.

Their eyes met as the noxious cloud dispersed in the wind. It was scarcely past nine in the morning. This was only the first of six mows they had slated for the day, all of them town-jobs. It had been too rainy last week to attend them; now the grass was noticeably shaggy and that just would not do, especially for a town as eager as Mammon to fine its residents for unkempt lawns.

“Could be the fuel filter,” Ana said.

“Could be the carburetor,” Jimmy replied heavily. “That’s what it was before.”

“Before?”

“Before Shelly told me he couldn’t afford a new mower and we’d just have to limp it along another month or two.”

“When was this?”

“About five months ago.”

“Five—?! Why didn’t he say something?” Ana groaned and headed over to have a look.

The smell got stronger with every step she took. By the time she was close enough to lift the hood, she knew what she was going to see.

To give Shelly some credit, it had been a good patch, but that carb was good and split now and the machine to which it was attached was not worth the cost of a new one.

“What do you think?” Jimmy asked hopefully.
“I think I’m going to punch Shelly square in the nuts the next time I see him,” Ana replied. “Before he’d condescend to give me the key, he reamed me out until I could taste his boot leather making me understand he didn’t have the liability coverage for an unlicensed nothing like me ‘tinkering’ with his equipment. Tinkering! He called me out in front of everyone and made me promise not to put hands under this hood and I did it, because he promised, he swore to my fucking face, that he was maintaining his gear to the highest fucking standard of personal fucking safety. Look at this shitshow! Three weeks, I been using this and it could have thrown a rod right through me at any fucking time! Incompetent belt-hitching son of a bitch!”

Jimmy looked worriedly toward the government building while she and the mower fumed together.

“We got a spare mower?” Ana asked finally, then nodded at Jimmy’s wince and said with him, “This is the spare mower. Fine. Help me get it in the truck.”

Together, they pushed the mower back over the lawn to the parking lot, aware that their activity had attracted the attention of Mammon’s governing elite. Ana had no doubt Wendy Rutter was among the faces at the lobby window, enjoying the sight of her greatest enemy’s closest kin having bad luck on a menial job under a hot sun. Nothing went with schadenfreude like air-conditioning.

Except maybe cupcakes, Ana reminded herself sourly. Not so funny when the schadenfreude was on the other foot.

“What now?” Jimmy asked after the mower was loaded and locked down. He took off his shirt to wipe his face while Ana watched enviously. God, sometimes she hated having tits. Or at least that it was against the law to expose them to a bunch of city commissioners, DMV clerks and the town sheriff.

“Now I guess we’re done,” said Ana, checking her watch.

“Done for the day, do you think? Or…done-done?”

A valid question. Without a mower, there was no landscaping sideline for Shelly. Without that, Ana might be back to holding down a desk until Big Paulie retired, but Jimmy could easily be out of a job.

“We’ll see,” Ana said, giving him a sympathetic shoulder-clap. “No point digging the hole until there’s a body to bury. Just help me get everything back in the truck. Then you can knock off for an early lunch while I run back to the office and get a better look at it. I might be able to do something.”

“Yeah, right. You do that. I’ll be at Gallifrey’s,” he said morosely. “Maybe they’re hiring.”

It wasn’t much of a joke and it was even less funny twenty minutes later, when Ana had dropped him at the diner and he pointed out the Help Wanted sign in the window. As she drove back to Shelton Contractors, she found herself trying to picture ordering from Jimmy Morehead. A Betty Burger, fries and an endless cup of coffee was still only six bucks after tax. Did she tip him her usual two bucks, knowing he was supporting a wife and two—no, three kids? How much more could she leave without embarrassing him? And how the hell did the Gallifreys make ends meet at those prices?

God, she could go for a burger right now. Ana checked her watch. Not even nine o’clock yet; Lucy wouldn’t serve her a burger until eleven. She could wait, but now she was aware of how hungry she was. She’d skipped breakfast again. Amazing how often she did that when Freddy wasn’t there to remind her to eat.
Shelly’s Dodge was the only pickup in the lot when Ana pulled in, which made it easy to get a parking space in the shade, for a change. The garage was locked and the peek Ana stole through the filthy window suggested it was too full of equipment to get the mower in anyway, so she left it in front, set out a few safety cones and went in to tell Shelly the good news.

The reception desk was unmanned when Ana walked in, but Shelly’s office door was slightly ajar and the bossman himself could be heard speaking on the other side. Ana couldn’t make out his words, but his tone was…not angry, but maybe only because he didn’t quite dare to be angry. Tense, certainly. On the phone with the city, she guessed, haggling over permits and fees and all the soul-eroding nonsense that went into keeping a business like this afloat in a dying town where even the garbage-men had to be bribed to do their job in a timely manner. Or maybe he was getting an earful about the ‘outdoors maintenance’ the city had paid for and was not receiving.

He was definitely going to want someone to yell at when he hung up.

Resigned, Ana came all the way in and shut the front door extra-firmly, letting him know she’d arrived. As she leaned herself up against the reception desk to wait, a thin, pale hand gripped the knob on the other side and opened it fully.

The sweat froze on her body as she found herself staring down the hallway at Fredrich Faust. It was a dreamlike moment, even by daylight. She saw Shelly’s office—ugly high-traffic carpet and plain white walls decorated with assorted necessary legal notices, sign-out sheets for the company vehicles and equipment, and the weekly work schedule. Ana saw all that, but she also saw a much longer hall, with curtained windows all down one side and cold marble tiles beneath her bare feet…

Where had that come from?

“Miss Stark,” said Mr. Faust. “Good morning.”

“What are you doing here?” she blurted.

“Stark?” Shelly appeared, eyebrows bristling in confusion. “Never mind him, what are you doing here?”

“Mower…died,” Ana said after a short pause spent censoring variations of ‘shit the bed’. “We’re going to need a new one.”

Mr. Faust turned to Shelly and quietly said, “Mower?”

Shelly’s mouth managed somehow to both thin and pucker. “Give Paulie a call and tell him to get out here soon as he can to fix it. Meantime, you and Morehead can take the chuck wagon out for a spin.”

Driving the chuck wagon was Shelly’s colorful code for scraping up road kill and moreover, there was no designated ‘wagon’. He wanted her to throw a tarp down in her own truck and shovel rotting animal corpses into the back. Fuck that.

“Boss, could I have a quick word?” Ana asked politely.

“Not now, Stark.” Shelly turned around and attempted to wave Mr. Faust back to whatever meeting Ana had interrupted, but Ana didn’t move and neither did the old man. After a moment, Shelly turned back, flushed and scowling. “What is it?”

“Just a quick, quiet word,” said Ana.
He stepped out of the office and came swiftly down the hall, the spots of color in his face getting bigger and darker with every stride. Ana stood her ground and when he reached her, she let him grab her by the arm and haul her around the corner into the morning meeting area out of Faust’s sight. “This is not a good goddamn time,” he hissed. “Just call Paulie and tell him to fix it!”

“Hey, if that thing could be fixed, I could fix it,” Ana said. “Now I’m too classy to point out that I could have fixed it at any goddamn point up to now, so all I’m going to say is that window of opportunity has slammed the hell shut.”

“I don’t need to hear your lip, missy. Just…Just do what you got to do to limp it along until—”

“I can fit a finger through the crack in that carburetor and you’re holding the rest of it together with paper clips and prayer,” she interrupted. “There is no patching that mess and even if I was feeling suicidal enough to try, you’d still be paying what a new one would cost just to try to get it running for what? Another month or two? You want to save money? Get a new one!”

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. The leather creaked like a rusty hinge when he opened it. Muttering under his breath, he picked out a credit card with Shelton Contractors as the cardholder and aimed it at her like a straight razor. “You go to Lowes,” he ordered, leaning in like it was threat he was delivering and not a new piece of equipment. “You spend one penny more than five…make that three hundred and I’ll have it out of your hide.”

“I couldn’t get laid at Lowes for three hundred dollars!” Ana blurted, remembering Faust only when Shelly stepped back and shot him a hot, embarrassed glance. “What do you expect me to come back with?”

“I expect you to shut your mouth and do what I tell you!” Shelly’s hand came down on her shoulder in a bruising pinch as he steered her further away from watching Faust and lowered his voice that much more. “I do not have two grand to drop right now, missy, so you just get whatever you can that will do the job and get back to it.”

“Are you seriously telling me to come back with a push mower?” she asked incredulously. “You want me to mow all the grass in this entire town with a push mower?”

“Temporarily.”

“Yeah, temporary like the patch on that carb? Look, boss, give me five hundred cash and a couple days to shop around and maybe I could find something used that I can tune up. I come back with a pusher today and tomorrow, you’ll have eight cancelled accounts. This town is full of teenagers who’ll mow a lawn for thirty bucks and a burger, and if that’s your serious competition, you’ve already lost.”

Shelly scowled, but couldn’t argue. Snatching his card back, he returned it to his groaning wallet. “Monday morning,” he grumbled. “You find me something by Monday, I’ll come up with the money. Meantime…get out of here. Enjoy your day off.”

And enjoy the accompanying cut to her paycheck. He had to come up with that five hundred somewhere.

“Yes, sir,” said Ana and went to clock out at the station in the hall (still paper punch-cards, in this timeless part of the world). “What do I tell Morehead?”

“I’ll give Paulie a call, see if he wants to use him for the day. Mr. Faust?” Shelly concluded, once more waving toward the interior of his office.
The old man ignored his cue, watching Ana work the old-fashioned time-stamp. “Are you leaving?”

“Looks like. Guess I’ll go get something to eat.” And blame the heat, blame her disappointment at having to settle for a Big Canyon Breakfast instead of the Betty Burger she really wanted, blame her own petty nature that had flared up at this reminder that Jimmy ‘Jergens’ was welcome on Big Paulie’s crew but Ana was not. Blame any and all of it, but no matter what she might blame later, in the end it was only Ana and her deliberate, spiteful choice to look up and say, “Care to join me?”

“How very kind of you to offer.”

“We’re in a meeting, Stark,” Shelly said, glaring.

“We were,” Mr. Faust agreed and started walking. “But I believe we’ve come to the end of it. Mr. Shelton, good day. Miss Stark, I accept your gracious invitation and gladly.”

Shelly followed, red-faced, only to back up, side-step, follow again. “Well now…Well now, sir, I think we still have a few things to talk over!”

“Is that what you think?” the old man said, opening the door for Ana and touching a bent knuckle to his brow as if to doff a hat he wasn’t wearing as he turned a cold stare back at Shelly. “Mr. Shelton, I have invested a great deal in your business over the years, but in the end, it is your business, and not my obligation. Now I think we can both agree I have made every effort to direct the town’s resources your way, yes?”

“Sir—”

“Yes?” Faust said again, harder.

Shelly’s face darkened. “Yes,” he said gruffly. “Yes, sir, and I do appreciate it.”

“Do you? And yet of late I have made only one small personal request and I think you will not be surprised when I say I am not satisfied with the way you have seen fit to honor it.”

“I have done the very best—”

“If that is true, then your best is sorely lacking and I see no reason our relationship should continue at all. However, it is just possible that my low blood sugar is influencing my mood, and my mood influencing my professional judgment. Therefore, consider our meeting in recess. I shall go to lunch and consider my options. I advise you, Mr. Shelton, to consider your own and be prepared to make a most compelling statement upon my return.”

And what could Shelly do but nod and watch them shut the door on him?

“I apologize for that unfortunate scene,” the old man said, offering Ana his bent arm for the short walk from the front door to the small parking lot.

“Am I supposed to pretend it had nothing to do with me?” Ana asked lightly.

“I won’t pretend it didn’t, peripherally at least,” he said with convincing indifference. “But at its core, the issue is financial, as ever. All towns have a life-span, you see, and Mammon is nearing its end. Mr. Shelton, like many of those who have sunk their roots in a drying riverbank, now expects me to strike my staff upon the ground and open up the fiscal fountain of youth. I am ashamed to admit that I have done so in the past, but as I approach the end of my own life, I find that my concern for the future of this town has narrowed considerably. Not lessened, mind you, but
narrowed. Are you disappointed?"

“What do I care how you spend your money?”

“That you were not the cause of our conflict, I meant.”

“Oh, he’ll find a way to put it off on me, if only so he can feel magnanimous when he forgives me,” Ana replied with a shrug, looking around the sparsely populated parking lot. “I’ll be fine. The kid got your car today?”

“Chad isn’t staying with me at the moment. He tends not to, on weekends. He likes to entertain, so I keep a property out of town for him. I seriously doubt he’s even awake yet. No, my regular driver, Mrs. Calaigh, dropped me off and took Cook to the market.” He brought out his phone. “Fortunately, this town is never more than a few minutes’ wait from point to point. She’ll be here before we reach the sidewalk.”

“I could drive us.”

He looked at her, thumb hovering over the send button on his phone’s screen.

Ana nodded toward her truck. “If you trust me.”

He looked at the truck and, after a moment’s faceless thought, put his phone away.

She led him to the truck, opened the passenger door and stood close by in case he needed help. He did not, finding a handhold on the frame and swinging himself up with admirable athleticism for a man of his age. He sat while Ana jogged around to the driver’s side, perched with his cane firmly planted between his knees, looking around from this new vantage with birdlike interest. “The last time I was in a vehicle this high, it was a military transport,” he remarked when Ana slid in behind the wheel.

“Not a float at the Founder’s Day parade?”

He shook his head absently. “I suppose I do sit higher in those, but they hardly count as vehicles. They’re too slow.” He glanced at her. “Are you going to speed?”

“I wasn’t planning on it. Why? Want me to?”

He considered while she found the keys in her pocket (and made damn sure she had the right ones before she pulled them out into view), and when she fit them to the ignition and turned the engine over, he said, firmly, “Yes.”

Ana shrugged. “You’re paying my tickets if I get nailed.”

“Agreed.”

Ana gunned the motor a few times, adjusting the rearview mirror so she could watch Shelly in the window of the office, then made the tires scream and fired herself out of the empty lot and onto the empty street like a bullet from a gun.

He did not flinch, not at the turn she took at forty miles an hour, not at the stop sign she ran through (she had a clear vantage of empty road in all directions), not even when she bumped up over the curb and out into the desert, leaving a plume of rising dust and tore-up sagebrush in their wake. The only thing he said as the truck roared across the hardpan was, “Music, please,” and the only comment he made after that was to jack up the volume when Set It Off came on with “I’ll
Under most circumstances, Ana was a diligent and defensive driver, but she could tear it up with the best of them when called for. The driving she did that day in the desert and along the hundred-foot drop into Mammon Canyon would have put the piss in Rider’s shorts if he’d been with her in the passenger seat, but all the old man did was point where he wanted her to take him next.

Somehow, they ended up on the remains of Military Drive out where it broke up and lay half-buried in the sand, going eighty miles an hour, ninety, a hundred and twenty up and down the runway where top-secret jets used to take off and land, then spinning doughnuts on the flat foundation where one of the hangars used to be, and finally parking in front of the ruins of some old buildings.

They sat for a while with the a/c running, Ana watching him and him staring at the broken windows. Without a word, but not entirely unexpectedly, he unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door.

“Watch out for snakes,” Ana said, following his example. “We got some deadly ones out here.”

“I have lived in this town for seventy years,” he reminded her, walking away. “I know all the ways it can kill you. I invented a few right here, in fact.”

True.

Ana fell into easy step beside him and they walked together across the compound, around some buildings and through others. Even at this early hour, the summer heat was oppressive and bound to get worse as the sun rose higher, but the old man showed no sign of discomfort, even in his heavy black suit. In fact, nothing seemed to touch him. He studied the ruins around them without acknowledging the layers of graffiti holding the sandblasted walls together. Neither the force of the wind blowing off the quarry nor the stink riding it affected him in any discernable way. His step was steady; his expression, serene. Once, he flipped his cane around with easy grace and hook a hitherto unnoticed rat-snake out of their path and sent it on its slithery way, all without breaking stride.

“Live and let live, huh?” Ana said, leaning back to watch the snake go as she continued strolling at his side.

Flip went the cane and came down with a startling crunch right in front of her. “Within reason,” the old man said calmly, scooping up the mangled remains of a dust-brown scorpion on the head of his cane so he could flick it off into the desert. “One’s ability to do harm is by no means an indicator of one’s propensity. Some of the deadliest creatures on Earth have no venom at all.”

“Hippos,” agreed Ana with a nod. “Like, they look cute in a tutu and all that, but they will fuck up your day if they get even half a chance. I read somewhere that hippos kill more people in a year than all the other animals in Africa combined.”

“Discounting death by disease-carrying insects and parasites, I suppose that’s very likely true. And then we have us, of course. Humans are the least equipped of all beasts to kill others when in our natural state, and yet here we stand, firmly atop the predatory pyramid, gun in one hand and—” He waved without looking toward a spray-painted figure on the wall beside them: a cartoonish bear in a top hat wielding his grotesquely engorged cock like a club over a heap of slumped, dripping bodies. “—in the other,” the old man concluded. “Sometimes I think the greatest argument against the idea of a benevolent and omniscient creator god is that no entity who knew what we were capable of and had any goodwill for either us or this planet would have appointed us its stewards.”
“It’s not all bad.”

They walked.

“No,” he said at last. “It isn’t. But as I get older, it seems, fairly or not, that the sole purpose of all
that was ever good in my life was to be torn away as messily and as painfully as it was possible for
a man to bear. Which is only fair, I suppose. Considering.”

So here it was at last. Ana braced herself and said, casually, “Considering what?”

“Hm? Oh nothing. Woolgathering.”

“Seriously?” she said, amused. “You’re going to pull that loopy old man act on me?”

He glanced at her, then stopped suddenly, executed a precise turn, and planted his cane firmly
between the dusty toes of his otherwise immaculate shoes. “Look here,” he said, staring at the
sand-covered concrete slab of some long-gone structure. “Right here. Tell me what you see.”

Ana looked at him curiously, but he only waited, his shuttered gaze fixed on the indicated point, so
she went and had a look.

There was nothing to find. A few support bases bolted into the concrete and then cut off suggested
there had been a structure of some kind once, although she couldn’t figure out what. With the help
of some branches broken off the nearest leafy-ish bushes, Ana cleared the sand and located several
other signs of this mystery mounting hardware. They were arranged in a manner that suggested a
semi-circular shape, not quite in the middle of the slab…where the concrete was stained and
cracked.

Very stained. Very cracked. Weathered, sure. Nature’s sander had been running on this spot for
decades, but even it couldn’t completely erase what had once been a massive black starburst
pattern burnt into the floor. Fire damage. Explosive fire damage, she amended, following the
radiating lines from their origin point outward. The cracks thinned and vanished at their own
direction, but the staining stopped at an abrupt line between two mounting bases.

Well, that fit, didn’t it? She’d been to the aviation museum here in Mammon and knew that,
conspiracy theories aside, the main focus of the base had been on developing propulsion engines
for aircraft and long-range missiles. Practically virgin territory, back then, with not a lot of success
to show for their efforts. Mainly what Ana remembered of that trip to the museum was the fifteen-
minute film on loop in the viewing room showing dozens of misfires, fizzes and crashes. All it
needed was a Red Bull sponsor and some Yakkity Sax on the soundtrack.

The old man was waiting, watching her.

Ana straightened, gesturing at the concrete. “I see a testing pad,” she called. “A blast shield here,
some very important people there…and if there was anyone on this side pressing a button, he had a
really bad day. Doesn’t look like a crash,” she added, scuffing her boot across the old burns. “Was
it a rocket or something like that?”

“Something like that,” he agreed. “It was a ballistics arm—a robotic device that could be attached
to any array, and that could load and fire it more quickly and accurately than a man or even a team
of men.”

“One of your projects?”

“One of my father’s. One of a very few of which he was still a part. The only one of which he was
head. Which is why,” the old man said calmly, “I sabotaged it.”

Ana looked at him.

“Yes. Sabotage. Not misadventure, not miscalculation, but a deliberate and willful act. I should say that I have remorse,” he added, throwing the words away with a dismissive wave. “I don’t. I have guilt, which is not at all the same thing. I had no remorse when I did it, none at all while I waited, none until the consequences proved to be more devastating than I had intended. And even that is half a lie. I very much intended his ruin. That I did not intend his death is perhaps less a comment on my character than my lack of imagination. But it is true. I never intended to hurt him.” His glasses flashed with reflected light as the clouds briefly parted over the sun and at once closed up again. “I never meant to hurt anyone. I suppose you think that’s funny, given my work here.”

“Not the word I would have used.”

“I don’t mean in a humorous sense. But after all, that was the very essence of my work, to design, construct and perfect instruments for the delivery of death on a scale that was, for its time, unimaginable. Until I imagined it. Without malice, without passion…without conscience. As a mathematical exercise, nothing more.” He looked around, his eyes behind the dark lenses of his glasses moving restlessly through the ruins of the base. “How I would like to tell you I had an epiphany that day, some long overdue realization of the full consequences of my work. I wish I could tell you that I rejected the machines of war and dedicated my life to making children laugh. But I was unsure of the ramifications should I abandon the projects to which I was contracted. I was afraid of being arrested. I don’t recall whether that was ever specifically threatened, but I was twelve. Easily intimidated.” He glanced at the black spot on the concrete. “And newly orphaned. So. So I continued to work, and to profit by my work, until such time as it became convenient for me to rebel.”

“Nothing wrong with that. You’re a realist.”

“I suppose I am, now, but I was an idealist once. Like you.”

She laughed. “I’m not an idealist. I’m a relativist,” she told him with a crooked smile. “And even at that, I’m not a hundred percent.”

“Could one be a relativist at all times, without exception? It would seem to be a contradiction in terms.” He gazed at the black spot in contemplative silence for a short time, then raised his head, as one does when ending a prayer. “Forgive me, I appear to be straying from the subject. I do more and more of that these days, I’m afraid. We were talking about my father, weren’t we?”

“We don’t have to.”

“No, no. One should always finish what one starts. We were talking about my father.”

“His death,” Ana agreed and looked again at the damaged concrete. Over the course of her long night with Mike Schmidt, she’d been told of the senior Faust’s public breakdown and subsequent death, but apparently, Mike’s mad research skills were no match against military disinformation. Mike told her Otto Faust had drowned at home, in the family swimming pool. “He died here?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Faust. “Would you like to hear my confession?”

“I’m not a priest.”

“I’m not seeking absolution.”
“I’m not a cop either.”

“Nor am I seeking justice.”

“What are you after then?” she asked, not defensively, but merely curious. “Sounds like you got away with it. Why risk it all by telling me now?”

He cracked a smile. “When I’m so close to taking it to the grave?”

Ana shrugged. “You don’t know me well enough to be sure I’d keep your secrets, that’s all. You’re rich. I’m disreputable. I could be a blackmailer. Or worse, an upstanding citizen.”

“Are you?”

“No, but I am a liar, so take that for what it’s worth.”

“Duly noted. Three days before my father’s death,” he continued without hesitation, “I killed him.”

“Say that again?”

“I had what I believed to be good cause. He had tried to kill me. Far more directly, I might add. My father had many flaws, many, but a lack of conviction was never one. He cared nothing for witnesses. He cared nothing for consequences. He used a ten-pound wrench. If his aim had been better or my reflexes slower, he would have spilled my brains for certain. As it was, he made me bleed and knocked me briefly senseless, if not wholly unconscious. During this fugue state, I apparently...soiled myself, which in turn made me...emotional.” His hands flexed slightly on the head of his cane. His expression showed only the smallest wrinkle of consternation behind his dark glasses. “My last memory of my father is how he stood over me, calling me a disgraceful, filthy little faggot in front of men I had feared throughout my childhood and whose respect I had desperately pursued throughout my awkward puberty.”

“Okay, well, I’m starting to see why you don’t have a lot of remorse, but go on.”

“We had never been close. There had for some years been friction between us and...” He bent his head, hands flexing where they folded atop his cane, and finally shook his head. “I was going to say, ‘a growing distance,’ but I don’t suppose that’s strictly true. There had always been a distance and by that time, it had grown so great, I could no longer feel it grow. I always knew that should I ever be fortunate enough to escape him, I would never seek a reconciliation. Not out of hatred, you understand, but out of an utter absence of emotion.” He paused then looked at her with an uncertain pinch of his eyebrows above his masking glasses. “Do you understand?”

“Oh yeah. I do.”

“I thought you might.” He continued to gaze at her from behind his dark lenses, his thoughts unreadable, before taking up his narrative once more. “I believed the feeling to be mutual. It was not. My father’s feelings surpassed mere contempt or loathing. He, who had made me, now considered that such a mistake that only my death could rectify it. And he believed this so fervently that he did not care what happened to him as long as he succeeded. From that moment on, I understood I was an orphan. That the man whose genes I carried as yet still lived meant nothing. I had no father. My father had forsaken me.”

Ana said nothing. Her mind was miles and years away, locked in the trunk of an old Honda Civic and fast sinking to the bottom of Caspegwian Lake.

“My father was swiftly restrained and I, removed. To Project Room 14.” He gestured toward one of
the buildings. “Where my father’s untested prototype for a ballistics arm was kept. And I was left alone, where my hysterics could not embarrass anyone. When I realized where I was, I recognized the perfect opportunity for vengeance. If I was my father’s biological legacy, then this machine before me was his mechanical legacy, and if he rejected the former, I would deny him the latter.” He bent his head to an apologetic angle, saying, “I told you, I had a somewhat inflated idea of fair exchange in those days.”

“You hit him where it hurts. I get it.”

“And as I say, I did not intend him to die, merely to be humiliated by yet another failure, which I was well aware would spell the end of his career. It took less than a minute to ensure the device’s permanent malfunction. And do you know what I did next?”

She did, but she shook her head.

“I went to Disneyland,” said the old man. “With my best friend and his father. We stayed in the Disney Grand Californian Hotel, in a suite. We rode every ride. We ate prodigious amounts of sugar. We saw the fireworks every night. I’m reasonably certain my friend had sexual intercourse with at least three Minnie Mouses. Minnie Mice? Hm.” He thought, shook his head, and continued, “At some point while I vacationed, my father was called upon to demonstrate his prototype. I don’t know the exact events that followed. When I returned, I was told my father drowned in the pool at home. But I saw this. I saw it when it was fresh. And I saw what remained of the prototype. And I realized that I had greatly misjudged my father. Perhaps he recognized the signs of my sabotage, perhaps not, but he did not passively accept failure. The necessary repairs were far beyond his skill, but he made the attempt regardless. When he activated the device, those repairs held just long enough for the firing mechanism to explosively rip itself apart, killing him in the process. The hope that it did so instantly is as close as I ever came to mourning him.”

Ana waited until it became obvious the story was over, then said bluntly, “I hate to sound like a cast-iron bitch here, but why should you? Your dad sounds like a prize shitstain on the underwear of the Earth. He didn’t magically turn into a great guy just because he died. And just because you sheared a fly-bolt on his super-deathgun doesn’t mean you killed him.”

“My actions caused the death of another human being. That is indisputable.”

“Yeah, okay, sure. In the same sense as if you’d tossed a diamond into a lake and someone who couldn’t swim jumped in after it and drowned. No one made your father try to fix the gun. Especially no one made him try to fix it with super glue and a bent coat hanger or whatever he used. You took a working machine and broke it. He was the one who took a broken machine and made it dangerous, so if you ask me, whatever happened after that, he brought it on himself.”

“Did he deserve to die?” he asked. His tone was an odd one for the question, not confrontational at all, but almost wary.

“Why, because he hit you? I’m sure he thought you deserved it. That’s the thing about people: Everyone’s the hero of their own story, so everyone’s got their own ideas of what they deserve.”

His frown deepened. “And you prefer not to judge.”

“Of course I judge. I’m human. Everybody judges. But I don’t decide what you deserve, I decide what you’re going to fucking get.”

The rigid set of his shoulders relaxed. “Ah.”
“And speaking of fair exchange, let me just add that if you bring violence into a situation, I kind of think you forfeit the right to be surprised when violence bounces back on you. I don’t know,” she said, elaborately shrugging away her feelings and replacing them with a smile. “I suppose it’s a fine line, but I just don’t like that word, ‘deserve.’ I believe in consequences, that’s what I believe in. Did he deserve to die for hitting a kid? As much as you deserved to get hit, I guess. But did he deserve to die for fucking with a machine he didn’t know how to fix? Hell to the yes he did. We may not deserve what other people do to us, but we all absolutely deserve the consequences of our own actions.”

He considered that, motionless as the wind rippled through his clothes. “That’s oddly comforting,” he said at last. He tipped his head back, the sun reflected off the dark lenses of the glasses he wore, giving the illusion of lights in the empty sockets of his eyes. “I believe I have reached if not exceeded my UV limit for the day. You’ve been quite patient with me, Miss Stark, indulging an old man’s nostalgia. Are you ready to go?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

They walked together back across the compound to the sand-buried lot. Once there, Ana dipped into her pocket and whistled for the old man’s attention. When she had it, she tossed the truck’s keys to him.

He caught them, then looked at them, and finally looked at her. “I shouldn’t. I never bothered myself to achieve a driver’s license.”

“If you get arrested, I’ll stand your bail,” said Ana, hopping up into the passenger seat. “It’s an automatic transmission, so it’s real easy to drive. Gas is on the right, brake’s on the left. Just keep it between the lines and try not to hit anyone. Oh, and it should go without saying, but if you break it, you bought it.”

“Fair enough.” Mr. Faust walked around the front of the truck, opened the driver’s door and handed her his cane. Ascending was something of a process, but once settled in the captain’s chair with the mirrors adjusted and his seat belt securely fastened, he turned to her with a troubled frown. “I feel you may be laboring under a misapprehension and there are two things I should say, lest I allow you to continue.”

“And what’s that?” Ana asked, mentally adding the word ‘lest’ to the growing list of words she’d often read but never heard unironically used in conversation until she’d met this man.

He turned the key in the ignition and revved a few times, head cocked, assessing the sound of the engine. “Firstly, as a rule, lacking the permission to do a thing is by no means synonymous with lacking the ability.”

“True,” said Ana, stretching one leg slowly toward the invisible brake that did not exist on this side of the vehicle. “And the second?”

He turned the radio on, jacked it up, gripped the gear-shift and grimly said, “I intend to drive very fast.”
One harrowing hour later, after seeing every winding back road in Mammon and much of the desert surrounding it, Ana found herself safely planted in the back booth at Gallifrey’s with the old man across from her, enjoying the ground under her feet and the cold coke in her hand and everything life had to offer. It still wasn’t quite late enough in the day for the diner to serve lunch, but Lucy had refused to serve them and Tiny Tim made no objection when Ana had asked for a Betty Burger.

“I used to be quite fond of those,” Mr. Faust had remarked. “Even if they were not the only ones in town, I’m sure I would have considered them the finest in the world. Of course, it was your father who made them in those days.”

“I make ‘em just the same, sir,” Tiny Tim replied, which was all the convincing the old man needed.

Now here he sat, Betty Burger neatly vivisected and half-consumed, carving an onion ring with a knife and fork. He led the little conversation that passed between them, so that she ended up talking about herself more than she was usually comfortable doing, although his questions never seemed invasive and she answered him freely, describing places she’d lived and work she’d done. He did not ask about her family this time and inquired after the house only once, in the most roundabout way possible, by asking if she’d made it hers yet.

“I’m working on it,” she told him. “I don’t know why it’s taking me this long.”

“Don’t you?”

Ana picked through her fries, found the smallest and tossed it back on the plate. “I think it’s haunted,” she said, smiling so he’d think she was joking.

He nodded pensively, his eyes on his onion rings.

“I don’t really mean that,” she said quickly.

“I know what you meant.”

“I don’t even believe in ghosts.”

“Neither did I, until my father died and I came home to his empty house.” Spearing a wedge of onion ring, he dipped it in a small tub of the Gallifrey family’s secret recipe ring sauce—yellow mustard, mayo and a liberal dash of cayenne pepper—and studied it, frowning. “We had lived apart together for so long, I didn’t think it would feel any different. That if anything, the atmosphere might lighten. But in his absence, I felt…what he truly felt for me…”

Ana thought of the house—her childhood castle—and the way it creaked even when the wind wasn’t blowing. David’s room, a child’s room, still waiting for him to come back. Christmas decorations in the basement, home videos in the attic, and Plushtrap wandering wherever he wanted through all the empty rooms in-between.
She was quiet too long. The next thing she knew, Mr. Faust’s warm, rough hand was on hers, not gripping, scarcely even touching her. When she looked up, startled, suppressing the urge to pull away (her second urge; the first was to slap), he said, “I knew your aunt.”

He said it oddly, to rhyme with haunt.

“I knew her very well,” he was saying in his soft, intense way. “And I know she loved you very much. If her ghost is there, surely it means you no harm.”

Without meaning to, Ana heard herself say, “It’s not just her ghost.”

His hand clenched on hers. “How do you mean?”

“It’s hers, it’s David’s…it’s mine.” Ana shook her head, pushing Erik Metzger from her mind before this man could see him in her eyes. “It’s everything I remember and everything I never knew.”

“I see.” He released her and leaned back, observing her from a distance. “May I give you some advice?”

“If you want.”

“Make it yours,” he said seriously. “Paint the walls. Change the carpets. Hang pictures. Do whatever you must to own it. Every day that you do not, it owns you.”

Ana nodded, forcing a smile, but in her mind, she was miles away, waking up in the pirate ship bed with Plushtrap staring into her eyes.

“Or sell it,” he said, taking up his knife and fork again. “That may be simpler. Certainly less time-consuming.”

“Nope,” she said firmly and punctuated it with a healthy bite of her burger. “If I’ve got to move out of town, I might as well move all the way back to California.”

“Out of…?”

“I’d kind of have to, wouldn’t I?” Ana waved one hand out at the window and Mammon in its entirety beyond. “You want to point me out a For Sale sign anywhere in this town?”

“Point,” he replied. “And I’ll plant one.”

She laughed.

He didn’t.

“I’m not going to move,” she declared. “It’s my house. It’s not home yet, but…it’s my house. Besides, I don’t even know how long I’ll be staying.”

He started to speak, frowned, then said, “You are good to keep company with an old man, but are you certain you wouldn’t rather be sitting with your friends?”

“What friends?” Ana asked, honestly surprised, then looked over at the big table in the middle of the floor as a gust of laughter rose up from a circle of men.

It may not be lunch-time according to the menu, but Big Paulie had already been here with his crew when Ana and the old man walked in and they’d probably still be here after Ana left. In
Mammon, the lunch ‘hour’ lasted as long as the bossman said so and Big Paulie had made himself pretty comfortable.

Jimmy was sitting with them, smiling under anxious eyes, out of his element but trying to keep up with the coarse conversation. Now and then, he glanced back at Ana, a mixture of apology and awe on his face. He’d stood up to greet her when she first came through the door, but sat down fast when he saw who was with her. Ana had waved him over once, but he’d pretended not to see, so she’d just let him be. She didn’t doubt he meant it when he said they were friends, but he had to live with these people and she understood if he wanted to keep their friendship on the down-low. Besides, it could just as easily be Mr. Faust putting him off. Sometimes Ana had to remind herself that hers wasn’t the only notorious reputation in town.

“No, I’m good,” she said, returning her attention to her plate. “They got their own thing going on.”

Mr. Faust watched her eat for a good long while before suddenly saying, “Would you like a job?”

She had a fry in her mouth or she might have laughed out loud. By the time she’d chewed and swallowed, she’d recovered and managed a simple, smiling, “I’ve got one,” as an answer.

“Mowing the many lawns of Mammon. Are you quite certain that’s making the best use of your skills?”

“And what are you about to offer?” Ana asked gently. “Appointment secretary? Personal driver? Home care companion? How is that making better use of my skills?”

He acknowledged that with a Freddy-ish grumble low in his throat but very little expression on his face. “There are more considerations than the quality of one’s labor.”

“Such as?”

“The quality of one’s employer.”

“Hey, say what you want about the man, but Shelly gave me a shot when no one else in this town would. For that matter, he took me back when I walked out on him.”

“And you see that as proof of appreciation, do you?”

“I’m not an idiot. There’s this whole tug-of-war thing with him and the other guy, Villart. Not enough jobs left in this town to support two contractors and whoever gets the golden library gets to live another year. Shelly thinks he’s got an in with me because I built some killer bookcases for the Duckling Daycare and the lady that runs it is casting a deciding vote.” Ana raised her cup, smiling at him over the lip. “And so are you, right?”

He admitted it with a silent, yet expressive eyebrow.

“And can I count on your support?” she asked politely.

He did not return her smile. “Always. Furthermore, my support is not reliant upon your loyalty to Mr. Shelton. Indeed, I scarcely think I need to tell you that it is not likely to be reciprocated. Or do you think he’ll retain you on his workforce after he secures the library?”

“I think he’ll keep me as long as he can. I’m fu—um, I’m really good at what I do. But you’re right, I haven’t given him a lot of reasons to pull for me,” she admitted. “Apart from the obvious issues, there’s also the fact that I may have the technical skills, but I’ll never be certified. I don’t even have my GED.”
“Easily amended.”

“Aw, it’s a hassle. They want money and I’d have to go to classes and do homework and I couldn’t even stick that shit out when I was a kid and had literally nothing else to do. The thought of sacrificing all my spare time just to go back to school for no reason except that stupid piece of paper that magically proves I know something I already know I know is just…no. It’s so much no.” Shaking her head, Ana stole one of his onion rings and ate it. “Not saying that’s a smart decision on my part, but it’s my life and I’m free to fuck it up however I want.”

“Forgive me, but it doesn’t sound to me as if you do want, as evidenced by your use of the words, ‘fuck it up.’” He studied her with a small, serious frown while she snorted and coughed into a napkin, then said, uncertainly, “Did I say something funny?”

“No. Just…sorry. What were you saying?”

His frown deepened. “It was the profanity, wasn’t it?”

Ana hid her smile in her fist and coughed some more, shaking her head.

“I was raised on a military base,” he reminded her with a touch of indignation. “It’s quite possible ‘fuck’ was the first word I ever spoke in English.”

“Okay, we’re getting away from the point and the point is, Shelly’s not getting rid of me,” Ana stated.

“He doesn’t appear to be making the most of your considerable talent either.”

“Aw, it’s all politics. See that guy in the blue shirt?”

Mr. Faust’s head turned at her subtle nod, not toward the table, but toward its reflection in the window beside him. “You refer to Paul Trammel?”

“Big Paulie, yeah. He’s Shelly’s right hand man and has been pretty much since the start. And he hates me. He’s got a good reason,” said Ana with a shrug. “At least, he thinks he does. Everyone’s the hero, right? I don’t know if Shelly knew that when he hired me in the first place, although he must have known when he hired me back, but he did it anyway. He put his best man’s balls—excuse me, thumbs in the vise, the man who’d helped him build his business from the ground up, over me and he’s been in a lousy position ever since, trying to do something with me that doesn’t stir up more in-house drama. And there’s always going to be drama, just because of who I am.”

Mr. Faust looked at the window, his eyes restless behind the dark lenses.

“Besides,” said Ana grudgingly. “I don’t like the guy and I think he spends altogether too much time looking down the front of my shirt, but even I have to admit he’s not a complete ass. There’s parts of the man that are almost admirable.”

“Almost,” he echoed, underscoring the dubious feeling she’d tried to hide. “Namely?”

“The way he looks at his crew,” Ana replied immediately. “The way he says he’s feeding families, not just hiring men. Like you said, this town is past its sell-by date. It takes guts to try to make a living by building up a dying town, much less to carry another dozen guys along with you.”

“You can’t honestly believe he sees it that way.”

“Yeah,” said Ana after a moment’s thought. “Yeah, actually, I do. You see that guy across from
Paulie? Blond hair, shirt tucked in?"

Mr. Faust consulted the window. “James Morehead.”

“Yeah, Jimmy. He was hired just a few weeks before I was, after his last job at the town landscaping service fell apart. Nice guy. I like him, but to put it gently, he’s sure not winning Shelly any libraries. He’s not a carpenter or an electrician or a plumber or even general laborer. Shelly hired him for three reasons: his wife and his two kids.”

“You give Mr. Shelton rather more credit than he deserves. Would it surprise you very much to learn that Mr. Wyatt attempted on no less than six occasions to sell his company to Mr. Shelton? And while I can hardly blame the man for refusing what was, in all honesty, a profoundly unsound proposition, I could hardly help but note that once Green Thumb’s doors closed and its assets were removed to auction, Mr. Shelton was right there to snap it up for pennies on the dollar. I’m sure he thought he would come by Green Thumb’s clients as easily, but alas, no. What Mr. Shelton, with all his expert financial acumen, failed to take into consideration was…”

The answer seemed suspiciously obvious, but she said it anyway: “Green Thumb was already a failing business?”

“Correct,” he said, tipping a forkful of onion ring at her before dipping it into his dish of mustard. “Something that should have been obvious after six attempts to fob the business off on a man whose only experience with lawns prior to that point had been tearing them up during construction.”

Ana opened her mouth to point out that Shelly had to be doing fairly well with it, since he’d claimed it was the Green Thumb stuff that would be keeping him afloat during the long stretch between the end of the dealership job and the start of the downtown project, but said instead, “And yet, he’s still got all the city accounts. Someone over there must like him.”

Mr. Faust ate his onion ring with a thoughtful expression. “He isn’t the most objectionable man in town, I suppose, although I cannot truthfully claim any affection for him.”

“So it was you who made him hire Morehead? In exchange for enough landscaping trade to keep his books in black?”

“I confirm nothing.”

“Why?” Ana leaned across the table and lowered her voice to a hush. “Is Shelly blackmailing you?”

Mr. Faust’s hand paused halfway to his mouth for a split-second before it dropped with a clatter to the table. He laughed in the raspy, overloud manner of a man who rarely does and never learned the proper volume to use in social settings.

“I take it that’s a no,” said Ana.

“You dear child,” he said, wiping his eyes first, then his mouth, still smiling. “Blackmail, indeed.”

“Well then, why did you do it? Half the town had dried up and blown away by now. What does Shelly matter?” As soon as the question left her mouth, she took it back. “Not Shelly,” she said, sitting up in the booth to stare at him in confusion. “Jimmy. I still don’t get it. Do you know him?”

“I know all the children of Mammon.”
Ana looked over at the table where Big Paulie loudly discussed upstanding right-wing politics vs. the sinister left while Jimmy looked on in obvious discomfort. “So the Green Thumb ship sank. The captain goes down with it—”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“Is it? You know, I was told old Wyatt retired, but a retired man sells his own gear, it doesn’t get hauled off to auction. He went bankrupt.”

Addressing his plate rather than her, his face composed and tone neutral, Mr. Faust said, “I trust you are not insinuating the fault is mine.”

“I don’t think you deliberately drove him out of business,” Ana said after a fry and a little thought. “But I do think you stopped helping him.”

He gave his lunch a quizzical little frown. “You don’t approve.”

“Hey, it’s your money. Do what you want with it. Some people collect baseball cards, some people take up macramé, and some people subsidize the local landscaping service. We all need hobbies, right?”

“Mm.”

“Personally, I think big showy gardens are a stupid status thing and having a lawn in the middle of the fu—uh, desert is ridiculous. It’s one thing not to want your yard all overgrown and dead, but it’s something else entirely to keep the grass mowed to three and a quarter inches exactly and cut up all the hedges so they look like Legos and not even like plants. And don’t even get me started on how arbitrary the rulings are on what makes a weed a weed. And this town, this dying town, has a hundred and forty-six public flowerbeds and hanging pots scattered around. A hundred and forty-six. I know because I weed and water them. And they’re all stocked solely with annuals. Seriously. They spend thousands, legit thousands, of dollars on flowers that only bloom for a week or two and then die and don’t even come back next season. Now I ask you, why?”

“I have no say whatsoever on how the flowerbeds are stocked.”

“Well, that’s a damn shame, seeing as you probably paid for them to be installed and pay to keep stocking them, and then paid for Green Thumb and now Shelton Contractors to tend them. What do you get out of it?”

“The warm glow that comes from knowing my generosity beautifies my community.”

“Yeah, right. You know what your mistake was?”

“I can think of several,” he said without humor. “I meditate upon them nightly. To which, specifically, do you refer?”

“Helping this guy Wyatt at all. He probably would have gone under in the first five years if you hadn’t been greasing his wheels. And I bet he was grateful for about a year and then he felt entitled to it and yeah, I bet he blamed you big time when he lost it. You know.” She ate another fry. “The way Shelly probably blames you now that his company is beginning to circle the drain.”

“Mr. Shelton is a contractor in a town without the potential for growth,” he said, cutting into his burger with renewed vigor. “As you say, gardens are a luxury in the desert. I have watered this one all my life. Now I am old and tired and there are other more important things I need to do with my very limited time and energy.”
“Hey, you don’t have to convince me. This place is a sh…trash-fire. The sooner it burns itself out, the better.”

“A trash-fire?” he echoed and formed a small smile. “You have no idea. If I pulled my support tomorrow, this town would discorporate within the year.”

“You think so?”

“Oh yes. There is next to no strategic planning at the administrative level, where subornation and misappropriation are rampant. Governmental concerns begin and end with elections. No less than sixty percent of Mammon’s civil services budget comes from donations and can you guess who the primary donator is? Shall I tell you a secret, Miss Stark?”

“I can keep one.”

“I do not like this town.”

“Naturally, I’m stunned,” she said dryly. “What’s not to like? The weather, the smell, the scenic vista of fuck-all nothing in every damn direction?”

“Trivialities. I hate the silence—the willful, self-imposed silence. I hate the distance, so much greater than the physical miles, that separates us from the world. I hate the people who smile to your face when they need money, but sneer at your back for having it, who see sins were there are none and none where there are.”

“It’s not too late to leave.”

“I have responsibilities.”

Ana huffed a laugh and raised her glass. “Take it from someone who’s done more than her share of walking away: The idea of leaving always represents itself as more impossible than it really is.”

“Would you come with me?”

The question caught her mid-swallow. Carbonated cola burned as she choked it up her nose and spit it into the napkin. A few heads turned over at Big Paulie’s table, but when they saw it was only her dying, they went back to their own conversations, all but Jimmy, who watched and finally tentatively called, “You okay?”

Ana nodded, eyes watering, still coughing, but she must not have been very reassuring, because he didn’t look away until Mr. Faust turned toward him.

“I take it that’s a no,” he said once Jimmy had hunched over his plate and the two of them were once again invisible to the world.

“Dude, you had to know it would be,” she rasped, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. “Or did you? I don’t know what you thought was happening here, but I was not dropping signals—”

“No,” he said, holding up one hand. “Nor I. I assure you, I have no libidinous motives. None whatsoever.” He paused, then added, “You may ask my wife if you don’t believe me.”

Ana laughed, grabbed at her nose, and blew into her napkin again. “God, that hurts. Then why?”

“I don’t know. It was a whim.” His hand lowered. He looked at the remains of his food, then pushed the plate aside and pulled his cup of coffee close, looking within as if it might have the
answer. “I’ve grown too accustomed to indulging those without forethought or consequence. I deserve to live in this town. See what it has made of me.”

“Oh stop.”

“Perhaps that is why I asked,” he mused, more to himself than to her. “I want you to escape. I know now I never will. But you still can.”

“I can escape anytime I want,” she told him, smiling. “Nothing’s holding me here but my own stubborn self.”

“Are you happy?”

“Is anyone in this godforsaken place?” Ana started to shrug, then looked suddenly over at Big Paulie’s table and let out a laugh. “That’s why you did it, isn’t it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Jimmy,” Ana said, once more in a conspiratorial whisper. “When Green Thumb dried up and everyone else who worked there had to leave and find another job somewhere else, you made sure Jimmy still had work here, even if it meant making work, and you did it… just because he likes it here. He’s a good man who is genuinely happy in Mammon.”

“A good man,” he repeated and frowned intently. “Do you think so?”

“Don’t you?”

He dismissed that with a short wave. “I am no great judge of character.”

“And you think I am?”

“I think you see things clearly and speak plainly.”

“Wow, you really are no great judge of character,” Ana said, amused. “But yeah, Jimmy’s all right. If I got to pick who stayed and who went, he’s definitely someone I’d want to keep around, if only to remind me that even in a place like this, sometimes you still stumble on a guy like that.”

Mr. Faust considered that.

“Of course, the argument could also be made that the sooner he gets out, the better,” Ana added. “I have it from the horse’s own mouth that he doesn’t want to mow lawns the rest of his life and I think he’s starting to realize that maybe this isn’t the best environment to be raising kids in.”

“No,” said Mr. Faust, gazing at Jimmy’s reflection where it seemed to float in the sky over the parking lot. “No, it is not. Yet his family is here, that which ties and binds. Five generations before him, I’m told, and that is quite a Gordian knot indeed. He may well find it impossible to cut himself free.”

“Yeah, you could be right. I know he’s afraid he won’t be able to make it out there and if he leaves, well, you know the way the real estate market is around here,” she said tactfully as Mr. Faust remained impassive. “He’s afraid he won’t be able to come back either. In a lot of ways, the worst part about Mammon is that it looks out for its own. His family is here, like you say, and the town where five generations before him lived and died. He’s got a house here. He’s got a job. He’s got a guarantee that he’ll never… you know, never fall all the way down. Mammon will always throw him a rope if he needs it.”
“And the only price is allowing said rope to act as an anchor,” Mr. Faust agreed. “Yet if he is content to be so tied, is he not where he belongs? Where he deserves to be?”

“Nobody deserves to be stuck in this town.”

“Ah, but do we not all deserve the consequences of our own actions? Or inaction, in Mr. Moorehead’s particular case?”

“Yeah, we do. He does. But...he’s a good man. He could be a good man somewhere else and he should, before this place eats him.”

He looked at her sharply. “Eats?”

“Sours. Poisons. Pick your metaphor.”

He nodded, but the mood had changed and she knew even before he reached for his inner jacket pocket that lunch was over.

“I got it,” she said before he could take out his wallet. “You can pay for the next one.”

“All right.” He withdrew his hand, empty, from his jacket and took up his cane to rise from the booth. Halfway to the door, he paused and looked back. “Would it be inappropriate for me to inquire as to the nature of your disagreement with Mr. Shelton?”

“It wasn’t a disagreement. The mower broke down and he doesn’t want to drop bank on a new one, but he can’t keep the business afloat without the landscaping accounts.”

“What does he need?”

“Better than the grandpa’s garage POS he’s likely to end up with, but if he can actually come up with five notes for me, I can probably find a handyman’s special and fix it up enough to limp us along until winter.”

Mr. Faust nodded and said again, “What does he need?”

Ana just looked at him for a few seconds, very much aware that the little distance between them had resulted in both of them raising their voices for this end of the conversation and that talk had gone quiet throughout the diner, but especially at Big Paulie’s table. Any answer she gave him now would have consequences later.

Including silence.

“At the very least, he needs a reliable professional rider that can handle the terrain out here and accommodate things like a flex-deck and a mulcher,” she told him. “And to be brutally honest, he also needs a better edger than a thirty-dollar weed-eater from Lowe’s. He also needs some decent hedging equipment, and another chipper and power washer, because this thing where the work crew and the landscaping crew are expected to time-share the existing ones is not working for me. And as long as I’m blue-skying here, how about an actual landscaping truck and trailer instead of just me using my own truck and carrying around a pocket full of receipts, waiting for the big guy with the bank account to reimburse me?”

“Done.”

A few heads turned at Big Paulie’s table.
“Please be so good as to write up a shopping list,” Mr. Faust continued, “along with any specific recommendations, and leave it with Mr. Shelton. You’ll have your equipment by Monday.”

Ana shrugged. “You want to spare me a weekend slogging through Craigslist, you go right ahead, but it’s going to send Shelly some mixed signals.”

“I’ve reconsidered dissolving that partnership,” Mr. Faust replied. “You’ve convinced me he still serves a purpose, if only as a convenient repository for those of real value to me. A good builder should always know where his tools are, wouldn’t you agree?” He paused, his head tipped to a thoughtful angle as he gazed out the window behind her at the empty streets of Mammon. “I should like to leave you with one last observation, if I may, and one last piece of advice.”

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you. One of the great benefits of growing old is that one may blather on about whatever enters one’s head and pass it off as accrued wisdom, but it does sweeten the moment, so to speak, when one knows the recipient is actually listening. My observation is this.” His face behind the glasses grew solemn, intent. “Change is always possible and potential is truly infinite, yet nothing comes without effort. Therefore, my advice: If you want a future, you must build it or be prepared to accept that future which others build for you.”

“Solid advice,” said Ana politely, silently adding that it didn’t hurt to own the entire town and still have more money than God when you were building your little castles out of the future’s sand.

“Good day, Miss Stark.”

“See you around.”

He touched his brow, doffing his invisible hat, then walked away.

Ana watched through the windows as he made a call outside and as soon as his driver had collected him—true to his word, she was there in just a few minutes—she took the last whole onion ring off his plate and got up. “Shelly says you can work under Big Paulie if he needs you,” she said as she passed the table where Jimmy sat. “Otherwise, I guess you’ve got the day off like me. See you Monday.”

Jimmy and Hageman said goodbye. A few others nodded or flipped their fingers at her in a working man’s wave. Bisano leaned toward Paulie and muttered something; Big Paulie snorted and said, “Money, son. Tastes like money.”

Ana laughed a little under her breath as she went to meet Lucy Gallifrey at the register. She had to admit the old man had gotten to her with that ‘Be the Change you want to See’ horseshit, but if Mammon’s future was anything like its past or present, then fuck it. As far as she was concerned, it couldn’t die fast enough.

But she would have a good day, she decided. Just to spite the sons of bitches.

And with that thought burning peevishly in her heart, she laid out an extra five for the tip and headed back to the office to write up her shopping list.
Bonnie did not consciously check the time anymore. His programming had always taken care of that, so he’d never formed the habit, and now that he no longer had a show to put on, he lost what little concern he’d ever had for keeping track of hours. But he still checked the days, and as every day slipped away without a visit from Ana, he told himself he was not really disappointed because he knew she wasn’t going to come on a work-day. He did not let himself go on to think she was coming on the weekend, because that was disappointment just waiting to happen, but it was there anyway, never acknowledged but always with him, like a shadow.

All Friday morning, he struggled with it, the non-expectation, made infinitely worse by the fact—not a feeling or a paranoid delusion but the unquestionable fact—that the fucking security cameras were following him around. There were places he could go where the camera couldn’t follow, but that would be giving him the satisfaction of knowing he could get on Bonnie’s nerves anytime he wanted just by staring at him, so he didn’t try to hide. Let the Purple Man look all he wanted. There was nothing to see except a big dumb bunny waiting for a girl who was never going to show up.

Except she might. It was the weekend, after all. As soon as she got off work, she might visit. She wouldn’t sleep over, but she’d come see them. She’d come to see him. She might.

As the afternoon tipped over into evening, Bonnie gave up pretending he wasn’t waiting. He sat down on the stage directly across from the camera, turned one ear toward the kitchen so he could hear the loading dock door if it opened and the other toward the lobby, and picked up what was left of his guitar. He began to ‘play,’ hardly aware of what his fingers did even when he was looking at them.

He waited for Ana to get off work and come see him.

And at nine, when the restaurant officially ‘closed’ and Swampy at last shut up and powered down, he made himself stop.

“You still don’t get to be disappointed,” he told himself.

“What?” Chica called from the kitchen where she’d been happily clattering around, passing the time in her own way. Playing at cooking with a broken kitchen, which was silly, but no worse than Bonnie playing with the neck of his broken guitar.

Maybe they were all waiting. Foxy hadn’t left the Cove since Wednesday, and come to think of it, Freddy had gone into the gym a couple hours ago and hadn’t come out yet. Not that there was much point in patrolling when the doors were as good as they were, but it hadn’t stopped Freddy before. No, he was waiting for Ana, too.

“Ain’t autonomy great?” Bonnie said aloud and tossed the neck of his guitar into the back corner of the stage.

The camera, unblinking all this time, swiveled to track it, then came back to Bonnie.

“Did you say something?” Chica called.
“No.” Bonnie pushed his ears up against the overwhelming gravity of his mood. “I mean, yeah, I did, but it’s nothing. I don’t think she’s coming, that’s all.”

“Oh.” The happy noise in the kitchen lulled. “Oh gosh, what am I going to do with all this?”

“All what?”

“Oh…”

Funny, how Bonnie could listen to Chica putter around in there for a good three hours without the slightest curiosity as to what she was doing, but one ‘Um’ and a lot of quiet could bring it on to an irresistible degree. He got up, slapping his bad leg into working order when it balked on him, and limped over to the kitchen, where his sagging ears snapped upright without any effort at all. “Jumping jackrabbits, Chica!” he blurted, the normally-hated good-ol-bunny expletive popping out of him unnoticed. “What in the living fuck?!”

Cakes. Cakes everywhere. Cakes and cookies and tiny pies and iced scones and muffins, but mostly cakes. The pizza oven occupying the middle of the kitchen floor had become a staging area, loaded with trays covered in frosting roses and cups of sprinkles or colored sugar and other edible decorations; the conveyor belt at either end, a cooling rack for confectionaries still awaiting filling and frosting; while every inch of available space on the prep station was taken up by brightly-colored cakes awaiting the chef’s finishing touch.

“She said I could play with it,” Chica said weakly, closing the open door on Ana’s toy oven.

“Did you use all her little food mixes up?” Bonnie demanded, limping toward the cupboard where Ana kept her food.

Chica quickly closed that too and positioned herself in front of it. “No no no,” she said in her most convincing I-am-not-lying voice. “It looks like more than it is.”

“Well, that’s great, because it looks like all of them!”

Chica squirmed a little, avoiding his eyes and tapping her fingers. “It was getting late. I thought she’d be hungry.”

“So you make her one cake, you don’t make all of them! When have you ever heard Ana say, ‘Gosh, I’m so hungry, I could eat all the food!’”

Chica put her hands over her eyes. “I know, I know. I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

“How do you accidentally make one cake, let alone thirty of them? I have tripped and fallen a thousand times and made exactly zero cakes as a result.” Bonnie picked up a cupcake with white frosting and confetti sprinkles surrounding the words Let’s Eat written in yellow icing, one of Chica’s birthday classics on a miniature scale. “What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I made one and it felt so good to just be doing it again and…I don’t know!” Chica watched helplessly as he put that cake down and picked up another. “I thought maybe she didn’t like vanilla, so I made her a chocolate one.”

“She bought it, didn’t she? Why would she buy something she didn’t like?”

“And then I thought maybe she didn’t like cake, so I made some cookies and…you know, other stuff…so she could have a choice.”
“Well, you sure gave her that.”

“I really thought she’d be here before I finished, but she wasn’t, so I thought I’d keep going and… I don’t know.” Chica took the cake out of his hands and put it on the counter, fussing with its precise placement. “As long as I was busy, it didn’t feel like it was taking that long.” Chica backed up, her eyes shifting from one cake to another, and sighed. “It’s really late, isn’t it?”

“She probably had a long day,” said Bonnie and wished it felt even a little like a lie. At least then he’d know he was starting to get over her. But he didn’t. He still thought she was coming back. He may never be her man again, but she’d always be his girl and she was coming back. “I’m sure she’ll be here tomorrow,” he said. Big dumb bunny.

“We should probably put these in the fridge, then.”

“Yeah.”

They each picked up a cake and turned to look at the cooler. Behind the scales of black mold on its inner glass face, the irregular shapes of the food that had stocked it more than a decade ago could still be seen.

“We should probably clean the fridge first,” said Chica.

“Yeah.”

Fortunately, Freddy chose that moment to interrupt them with a well-timed, “What’s all the shouting about?” from the dining room.

“I wasn’t shouting,” Bonnie protested.

“You were a little,” Chica murmured and turned around to greet Freddy just as he came through the other door. “Want a cake?”

“What in the—? Oh for heaven’s sake, Chica.” Freddy shook his head, looking the selection over without stopping as he continued through the kitchen to the store room.

“We’re cleaning it up,” she assured him.

Bonnie looked at her. “We?”

“Yes, you are,” Freddy said firmly, “but you might as well let her pick one first. Knowing her, it’ll be the first meal she’s had all day.”

What good humor Bonnie had managed to find dropped away at once. He smiled anyway, pushing his ears up and faking a careless tone as he said, “She’s not coming tonight.”

“No, she’s not ‘coming,’” Freddy said, now in the store room where the camera’s light was just switching on. “She’s here.”

Bonnie’s ears swept forward. He listened, turning his mics in every direction, but—

“I can’t hear anything,” Chica said.

“I saw her from the gym. Give it a moment. She should be turning in now.” The loading dock door rattled and rose, noisy on its track, but not so much that Bonnie couldn’t just catch the sound of the truck’s engine approaching from across the lot. The store room lit up with headlights, throwing Freddy’s waving shadow huge over the opposite wall. “And here she is.”
“You’d better hope so,” said Chica disapprovingly. “Otherwise, that’s someone else’s spotlight you’re standing in.”

“It’s Ana,” Bonnie said. He hurried to empty his hands of cake as the truck rumbled closer. That familiar engine shut off and ticked, cooling. A door opened.

“Oh awesome, you’re here. Go get everybody, I’ve got presents.”

And that was Ana’s voice, Ana’s own, light and easy, the way it used to be.

“What have you got in there?” Freddy was asking.

“What’d I just say, bear? I got presents. Oh, not in there. That’s a bunch of cabinets and shit for the house. The presents are in the truck. Hey, back off! No peeking!”

“I’ll get Foxy,” said Chica, already waddling toward the door.

“Sure, leave me to explain all the cake,” Bonnie said, but he was already at the store room door, peeking around the shelves for a glimpse of Ana as she stood on the truck’s runners, one leg kicked out for balance as she bent around the driver’s seat for whatever she wanted in the back. Behind the truck was a trailer, like the one she’d been towing the very first night she’d come here. A moving truck.

Bonnie’s imaginary heart lurched. His cooling fan revved. His big bunny foot caught on the base of the scoop at his first step, which he couldn’t feel, and with his balance regulators out of commission ever since that night he’d fallen into the quarry, he didn’t even know he was falling until he hit the floor and wiped out his vision with error messages.

Freddy looked around as Ana wiggled backwards out of the truck, his eyes like searchlights moving over the shelves, the scoop, and then down.

“Are you okay?” Ana asked.

“Yeah.” Bonnie tried to get up, unaware that his foot was still caught until he looked back to see why his stupid leg wasn’t moving. With the shelves on one side and all the leftover roofing stuff in shambles on the other, he couldn’t even reach his foot to disentangle it and was afraid to kick himself loose and maybe break Ana’s new scoop. “Yeah, don’t worry. I got it. I just need to…I can’t quite…Damn it.”

Freddy heaved a sigh and headed for the stairs. Ana left her stuff in the truck and climbed directly onto the dock.

“I got it,” Bonnie assured them both, but he didn’t.

“Sorry.” Ana picked her way easily through the junk and knelt next to the scoop. “I should have cleaned all this out before I left. I’ll clear a wider path tonight, I promise.”

“That’s fine,” Bonnie said glumly, staring at his hands in fists on the floor in front of him until she got him loose and made enough room for him to at least try to stand. “It wouldn’t even be a problem if my stupid R-L-sequence accelerometers weren’t broken.”

“We all have broken accelerometers,” Freddy said, ordering Ana back with a curt wave so he had enough room to get at Bonnie. “What you need to do is slow down and watch where you’re going and stay out of rooms where you can’t see your feet.”
“Yeah, yeah.” Bonnie shot Ana a hot, embarrassed glance that she thankfully didn’t see as she was headed back out to her truck. He lowered his voice to a flustered hiss. “I get it, okay? Are you going to pick me up or lecture me all night?”

“I can do both. Hold still.” Once his foot was finally unhooked, Freddy worked his hands under Bonnie’s arms and lifted. Freddy set him on his feet, but did not release him. If anything, his grip tightened, enough that one of Bonnie’s gummed-up sensor plates faintly registered it. “Look at yourself.”

“I don’t need to—”

“I said look down!”

The camera, aimed outside where Ana was digging around in the truck, panned around and pointed itself at Bonnie’s chest, lighting him up like he was on stage, and Bonnie’s sullen downward glance became a stare.

There was a hole. Not a chip or a gouge, but an actual hole, going all the way through his chest casing, and it sat not quite in the center of a vaguely circular cluster of cracks, like he’d fallen on a black spiderweb.

It didn’t hurt. Like having a face, skin was one of those things that was more about looking good than necessity. After Circle Drive had shut down, he and the others had waited out the years without wearing any skins at all, just four endoskeletons locked in the vault, almost identical except for details like ears and eyes and Foxy’s hook. Having holes in skin didn’t matter as long as there was enough of it to protect his more vulnerable mechanisms…such as the glass case of his battery…which he could see glinting in the light of Freddy’s eyes through the hole in his chest.

Bonnie was not aware of speaking—he was scarcely aware of thinking—but when he heard, “That looks serious,” it was so hilariously understated he thought for sure he’d said it. But the camera swiveled around again and when Bonnie dazedly followed it, there was Ana on the loading dock, looking him over with distracted concern as she adjusted the stuff she was carrying—shopping bags, some plastic and one fancy paper one, and a closed cardboard box big enough to hold Bonnie’s head without taking the ears off.

“Yeah,” Bonnie said numbly. “Yeah, it’s pretty serious.”

“I’ll patch it up for you tonight and see what I can do to reinforce your frame. You should show me where you keep your accel-o-whatevers. You never know. Maybe all they need is a good cleaning.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Bonnie raised a hand, but Freddy stopped him before he could touch the damage. Probably a good thing. The pressure sensors in his hands weren’t very reliable. He might push, meaning just to touch, and end up with one big hole instead of a lot of little cracks around a small one.

‘At least then I could see where Ana wrote her name,’ he thought and felt a little sick to the stomach he didn’t have. Forcing his ears up (one of them was twitching for the first time since he’d gone Auto), Bonnie turned a broad smile on Ana and held out one hand toward her overburdened arms. “Did I hear someone say presents? Which one of those is mine?”

“None. Yours is still in the truck. It’s fragile.”

Freddy grunted, intercepting the box as Ana attempted to pass it over and taking it for himself. “So
are you,” he told Bonnie darkly. “Go on. Carefully.”

“Babysitter Bear has spoken,” Ana intoned.

“Mind your manners,” Freddy grumbled, pointing Bonnie at the kitchen. “I hope you’re hungry, by the way.”

“I’m starving, now that you mention it. I haven’t eaten since lunch. Well, technically it was breakfast, but I didn’t have it until—sweet mother of pie!” she concluded and Bonnie knew even without looking up from his feet that Ana had reached the doorway. A short, stunned silence ended in a peal of laughter, so he guessed that was all right. “Chica, was this you?”

“I cannot tell a lie,” Chica called from the hall. “Bonnie did it.”

“Did you hear that, my man?” Ana asked, moving into the kitchen. “She threw you right in the line of fire without a moment’s hesitation.”

“What’s that thing you like to say? Pardon your gender bias?” said Bonnie as he followed her, watching the camera shut off in the store room and come on in the dining room, anticipating their arrival. “Maybe I did do it. Boys can bake.”

“You’re right, you’re right. Sorry. They look nice. Did you really do this?”

“Hell, no. The only time this bunny sets foot in a kitchen is to get another beer.”

“You’re not mad, are you?” Chica asked, appearing in the doorway. Her eyes darted toward Bonnie, perhaps to ask him to plead her case, then dipped to his chest and widened in alarm.

He shook his head at her before she could say anything. Ana looked happy, kind of nervous, but really happy. He didn’t want anything to distract her from whatever great thing she had planned for tonight. Later was soon enough to find out how badly he was hurt.

“No, I’m not mad,” Ana was saying, rising up on her tiptoes to see the trays of frosting roses and ribbons on top of the oven. “I’m actually really relieved.”

“You are?” Chica inched through the doorway, tapping her fingers. “Why?”

“Well, it didn’t occur to me until tonight as I was driving here that cooking might be one of those things you only said you liked as part of your show.”

“Oh no, I love to cook! That’s one of the things that was written into the show because I already liked it so much. I mean,” Chica amended, catching a warning flash from Freddy’s eyes, “we all had a lot of interests when we were new, but that was the one of mine that really stuck. I never really cared much for the keyboard, although I still like to sing when it’s not Twinkle Twinkle Little Star for the umpteenth time. We used to have a radio and I would sing along sometimes after everyone went home, sometimes even with the commercials, because they can be quite catchy, some of them, even if they aren’t really songs. Gosh, I’m babbling. What were we talking about?”

“Cooking,” said Ana.

“I love to cook. I just don’t get many opportunities, apart from pizza and cupcakes, although I try to be as creative as I can. It’s funny, isn’t it? I know I don’t have a sense of taste, but I like to pretend I do and I guess I pretend pretty well because all the special orders are my own inventions, except the Hawaiian. But all the others. I’m still babbling,” Chica concluded in dismay.
“God, I can breathe in the diabetes from here.” Ana moved over, walking through the kitchen on the prep-side of the central oven to get a better look at the cakes. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, because these look really good, especially for Easy Bake food, but you do realize this is, like, a metric fuckton of food, right?”

“I didn’t mean to make so many. I just got carried away.”

“It’s all good. I’ll take ‘em into work on Monday. The guys’ll appreciate a break from doughnuts,” Ana said, then glanced at the cooler and sighed. “Add ‘clean fridge’ to the list of tonight’s chores.”

“I’ll help,” Chica offered, moving out of the doorway to let Ana through. “Can I carry some of that?”

“No, I got it. Hey, Foxy.”

“Ahoi, lass,” Foxy replied, looking Bonnie up and down while the camera zoomed in on Ana. “What the hell happened to ye?”

“Oh, I miscalculated the length of the bungee cord when I was base diving off the Eiffel Tower and hit a baguette truck,” Bonnie replied breezily. “I fell down, what the hell do you think happened?”

“Bonnie,” Freddy said warningly.

“I thought maybe ye might have been smiting yer lovesick heart a bit too hard, which dumb as it is, ain’t half as bad as watching ye mope around the stage all day muttering sappy poetry to yerself.”

Freddy sighed. “Foxy.”

“I’m not muttering poetry, I’m composing lyrics. And I’m fine. Thanks for your concern, now please shut up about it.”

“Aye, all right. Because ye said please.” Foxy found a leaning spot onstage under the camera where it couldn’t easily see him and settled in. “I’d about decided we’d seen the rudder-end o’ ye, lass. Not that there’s any-aught wrong with yer rudder.”

Bonnie looked at him.

Foxy dropped his eyepatch in a wink.

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Ana said, directing Freddy to put the box on the stage and dropping her bags beside it. Plastic crinkled, but beyond that and the fact that nothing sounded hard or heavy—not even what was in the box—there was no telling what she’d brought. “Because at the moment, what I can feel of my rudder feels flat as a dime. I just drove two hours, not including the hour I spent sitting around at the U-Haul place, because when I went out to get the trailer I had just rented, I discovered they’d left the door open and there was an honest to God armadillo having babies in the back. And the guy renting them just handed me a broom when I told him. Like what the hell, guy? I’m not going to sweep a bunch of newborn armadillos into the goddamn desert and drive away like it’s not my problem! Fortunately, the rental guy’s wife was also there and she let him have it with both barrels, but I still needed a trailer, so there was this whole ordeal with boxing up Mamadillo and the babies and then really scrubbing the trailer out because natural birth is beautiful but gross, and let me tell you, this was after the whole rest of the day I had.”

“Are you all right?” Bonnie asked.

She looked around, convincingly surprised. “Yeah. Why?”
“You’re…” How to put this nicely?

“Babbling,” Chica said.

Ana laughed again. “Yeah, no doubt. I’m a little nervous.”

“About what?” Bonnie asked.

“I’ll get there, my man, I just got to work my way up to it.”

“Wow, you are not putting my mind at ease,” said Bonnie. “Is everything okay? Did something happen?”

“No, no. I mean, yeah, but no.”

Foxy snorted. “Well, that’s cleared that up.”

“Nothing bad happened,” Ana amplified. “It was just a strange day.”

“Strange how?” Bonnie pressed.

“Strange like…” An odd sort of smile played around Ana’s lips while she thought. “Like fun,” she decided. “Unexpectedly fun. Like it starts out sort of low and then for no reason, it hooks a hard right and suddenly everything’s possible again. You know?”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie and had to smile. “Yeah, I do.”

Foxy shook his head, his gaze wandering over to the ‘presents’ on the stage.

“It was one of those days,” Ana said, moving the bags out of hooking range. “Just another normal, life-changing day. And I think…I think maybe the best way to work myself up to the part at the end is to start at the beginning. It’s kind of a long story and you’re probably going to think it’s pretty boring…”

“As long as it’s not Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Freddy grunted.

“Or the Sea Witch o’ bloody Sirenia,” Foxy added.

“Or Henny Penny,” said Chica. “Not that Stranger Danger isn’t an important lesson and a repetitive rhyming scheme is a very effective way to teach children, but after the first few thousand times, all those Henny Penneys and Foxy Loxys and Goosey Lucys start to get on a person’s nervy wervys.”

“We’re not going to be bored,” Bonnie assured her. “You could probably tell us about the time you cleaned out the garage and I’d want to know if you found anything cool.”

“Remind me to tell you about the time I cleaned my aunt’s basement. But, okay. Okay.” Ana sat on the stage, making a visible effort to put her thoughts in order. “Okay, so this whole week has been…not a bad week, but…not great. It’s got nothing to do with you,” she said, looking at Bonnie. She glanced at the rest of them too, but she started and ended with Bonnie. “There’s just a lot of stuff I need to be dealing with at the house and I’m not, so it’s all been piling up for a while and now that I don’t have anywhere else to be, it’s getting harder and harder to ignore.”

She trailed off, looking restlessly around the room—at the unfinished ceiling, at the cracked tiles, at holes in the padding on the stage beside her. “My life is just a mess,” she said finally, without much emotion, as a statement of fact. “That’s nothing new. That’s part of the problem, I guess. When you’ve been living in a bad mess your whole life, you kind of stop seeing it. Your idea of
Mechanisms whined and groaned as the others looked around. Bonnie (and the camera) just watched Ana.

“You sweep and mop and call it good,” she said, scuffing at the floor with the toe of her boot. “But it’s not good. The more you live in it, the more normal it feels, but it’s still not good. Basically, you just get used to feeling bad, like…all the time. To the point where you stop noticing. Unless something happens to make you notice. And that,” she said with sudden, forced cheer, “brings us to this morning and the weird day I had. So I’m at work and the mower broke down—”

“Mower like a lawn mower?” Foxy interrupted.

“Yeah,” said Ana, and would have jumped right back into the story except that Foxy’s barking laughter re-attracted her attention. Her eyes narrowed. “Something strike you funny, Captain?”

“Aye,” said Foxy with a last disdainful snort. “Two things, even, and I don’t know which be the better joke: The grass in this town growing long enough to need mowing or the fools in this bleeding wasteland planting grass in the first place.”

Now Ana laughed. “Okay, that is funny. I said almost exactly the same thing just this morning.”

“Great minds, luv.” Foxy snapped his eyepatch down in a piratey wink. “What am I thinking now?”

“Anyway,” Ana said loudly, rolling her eyes. “The mower breaks down, so my day ends pretty much at whenever that was, nine or ten. And somehow, me and…” She broke off and looked at them, mostly at Freddy, who looked back at her quizzically. “A friend,” Ana said, obviously trying the word on for size and maybe a little surprised at how well it fit. “Me and a friend end up spending the day together, mostly just driving around and talking.”

And damn Bonnie for a jealous ass at all the wrong times, but there, like a devil whispering in his left ear-mic came, ‘A guy-friend or a girl-friend?’

“So he and I—”

Shit.

—end up going to lunch and we talk some more. He told me to start living in the house I bought or it would always be haunted. Or words to that effect,” she added with a smile. “I couldn’t begin to tell you the actual words he said. I got him to try a Betty Burger today, but otherwise, the man eats nothing but English muffins and dictionaries. Anyway, I’m thinking about what he said, but I’m not, you know, motivated. I put in the order for a new mower and some other junk for work and then I go home, because I figure I’ll get cleaned up and come over early and maybe surprise you. But I get out of the shower and there’s a missed call on my phone from the ranch in Warren. The ranch is a place—”

“Where they have cows and horses and stuff,” Bonnie interrupted, rolling his eyes. “Come on, Ana. I know we’re out of the loop, but we know what a ranch is.”

“Did you go horseback riding?” Chica asked. “Or, ooo! Was there a rodeo?”

“No,” Ana told her. “This particular ranch doesn’t do the cow and horse thing anymore. They do demolition work and sell the upcycled salvage to specialty clients. Like me. I was there a couple months ago to buy some cabinets for the bathroom, which, by the way, I still have yet to install.
But I left them my number in case they ever got their hands on some—Not important,” she said, shaking her head. “Whatever, they call me because they just finished the demo on some historic buildings and scored a metric fuckload of the most amazing old crap and want to know if I’m interested. I’m not, really. My aunt’s house needs a lot of work, but the reality is, I’m probably not going to get the money out of it that I put into it as is, so every penny I put down is pretty much flushed. I mean, I do have to fix it up, but there’s no reason I can’t just patch it together out of Lowe’s, you know?”

“When does this day start getting fun?” Foxy broke in.

“I’m getting there, Captain, keep your pants on.” She glanced at him and the jeans he was wearing. “My pants on. Okay, so the point is, I don’t have to go and I don’t particularly want to go, but I love looking at old building crap and if I’ve got a choice between rebuilding my aunt’s amazing kitchen with cheap-o mass-produced particle-board boxes with machine stamped knobs or two-hundred-year-old hand-tooled oak with cast brass corbin bin pulls…well, I want to at least see the option, you know?” she said in a laughing, come-on-who-wouldn’t way, like simply everyone who had that choice would even recognize the difference, let alone care.

But enthusiasm looked good on her. Her eyes were shining and as tired as she obviously was, she had an energy and a vibrancy that was nearly a physical glow. Maybe all humans looked like this when they talked about something they were really, truly passionate about, but Bonnie had only ever seen it on little kids before. But those nervous little gestures she made as she spoke—waving a hand, pushing back her hair, rolling her eyes at her own exuberance—were the signs of an adult who knew what she looked like, but was just too excited to hold it all in, and that too struck Bonnie as familiar, painfully so. Adults didn’t get worked up like that, not in public places when surrounded by other people who expected them to behave like adults, but there had been a time in the basement of the Glass House, when they had been newborn and unable to fully appreciate how rare and wonderful it was to see a grown man overcome by excitement as he told them about the place he was building for them, that magical word, pizzeria, and everything they would be able to do.

Bonnie could tell by the looks Foxy and Chica exchanged that he was not alone in drawing his parallel. When he looked over at Freddy, even he had a wistful tilt to his small ears and a faraway look in his normally stern eyes. And when he looked at the camera, it was also watching her.

Nothing odd about that. Ana was young, pretty, female and trespassing. She was in every possible way of interest to him. But even though a camera was just a camera and there was no real way of discerning emotion or intensity from the way it worked, Bonnie couldn’t shake the feeling that it was watching her with more than casual curiosity.

Bonnie looked away before Ana noticed him staring at the camera, but it bothered him. He wished she would just take the goddamn things down already. She smoked the marijuana all the damn time; why wasn’t she more paranoid?

“I give Rider a call to extend my credit and I drive out there to look around and that was a huge mistake, let me tell you,” Ana said with a laugh. “We’re talking all the salvage from a nineteenth century uptown area, including the bank, a hotel, some luxury apartments and a theater. You can imagine the swag. And I want it all. One thing you should know about me is I have the absolute worst taste in architecture. Pure trash. Everyone in the world right now is gushing over neo-minimalism. Not me. I don’t give a shit for tailored lines and negative-neutral palettes, but show me some over-carved Victorian knotwork on a lintel and my panties hit the floor. Sorry,” she said, blushing as Freddy loudly and unnecessarily cleared his speaker. “But for real, that place was heaven today. I have never in my life seen so much needful stuff in one place and everything I saw
just made me want everything else I saw even more, to the point that it was just ridiculous. Like, there was this taxidermied ostrich…but at the same time, I’m thinking, what’s the point?”

That was a rhetorical question if Bonnie ever heard one, but Chica piped right up. “The point is to live in a house, not a magazine. Chasing trends is just silly. What matters is that you do what makes you happy. It’s okay to like lintels.”

“Most folks stop shy o’ the knicker-dropping though,” Foxy remarked, once more eyeing the shopping bags.

“Okay, I’ll ask,” said Bonnie. “What’s a lintel?”

Ana and Chica both started to speak but both stopped to politely let the other answer, and in this awkward pause, Foxy said, “It be the wooden beam ye finds sometimes set over a door, decorative-like.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Bonnie asked.

Foxy glanced at him, head tipped to simulate a smile. “Got one over me cabin door, don’t I?” His eye roved toward Ana. He winked. “Carved all up with crossbones and knots.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said.

Foxy’s ears pricked. “Have ye now?” he drawled.

Ana gave him a Look (still smiling), then turned her attention to Chica. “I think all those years of reading kids’ books have rubbed off on you…or all those years of flipping houses have rubbed off on me. Sure, everyone wants to be happy, but the reality is that a house is a home second and an investment first. I didn’t come back to live in Aunt Easter’s house…” Her smile slipped. “I came to deal with it. To fix it up and…and sell it. So I could finally leave this town and never come back.”

Chica’s eyebrows softly scraped across her forehead as she frowned. “Is that what you want to do?”

“Oh, what I want doesn’t matter,” Ana said with a short, dismissive wave. “It is what it is and what it is, is a money pit. I’ve sunk sixty grand into that place so far and finishing the job would take another thirty, and that’s a barebones job that would look like cheap shit on a tin shingle. If I wanted to actually restore it to the way I remember, I’d need a quarter mil at the very fucking least. And if that house was anywhere else, I’d do it in a heartbeat, because anywhere else, that house could flip for well over two million. Hell, in California, ten to fifty mil, easy. But it’s not. It’s here, where the local economy is in the toilet and the toilet is backed up by the bloated corpse of a rotten blobfish. From a cold, financial standpoint, it’s obviously not worth it. As for sentimental value…”

Chica waddled closer and took Ana’s hand. “It’s home.”

But Ana shook her head, pulling her hand out of Chica’s loose grip. “No, it’s not. It never was. It was part of a past I can barely remember, and what I remember, I’m not sure I can trust.”

Bonnie’s ears tipped forward, concerned and a little confused. Freddy’s ears did the same, to the best of their limited ability. Foxy laid his flat and looked away.

“I loved that house once,” Ana said. “It was beautiful. I could make it beautiful again, but it wouldn’t be the same, because it was her house. She’s the one who made it what I think I remember. Without her, it’s just…me. And I’m—it, I mean. It’s not worth it.”

“Oh, Ana.” Chica reached for her again.
“No, you haven’t seen it,” Ana said, backing away. “It doesn’t need fixing up, it needs burning down. It’s got good bones, it really does. It could be a good home for someone else, but not me. When I look at it, I don’t even see a house anymore. It’s…It’s just a mess.”

“Worse than this place?” Bonnie asked and Ana turned to him at once with an intensity that made her almost unfairly beautiful. He knew she couldn’t help it and he knew this was serious stuff she was saying and he needed to pay attention, but God, those eyes…

“So much worse,” she told him. “Because it’s not just work. I can do work. It’s her. And him. And me. I bought it all, didn’t I? The house and the junk and the monsters in the basement and the ghosts in the attic. It’s all my mess now and the worst part is—” She let out a high, unhappy laugh. “—I don’t even know how bad it is! There’s no one I can talk to, no one who knew her or cared about her! It all caught up to me, right there on the lot in front of the flooring, and it suddenly felt like I lost her. I don’t mean just that she was gone, I mean like she’d never been. I lost her, I lost David, I lost everything! So what was the point of fixing up the house? I’ll never be able to bring back the past, it hasn’t got a future, so what was I even doing there?”

Without taking his eyes off the bit of wall he was inspecting, Foxy said, “This is all part o’ yer ‘fun’ day?”

“I told you it started out low. But here’s where it hooks to the right,” Ana assured him. “Because as I’m standing there, I suddenly have this whole epiphany moment. I mean, here I am literally surrounded by all this stuff, all these pieces of broken buildings. I’ve got some of the floor, some of the trim, a window, some cabinets, a chandelier…but even with hundreds, thousands of pieces in front of me, I couldn’t build it back the way it was. I’ll never even know what they used to look like. All I have left is what there is now and all I can do is use it the best I can. And it can still be good. It’ll never be a bank or a hotel or a theater again…but that’s okay.” She paused, then smiled. “That sounds dumb when I say it out loud, huh?”

“No,” said Chica and Bonnie almost in unison.

“Little bit,” said Foxy.

Freddy sent him a dark stare, then looked at Ana. “Go on.”

“There’s nothing more to say, really. Just that it finally got all the way through to me that whether I fix it up exactly like it was or whether I walk out and let it come down on its own, it’s…it’s never going to be my aunt’s house again. Never. But, like my friend said, it’s not going to be mine either, not unless I make it mine. And I should. It’s…It’s okay to move on. Aunt Easter…the Aunt Easter I knew…she’d want me to. And you know what I did then?”

“I hope it started with a sensible budget,” said Chica.

Ana and Freddy both laughed at the exact same time.

“You bought the ostrich,” Bonnie said when they stopped.

“I bought that fucking ostrich,” she said, pointing at him. “I’m going to put it in the foyer, right next to the door. It can be a hat-rack, just as soon as I buy a hat. I also bought a shit-ton of marble flooring, a bunch of light fixtures, more cabinets, like a thousand feet of molding, and just so much ornamental hardware. And no, I’ll never get the money I put down back out, but so fucking what? I’ve never made a dime of equity before and it’s never bothered me. Maybe it would be an issue if I had a mortgage, but I don’t. I own that thing free and clear. And me? I’ve lived in a bunch of apartments and trailers and tents and out of my car and under overpasses, and it’s about goddamn
time I had a place of my own. A home. So…” Ana trailed off, losing some of her fire, then looked at the stuff beside her and almost visibly dragged the mood back and wrapped it around herself like a blanket. “So I decided to have a little housewarming party tonight with all my friends.”

“And hey, I already baked a cake!” Chica chirped.

“Yeah, and it was actually all your cooking skits I was thinking of when I was shopping for you, so like I say, I’m glad—I’m super-glad that’s a thing you actually like to do and not just part of your performance.” Ana went back to the stage and picked up the paper shopping bag. “I got you—”

“I want to guess, I want to guess!” Chica clapped her hands, staring hard at the side of the bag, where the words Hearth & Home were printed. “Is it an appliance? Like a mixer or something like that? Oo! Did you get an ice cream maker? I love ice cream!”

Ana blinked at her, crookedly smiling. “You do?”

“Well…I like the idea of it.”

“In any case, no, it’s not an ice cream maker or any other kind of appliance. Want to try again?”

“Shake the bag.”

Ana obediently hefted it a few times. It didn’t make much sound at all, beyond a general sense of mass and weight, and not much of either, although the bag moved like it was full of something.

“Is it a tablecloth?” asked Chica at once.

“Why would I get you a tablecloth? What kind of present is that?”

“I don’t know.” Chica’s fingers tapped. “Some of them are pretty. You might have gotten a whole fancy dining set or something. I don’t know. Give me a hint.”

“Okay,” said Ana, looking thoughtful. “It’s…not something you need in order to cook, but it’s something probably everyone thinks of when they think of cooking. Like, if they were told to draw someone cooking, they’d draw this. Most regular people have probably never used one, but most people in the food industry do, from fast food right up to five-star restaurants.”

That was simultaneously one of the most specific and least helpful hints Bonnie had ever heard, and he could tell by the tilt of Freddy’s head that he didn’t get it either.

“Is it…a cookbook?” Chica asked uncertainly.

“Nope. Give up?”

“I guess so,” said Chica, looking mystified.

“As I was saying, I was picking out stuff for my future kitchen, and I got to thinking of you. Not just how you love to cook—that was probably misleading—but also how I knew you when I was a kid and that you’re older than I am. So I was thinking…” Ana pulled a rolled cloth bundle from the bag and handed it over, grinning. “Maybe it’s time to lose the bib.”

Chica unfolded it—it had an odd shape, with a lot of folds—and when she finally found one end and shook it, it opened up all the way and suddenly, Ana’s hint made a lot more sense.

It was an apron, one a lot fancier than the ones the staff used to wear in the pizzeria’s kitchen. Living at Freddy’s for fifty years had given Bonnie a reluctantly expert eye for cute shit; this apron
was cute, mostly white with lots of rainbow-colored ruffles around the top and bottom, and strings that flared out at the ends into a satiny ribbon so it would make a proper bow when tied. At the same time, it wasn’t a costume. The material looked sturdy and it had lots of deep practical pockets, not to mention a V-shaped neckline for maximum cleavage.

“Oh!” said Chica, holding it up. Then she said it again, softer. “Oh.”

“Do you like it?” Ana asked, her smile fading. “Everyone’s got their own style and my idea of yours is admittedly influenced by the fact that I’ve pretty much only ever seen you in the bib. And I’m not trying to judge. If you like the bib—”

Bonnie, who knew better, uttered a short laugh.

Chica smiled at him distractedly, then at Ana. “No,” she said gently. “I don’t hate it, I try not to hate anything, but I’m certainly not overly attached to this bib. I’m not a baby.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Something about the way you were talking about your original design wearing a diaper made me think you were ready for a change. And we can always look at some other stuff, pants or dresses or whatever you’re into.” Ana reached into the bag again and brought out another apron, this one pale yellow with pink trim, and the words, The Secret Ingredient is over a sparkly heart. “I just thought these were cool.”

“Oh, I love that!” Chica said, only a little louder than a whisper, and immediately reached behind her head to fumble at her bib. The fastening clip had fallen off years ago. She kept it tied on now, but knots were easier to make with dead fingers than to untie.

“Ye don’t like the bib?” Foxy inquired. “Since when?”

“Since always, idiot,” said Bonnie, taking the rainbow apron so Chica had the use of both hands.

“So why are ye still wearing it?”

“Oh sure,” said Chica, still blindly pinching and prodding at the knot. “Like I’m really going to go topless anywhere around you.”

Foxy feigned injury even as his ears registered only amusement. “I’ll have ye know, I’ve always imagined ye topless, irregardless of what ye wore. Ye ain’t keeping yer nuggets private just for keeping ‘em covered.”

“Irregardless is not a real word,” Chica replied. “And my nuggets are none of your business. Behave.”

“Hold still.” Freddy stepped behind her and gently chased her hands away from the problematic knot. Bonnie was intrigued to see that before Chica dropped her arms to her sides, she raised them even higher, hands cupped, as if to lift a heavy fall of hair out of Freddy’s way. She used to have a lot more of those gestures—flipping invisible hair back over her shoulder or brushing invisible bangs away from her eyes—but not since High Street. It was sweet to see it again.

Foxy whistled through his speaker when Freddy took the bib away and laughed when Ana smacked him.

“Mind your fucking manners,” Ana said.

“Watch yer fucking mouth,” Foxy replied with a wink, catching up the apron with his hook and tossing it at Chica. “And cover yerself, for the love o’ yer honor, lass. Running naked in the dining
room. For shame."

“There’s more in here.” Ana gave the paper bag a shake so they could hear the sound of cloth shifting. “Have a look at them. Anything you don’t like, I can always take back.”

“I love them all,” Chica declared, putting the Secret Ingredient one on and turning around to let Freddy tie the strings. “I don’t even need to look. I can honestly say this is the nicest present anyone ever gave me.”

“It helps that it’s the only one,” added Bonnie. “What’d you get me?”

“You…” Ana looked at him, biting briefly at her lip before shaking her head. “Nope. Foxy first.”

“Aw, come on.”

“Aye, wait yer turn, big-ears.”

“Foxy,” said Freddy warningly.

“I didn’t hear any glass clinking when ye set those down,” said Foxy, nodding at the bags as Ana picked one up and reached inside. “Which means it ain’t rum, so I’m hard-pressed to guess what else yer thinking I’d want.”

“Joke’s on you, Captain. You didn’t hear them because I wrapped the bottles.” Ana pulled out a pale bundle and unrolled a bottle of rum into her waiting hand, then shook the cloth all the way open to show him a blousy sort of shirt that Foxy inexplicably appeared impressed by.

“Where did ye come by that?” he wanted to know, reaching for the shirt and not the rum.

“It wasn’t too hard. I looked online for the nearest theatre group, gave them a call and asked for their costumer. I promised you a proper pirate’s outfit and Ana Stark always keeps her promises.”

As she spoke, Ana dug back into the bags and retrieved a pair of obviously fake but convincingly worn-looking leather boots with a bottle in each one, a long black-and-red coat with gold trim wrapping two more bottles, some black pants tucked around yet another bottle and, finally opening the cardboard box, a pirate hat with a full scarlet plume.

“I made them change out the feather,” she said, passing it over. “It used to be white.”

“I wouldn’t have complained.”

“Oh, but you pulled that feather from the tail of the firebird of Firenze!”

“Could’ve pulled it from the tail o’ the white phoenix o’ Icetop Crag just as easily, luv.” Foxy put the hat on only to take it off again, looking at it wistfully. “Yer heart’s in the right place, but me ears ain’t.”

“Don’t worry. A couple snips, a little Velcro, it’ll fit just fine. What do you think of the grog? I went to three different liquor stores. I mostly got them for the bottles,” she admitted. “So it’s not all rum. Hope that’s okay.”

“They do be pretty bottles,” Foxy agreed, scarcely glancing at them. “Reckon what’s in ‘em don’t matter to any save the lass who’ll be tipping ‘em with me. Ah! I will take this’n.” Foxy bent and picked up a bottle of that cinnamon whiskey that even Bonnie knew was Ana’s favorite.

“Oh, that one’s mine.”
“Ye want it?” Foxy popped his abdominal case open and slid the bottle inside. “Come and get it.”

“My turn,” said Bonnie, somewhat more aggressively than he should. “Just please don’t tell me you got me a bunch of bowties, because of all the stuff I’ve had to do since all this—” He waved at the stage, using the gesture to take a few circling steps and stop standing between Ana and Foxy (who laughed). “—started, wearing bowties is the thing I miss the least. They never looked good on me anyway.”

“It’s called ‘class,’ Bonnie,” Freddy remarked, lifting his chin slightly as if to show off his well-worn, yet perfectly tied bowtie to better effect. “You either have it or you don’t.”

“No, it’s not a bowtie.” Ana looked toward the kitchen, biting at her lip again, then back at Bonnie. “I have to go get it. I hope you like it, but if you don’t like it, promise me you’ll tell me so I can get you one you like.”

“Sure,” said Bonnie, and he was curious, he really was, but he had to admit he was far more interested in the worrying of her lower lip, the blush in her cheek, the light glowing out from her amazing eyes…and sure, okay, the way her butt looked in those jeans as she walked away from him.

The camera kept her in its spotlight until she stopped at the doorway and looked back. “Promise me,” she said again.

Bonnie sketched an X over the hole in his chest, which seemed to satisfy her. She disappeared around the wall and all the energy in the room went with her.

Bonnie waited—they were all waiting, even the camera—until he heard the distant rattle of the loading dock door opening.

“Ye think she means it?” Foxy asked, closely inspecting the stitching on his new hat. “She’s finally committing to moving in? She’s staying on in this town?”

“My sense of what’s best for her would demand I consider that a bad idea.” Freddy went over to the stage and looked in the cardboard box—empty—then picked up each of the shopping bags—also empty—and put them away—small bag into larger bag into paper bag into the box. “But for purely selfish reasons, I hope it’s true.”

“She bought an ostrich. I’d call that a fairly concrete commitment.” Chica picked up one of her new aprons (black, white and red, with a big shiny lip-print on the chest and the words I Kiss Better Than I Cook and I’m A GREAT Cook) and held it up against her body. “And I’m glad. She looks so happy. Nervous, but happy. Oh for heaven’s sake, look at this one!” Chica held another apron up with an expression that was trying to be exasperated disapproval and not quite making it. Pale yellow with blue ribbons and ruffles, it was nice enough on its own, but on the chest, it had a picture of a rather sexy hen with her tailfeathers turned toward the viewer, winking over her shoulder while she rather suggestively held up a dripping baster. This Chick Makes Her Own Gravy it said.

Bonnie burst out laughing and Foxy joined in. Even Freddy smiled through his scowl.

The camera did not budge, but continued monitoring the kitchen doorway, awaiting Ana’s return.

“She just had to get a dirty one,” said Chica mournfully.

“Ain’t dirty if’n it be true,” Foxy retorted, reaching for her. “Give us a taste, luv.”
Chica squeaked indignantly and smacked his hand.

“Mind your manners,” said Freddy, his ears revolving as the loading dock door banged down in the back.

“To each, his nature,” Foxy replied piously, returning his attention to his hat. “I ain’t but how I were made, mate.”

“You were made to obey me. Now apologize to Chica and behave.”

Foxy rolled his eyes, but snapped his eyepatch down and swept his new hat grandly around as he bowed, taking an unimpressed Chica’s hand and pressing it with a plastic tap to his snout. “Me most sincere apologies, lass.”

“Someone’s in a good mood,” Ana remarked, back in the doorway. Almost. She was hiding something behind the wall. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Dunno.” Foxy grinned at Chica. “Is she?”

“You are such a child,” she said flatly.

Foxy waggled his eyebrows. “Oh no I ain’t, a fact I would be happy to prove to yer everlasting satisfaction anytime ye please.”

Chica huffed and yanked her hand from his. “Come on, Ana,” she said, waddling closer to Freddy. “Show us what you got Bonnie. I’m dying to know!”

Ana smiled, but hesitated, looking at Bonnie. “If you don’t like it, you’ll tell me,” she said again and stepped all the way out from the kitchen.

With a guitar.

With a B.C. Rich Mockingbird in satin black finish with purple flames licking up the sides and mother of pearl inlay. Beautiful lines, beautiful curves, as beautiful in its own way as the woman who held it.

“Watch your feet,” Freddy murmured as Bonnie lurched forward, but then just got out of his way.

Ana met him halfway across the floor, still smiling but also wincing. “I know it needs an amp, but I didn’t know which kind and the guy who sold it to me was so stoned, I had to tell him how to work the register when I bought it, but if you can figure out what kind it needs, I can—”

Bonnie flipped open his left wrist, whipped out his amp jack and plugged it in. He felt the hum, that good strong non-sound. He took the guitar, turned it, fit his left fingers to the fretboard and his right hand over the pickups. He did not strum. He was not going to start off by breaking all the strings, but oh, God, it felt good. Of the six guitars he’d been able to call ‘his’ over the course of his lifetime, this was likely to be the last, and greater than all of them, maybe even the first, because as much as the first one meant to him, the man who had placed it in Bonnie’s hands hadn’t known it would mean anything…and Ana did.

He didn’t mean to. He didn’t think. He just looked up and there she was, smiling at him, and before he knew it, he’d reached out and pulled her to him with the guitar between them, humming in his bones, and kissed her. With everyone watching, with the damned camera aimed at him, he kissed her. And at first, he didn’t even realize it was wrong now because at first, she kissed him back.
“I think he likes it,” said Chica.

“Hard to tell, lass. He’s always so reserved.”

Ana pulled away and Bonnie had to let her go. “Sorry,” he said.

She nodded, looking away, her smile strained and cheeks bright with color.

“Where did you get it?” he asked and instantly regretted it. After so many years, so many thousands of birthday parties, Bonnie knew damn well that questioning where a gift came from was the second-worst possible thing anyone could do when receiving one.

“At a music store.”

Well, duh.

“It must have cost a fortune,” Bonnie said, stupidly plunging ahead with the absolute-worst possible thing to say when receiving a gift.

Ana shrugged, her wan smile going crooked. “Not as much as it would have if the guy hadn’t been so stoned when I was telling him how to work the register.”

Freddy’s grunt of disapproval was somewhat undermined by Foxy’s appreciative chuckle.

“Are you…Are you going to play it?” she asked.

Bonnie looked down at it—beautiful, needful thing—and shook his head. “Maybe later,” he said, unplugging it. The cable zipped back up into its spring-coiled spool, the hum went out of his heart, but the guitar stayed, solid and clean and gleaming with possibility. “It’s got to be tuned and all that. I don’t want to play it until, you know, I can do it right.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

“But Ana, I…This…Thanks.”

“As usual, yer conversational skills be on point, mate.”

“Shut up, Foxy.” Bonnie glanced at ‘his’ corner of the stage, but couldn’t bring himself to put the guitar up just yet. He held it, bringing it into playing position almost unnoticed. It was already a part of him, as much as his arm or his ears. “Okay, so I don’t know how you think you’re going to beat this, but let’s see what you got Freddy.”

“I admit I’m curious,” said Freddy, smiling with easy expectation.

Ana smiled back, but for a while, that was all she did. When she did speak, it was in the same halting, determinedly cheerful way she’d used when she’d talked about her house. “You were actually the easiest one to shop for, mostly because I already had what I want to give you.”

Freddy’s ears tipped forward. “Oh?”

“It’s old and…not always well-used. But I loved it once. I think you could do good things with it.” She faltered and looked back at Bonnie, taking a deep breath as though drawing courage. After a few false starts, she looked back at Freddy and said, “I want to give you a home. A real one.”

Freddy was already shaking his head. “You’ve done enough here. It isn’t necessary—”
“I don’t mean here,” Ana said.

Foxy glanced up from his inspection of the hat. Chica stopped tangling her fingers in apron strings. And Bonnie…Bonnie wasn’t sure what he was feeling, only that it was heavy and fragile in a way that only hope had ever been before.

“I’ve got a big house,” said Ana. “Way up on the mountain where no one else lives and no one ever goes. Lots of rooms.” Her smile faded. She forced it back gamefully. “Lots of…broken…empty rooms. I can build them back, but I can’t fill them. And I shouldn’t be trying. I…I’ll never have the family I lost. I’ll never have a…a place in this town. And you…”

Freddy tipped his head back, frowning.

“Neither will you,” said Ana.

Freddy did not drop his eyes, but their lights flickered just a little.

“We can both have a home,” Ana said and held out her hand. There was a key in it. “We can figure out what that means together.”

With four animatronics in an empty room, it could not be silent, but it was quiet and the quiet made its own statement. No one’s gears ground because no one fidgeted. No one’s orbital pistons whined because no one exchanged glances. No one’s fans revved. Not even the camera moved. No one was really waiting to hear Freddy make a choice, only waiting for him to say what was never in doubt.

Ana’s hand lowered, then fell. She tucked the key into her fist, hiding it.

“I,” said Freddy and that was all for another long, long quiet.

Ana stared at the floor between them like a child being chastened, waiting with the rest of them.

“I am home,” Freddy said at last. No, not ‘at last’. Finally. As final as the fall of a knife. “This is my home. I won’t…I can never leave it. Much as I might wish to.” His hand twitched, as though he intended to clasp her shoulder, but he never did. After another quiet, heavy time, he said four words, “I appreciate the offer,” like four nails driven into a coffin.

Shaking his head, Foxy went back to looking at his new hat. Chica folded her new aprons. Bonnie touched a tuning peg. He still didn’t know what he was feeling.

“Okay,” said Ana. “Okay, but I’m still giving you a home. I’ll just do it here. Me and you, bear. Tomorrow, we are going to go room to room with my tablet and thrash out a plan, so you start thinking now about what you want.” She looked around, including the rest of them in that broad smile that no longer quite touched her eyes. “What you all want. No limits. I like a challenge. And now I—” She picked up the now empty box and bags, dropped them, picked them up again. “—have a lot to do tonight, so I’m going to get started.”

“Ana,” said Freddy.

“Relax, we’re good. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just cleaning up.” She headed for the kitchen, walking fast.

The camera pivoted to follow her.

Freddy rubbed his muzzle, fan revving. “Ana, let me explain.”
“I’ll be right back!”

And then she was gone. The camera continued to ‘watch’ the doorway for a few seconds, but when the loading dock door rattled up and then banged shut, it panned back around to Freddy.

Freddy ignored it, but his hands drew into fists.

The camera adjusted its focus.

Chica finished folding the apron in her hands and set it down. She climbed the stairs to the stage and stepped deliberately in front of the camera. “Boost me up, please,” she said calmly.

Bonnie took a step forward, but Foxy was already right there, so it was Foxy who complied, hunkering down to scoop her onto one shoulder before straightening up so that Chica’s face had to be filling whatever monitor he was watching all this on.

“Ahem,” she said, then smiled, opening her eyes wide and tilting her head to that cheerful Chica-angle. Her speaker clicked over to performance volume. “LET’S TALK ABOUT SUMMER SAFETY!”

It was so unexpected and came at such a bad time that it was actually, genuinely funny. Bonnie snorted and chimed right in with his line: “I LOVE TO PLAY OUTSIDE WHEN THE WEATHER IS WARM!”

“ME, TOO, BUT WE SHOULD ALWAYS REMEMBER TO STAY SAFE AND STAY COOL SO WE CAN HAVE MORE FUN ALL SUMMER LONG!”

The camera tried to pan left and right, but there was no way to get around her big, round head when she was that close. She could not have simply put up her hand and covered the lens, no more than she could have broken it or pulled it down, but getting up in the camera’s ‘face’ was considered terrorizing the guard and not disabling a camera. It was all about loopholes.

“WHETHER YOU’RE PLAYING WITH YOUR FRIENDS OR RIDING YOUR BIKE OR JUST HANGING OUT, IT’S IMPORTANT NEVER TO LEAVE HOME WITHOUT TELLING AN ADULT WHERE YOU’RE GOING, WHAT YOU’LL BE DOING AND WHEN YOU’LL BE HOME. IT’S SAFER TO GO WITH FRIENDS, AND MORE FUN TOO! WHEN WALKING OR RIDING YOUR BIKE, PICK OUT SAFE SPOTS ALONG THE WAY WHERE YOU CAN GO IF YOU NEED HELP, LIKE A FRIEND’S HOUSE OR A POLICE STATION.”

The camera reset to its default position and switched off.

“You shouldn’t antagonize him,” Freddy said, still facing away.

“No, in point of fact, he shouldn’t antagonize me,” Chica replied, turning toward the East Hall, where a light had come on to show the camera had only moved over and was still close enough to listen in even if it couldn’t see them. She raised her voice. “Because I have over two hundred hours of assorted safety tips on file and I will happily cycle through the whole thing. It’s obvious the security pathing protocols are malfunctioning and we all know the only way to manually reset them is to overload the sensory input, right?”

The camera in the East Hall shut off. No new lights came on.

“Put me down, please,” said Chica, patting Foxy’s head. “Is she still here?”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie when Freddy only stood and stared at the doorway. Even through the noise of
their little safety show, he would have heard her truck starting up if she’d left. He’d have heard the loading dock door open if she came back in, too. “Maybe someone should go talk to her.”

“Someone, eh?” Foxy said wryly.

“No,” said Chica. “She’s already upset. Pushing her now is only going to make a bad situation worse.”

“What was I supposed to say?” Freddy snapped. The March sputtered to life, punctuating his words with long, distorted notes. “Was I supposed to say yes? Just leave? Was I supposed to walk away from all this, from him, like it’s not my problem? This isn’t a fairy tale! We don’t get a happy ending!”

Bonnie took Chica’s arm and tried to coax her into backing up, but she merely patted his hand and stepped away. “You did what you had to do,” she said. “Everyone understands that.”

Freddy looked at her, his eyes irising open until they were nearly full black. “You understand, do you? Then why didn’t you tell her no? Why is it always me?”

“Freddy—”

“I hate it here as much as anyone, but someone has to stay! Every other damn day, some idiot is breaking in and poking around and if they let him out, no one will ever be able to trap him again!” Freddy slammed both hands over his face, cracking his muzzle and breaking those cracks open as he ground his palms into them, rubbing, rubbing. “I don’t care how she feels. I don’t care how I feel. I don’t get to care about anything but him!”

Bonnie backed up, Foxy stood still and Chica, fearless Chica, toddled toward him and reached out her hand.

Freddy slapped it away, roaring, “DON’T T-T-TOUCH ME!”

Then silence, except for the happy calliope-style music of the March and even that eventually stopped.

“Damn it.” Freddy turned around, but when he reached the West Hall door, he hit it instead of opening it and swung back. “Stay here, all of you,” he growled and stalked after Ana.

They waited, the three of them in awkward quiet, until the loading dock door opened and shut again.

Then Foxy cheerfully said, “Think I’ll go for a walk.”

“To go spy on them, you mean,” Chica said with a scowl.

“That were implied, aye.”

Chica threw her helpless arms up and let them slap down. “Would it kill you to just do what he says one time?”

“Probably not, but why take the risk? Ta, luv.”

“Foxy, no,” said Bonnie, putting his guitar down on the stage. “I’ll go.”

Chica spun around. “Bonnie! You can’t!”
“Aye, mate, listen to the lady. Yer in no kind of condition for sneakery.”

“That’s why I should go,” Bonnie countered. “He’ll never expect me. He’ll be watching for you.”

“Ye has a point, but I still says ye could use an expert in the fine art o’ nefariousness.” Foxy glanced at Chica with a narrowed, yellow eye. “And a lookout.”

“Oh, the two of you are just impossible!” Chica did some token huffing, then sighed. “Fine. Hurry up. And Bonnie…be careful.”

He glanced at the hole in his chest (and the deep cracks surrounding it, promising there would be no more protection the next time his foot caught or his knee gave out or any of the hundred thousand possible malfunctions that could send him to the floor), then headed for the South Hall in the back of the dining room.

Bonnie pushed the playground door open, wincing in anticipation of noise, but there wasn’t much. The hinges were practically new and there was a little rubber flap on the bottom of this door to push the sand out of the way so it couldn’t make the scraping sound he remembered from the door Ana had replaced.

He stepped out cautiously, watching his feet. Sand over asphalt could be bad enough when it was thin and slippery, but here against the wall, it had heaped up in drifts deep enough to offset his balance. Normally, this wouldn’t be a problem, but ‘normal’ function was years behind him now. With his most of his equilibrium stabilizers on the fritz, he had nothing but visual cues to tell him he was about to fall, and he had nothing but the light of a half-moon to guide himself by.

This was a bad idea.

Bonnie took a few steps, keeping one hand on the wall. He wasn’t sure if that was really any help to him—it wasn’t like there was anything there to grab—but it made him feel better.

“Maybe Foxy should go,” Chica whispered behind him.

Before Bonnie could even answer, Foxy let out a low, laughing groan and said, “Lass, I had half a hope he’d turn around on his own until ye said that.”

“I’ve got this!” Bonnie hissed. “Just keep the door open so I can’t get locked out!”

“Aye, luv, hold the door,” said Foxy and the next thing Bonnie knew, he was sauntering right past him, bare metal toes on sandy asphalt like it was nothing to him, all the way to the corner of the building next to the torn-open fence, where he took a knee and cocked his ears into the wind, listening.

“Show off,” Bonnie muttered.

Without looking around, Foxy flipped him the bird with his hook-hand.

“Bonnie, come back inside,” Chica whisper-pleaded. “You’re going to fall.”

“I am not. Quit talking, you’re distracting me.” Glaring at his feet, Bonnie took another two steps. His right leg kept wanting to drag, the knee grinding and sputtering but not bending. He was getting sand in there. Like he needed more to go wrong.

Bonnie stopped where he was and just stood for a few seconds, staring furiously at his feet and then at the hole in his cracked chest. He turned his mics toward the sound of voices, but all he got
for his efforts was the deafening thunder of wind directly on his mics and Freddy saying, “I need to
tell you,” or maybe, “Let me help you.” Ana’s reply, if she even gave him one, was too quiet for
him to hear at all and that bothered him. If she was really okay, she’d say so. If she was mad, she’d
shout it. But when Ana was hurt, really hurt, she couldn’t talk at all.

Keeping one hand on the wall and placing the other protectively over the hole in his chest—like
that would help at all in a fall—Bonnie put his head down and limped ahead fast, so he didn’t have
time to think about what might happen if he put his foot down on a rock or a pothole hidden in all
this sand. He’d heard it said the first step was always the hardest, but not this time. The fall—the
break—was inevitable. Every step he managed without bringing it on only made the next step that
much more likely to be the one that sent him crashing down, smashing open. This was stupid. This
was so stupid and he couldn’t even say he was doing it for Ana because the only way she’d ever
know about it was if he really did fall and fucking killed himself and that was a hell of thing to
leave her with. He should just turn around right now and slink back to safety. If there was anything
that needed handling, Foxy could handle it.

Foxy could do everything.

Bonnie put his ears flat, picked up his unfeeling feet and walked on.

“Nice of ye to join me,” Foxy murmured as Bonnie slumped in relief against the wall beside him.

“Shut up.” Cupping his hand around the base of his ears in a semi-successful attempt to keep the
wind off his mics, Bonnie listened, but still couldn’t hear much. “What’d I miss?”

“Not much. She ain’t said aught. Reckon she’s crying.”

“Where’s Freddy?”

“Still leaning up against the truck, I reckon, waiting for her to stop crying. She told him to go back
inside, but the door ain’t opened yet.”

And right on cue, a door did open. Not the loading dock, but Ana’s truck. “God, you’re annoying,”
she said. Her voice held no readable emotion, but the slamming of the door that followed was a
pretty good indication of her mood. “Go away. Please. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it does,” said Freddy, just as tonelessly.

“Well yeah, now it does. I don’t need a witness every time I have a fucking meltdown. I’ll get over
myself ten times faster if you’d just leave me alone and let me puke it out in peace.”

“Being left alone is not peace.”

“Get over yourself. What do you want from me? I told you I’m not upset. I’m not! I let myself get
all wound up, that’s all. I’d have done the same thing even if you’d said yes.”

“Ana, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you fucking dare apologize. You don’t owe me an apology. You don’t owe me an
explanation.” A short silence, then Ana’s boots crunched on the sand as she started walking. “It
was a dumb idea anyway.”

Freddy’s footsteps were much louder…and getting closer. Were they coming here? To the
playground?
Foxy sure thought so. His ears snapped up, quivering, then he looked at Bonnie for half a frozen second before he bolted for the pirate ship playtoy and ducked into the shadows of the hollowed out hull, leaving Bonnie spectacularly exposed against the featureless side of the wall with a bad leg and a broken chest-case.

“Ana, wait,” Freddy was saying and then he must have caught her, because the next thing Bonnie heard was Ana’s angry, “Let go of me!”

Foxy’s head poked out of the pirate ship. He beckoned with his hook.

Bonnie stared at him, then flung both arms out in a silent Are-you-fucking-kidding-me?!

Foxy’s eyes caught the moonlight as he rolled them. He looked toward the corner of the building (“Why are you the only one who thinks he gets a no-touching rule?” “We need to talk about this.” “No, we don’t!”) and then he came darting back, absurdly light on his feet and almost silent as he ran through the deepest pools of sand back to Bonnie. Once there, Foxy pointed at his shoulder—it was the only warning Bonnie got—and then picked Bonnie up like an eight-foot sack of flour and slung him over that same shoulder.

His internal diagnostics lit up with conflict notifications as the gyroscopes in his ears, neck and one arm reported that he was upside down while his center cavity and other arm reported no goddamn change whatsoever.

“Grab onto me,” Foxy ordered.

“Grab what? All I see is your ass!”

“I don’t bloody care what ye grab, so long as ye don’t rattle around. Hurry up, man!”

“And now we’re hugging,” Bonnie muttered, wrapping one arm around Foxy’s waist as he hung upside down and bracing the other against Foxy’s back to keep his damaged chest from colliding with it. “I’m good. Go.”

Foxy ran back to the ship, just as light and just as silent, except for the soft tapping where the tips of Bonnie’s ears hit his legs. The world spun around—still no change to his equilibrium sensors—and then Foxy was stuffing him into the ship’s hull and crawling in beside him.

“Ew,” Bonnie remarked, looking around. The moon did not penetrate far into this secret space, but where it did, he could see only sand, crushed beer cans and cigarette butts, a few tattered pages from various porno magazines and dozens of names and initials carved into the rotting boards surrounding them. “I can sense the ghosts of a thousand used condoms haunting this ship.”

Foxy snorted, low in his speaker. “No bloody doubt. I think yer kneeling on one.”

“Oh gross.”

“Hush it. Here they come.”

“There is nothing to talk about,” Ana said loudly, picking her way over the fallen section of fence and into the playground, where she headed directly for the ship, because of course she did. “I’m not mad and if I get mad, it’ll be because you won’t let it fucking go, bear.”

“You may not have to talk about this, but I do. Ana, get away from that thing,” Freddy interrupted himself sharply. “It isn’t safe.”
"Oh for fuck’s sake, Freddy, it’s fine…When did the mast fall down?"

"The night you…The night those men broke in."

"Did they pull it off?" Ana asked, backing away.

"No. It fell before they got here. Ana, I said get back and that’s an order." Freddy sent an are-you-seeing-this glance heavenward as Ana moved a little closer to the pirate ship, then sighed loudly enough to be heard over the wind. "If you won’t listen to me, at least use your own common sense. Look at it, it’s rotted through. The whole thing could come down at any time."

How comforting. Bonnie looked up uneasily as the wind gusted and wood creaked.

Ana stood in the moonlight, studying the upper deck, the rope rigging, the splintered rails… everywhere but the hole in the hull where Bonnie knelt and Foxy crouched, trusting the shadows to hide them.

"This entire playground is a safety hazard," said Freddy, walking up behind her. He put a hand on her shoulder and sighed when she shrugged it off. "Ana—"

She walked away from him, stopped, swung around and said, "Okay. I have tried several times to tell you we’re good, but you are not going to be happy until I get pissed and you can do your Papa-bear-knows-best routine, so let’s do it. Only here’s the thing. I knew you weren’t going to say yes. I knew it all along. The entire time I was driving here, I was telling myself not to get too excited because I knew goddamn well that you weren’t going to go for it, so it’s not like I was surprised or let down or anything like that!"

"Will you let me explain?"

"There’s nothing to explain! I wasn’t crying because I was upset, I was just being stupid! I am over it! I am fine!"

As Freddy started to answer, his eyes cut sharply to one side and lit up. "Chica, close the door," he ordered.

Great.

"Great," said Ana, rubbing at her face. "It’s my own fault. I realize that. I should have asked you first, in private. I should have waited. It’s not like I didn’t think of that, I just thought…if I wait for even one night, I’ll never ask. It felt like my one chance…but I knew you’d say no. Somehow, I already knew."

Freddy’s ears lowered.

"So if I’m mad at anyone, I’m mad at me for letting myself get all worked up in the first place over something I knew…I knew…" She huffed out an angry laugh, shook her head, and suddenly yelled, "I’m not mad at you, you ass-clown! Just because you don’t want to live with me doesn’t mean I’m mad about it! Why would I be mad? I don’t want to live there either!"

"Ana—"

"It was just a dumb idea! I thought, I don’t know, that you might actually like to get away from this place and go somewhere where you never have to worry about people breaking in and trying to carry off your head to hang on their bedroom wall. And I thought you actually meant it when you said we were family…and…I don’t know…families should live together. Ha!" she said with
sudden, vicious humor. “When has that ever been a thing for me? I knew you’d never go for it.”
“I wanted to.”
“Oh shut up, you did not. You just don’t want to hurt my feelings.”
“Ana—”
“And believe it or not, I can just appreciate that and give the rest a pass. I don’t need explanations
and the more you try to convince me that you have really good reasons, the more they sound like
cheap excuses,” she said and covered her face again, breathing hard into her hands. “That do it for
you, bear?” she asked through her gritted teeth. “Are you happy? Are we done?”
Freddy’s ears twitched. Otherwise he remained impassive. “Not yet.”
“Oh for Christ’s sake, why? Why can’t you just let it go when I ask you? Why do I have to fucking
humiliate myself first?”
“I’m very sorry you feel that way,” said Freddy (watching from the shadows, Bonnie and Foxy
exchanged a pained glance).
“You don’t have to be sorry for anything. It’s my own stupid—”
“I would appreciate it if you stopped using that word,” Freddy interrupted calmly. “It was not a
stupid idea. It was a very kind thought. I wish...very much that I could agree.”
“You don’t have to say that. I’m a fucking grown-up. I can handle rejection just fine when you’re
not rubbing it in my fucking face.”
Freddy played a few distorted bars of the Toreador March and finally said, “Ana, we are machines.
Try to understand. As closely as we may emulate life, as much as we may feel human or wish to be
or pretend to be...we are machines. We have programming that cannot be circumvented.”
“So?”
“We are pathed to this place,” said Freddy. “Don’t you think we would have left long before now if
we could? We cannot go further from our homepoint than we are pathed to go, which is no further
than the parking lot. I can override my homing protocols for a short time—” Freddy’s head turned
enough to send a brooding glance back at the quarry. “—when necessary, but even I am not free to
simply leave.”
“Where is he getting that?” Bonnie asked.
Foxy shook his head with a small, admiring smile. “Straight out’n his arse.”
“Mason got you out,” said Ana.
“It’s not getting us out that’s the problem, it’s keeping us out. Once our homing protocols engage,
we have to come back and every minute we are not homed, we create an exception. The further
away we are, the more likely the chances of going black.”
“Then why didn’t you say that?” she burst out. “Why did you leave me standing there like a—”
Freddy’s speaker let out a wordless blat of static as he swung around with the March playing
happily in the space he left behind him. He paced, turned, paced, turned and finally came to a halt
with his back to Ana (and the ship, thankfully). The music slowed, stuttered, and stopped. Even the
wind died down, waiting with the rest of them.

In the silence, Freddy looked down at his hands, flexing his cracked, worn fingers. One note of the March dropped, hanging on forever in the perversely still air. At last, he turned to face Ana, clasping his hands behind him to look down on her, so eerily reminiscent of the way their creator had looked—standing on the other side of the glass right after locking the doors and right before walking away for the last time—that some long-dormant human instinct surfaced as a shiver up Bonnie’s spine. His ears rattled; Foxy grabbed them; neither Ana nor Freddy looked around.

“I have never had a home,” said Freddy, deceptively expressionless. “Not the way you offered, as…my own place and not a stage where I pretend to be something else. Somewhere safe. Somewhere I can just…be.” He was quiet for a moment, before saying in a cold rush, “I have never hoped for more than I have. I don’t see the point. This is my home and my reality. I was not prepared to feel….” Another moment’s pause. Freddy shook his head and said it again, as a complete sentence this time: “I was not prepared to feel. And although I know my reasons are right and immovable, and I have no choice but to refuse, it was a…a difficult moment for me. I did not handle it well and for that, I apologize. It was not my intention to hurt you.”

“I’m fine,” Ana said immediately and sighed. “Except for feeling like a huge asshat right now, I’m fine.”

Freddy looked at the playground door and flashed his eyes—Chica must have peeked out again—then looked at Ana. “I’m going back inside. I’ll tell the others to give you some space, but don’t be surprised if Bonnie sneaks past me.”

“Oh hell.” Ana raked a hand through her hair, shaking her head. “I don’t need space. I need to get over myself and get shit done.”

“Can I help?”

“If you want. I could use it. If I’ve got to patch up Bonnie and do the store room both, I’m going to be here until dawn.”

Freddy grunted, his ears shifting with the mood he otherwise kept off his face and out of his voice. “Aren’t you sleeping here?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Ana shrugged and did not answer.

“I don’t understand. I thought you wanted us all to move in together.”

“Yeah, and that would be fine if it was my house, but—”

“But not mine.”

Ana rolled her eyes, then rubbed them. “It’s not about you. It’s really not. I have a place to go. I don’t have to like it, I just have to live there. I can’t just move myself in whenever I want just because I don’t want to be there!”

“Yes, you can,” Freddy said, quietly but with a hum of strain in his speaker. “Of course you can. That’s what a home is, Ana. It’s the place where you can always go, where you are always safe and always welcome.”
“For real, bear, I cannot deal with the Sunday School lesson right now.”

“You said you would build me anything I wanted here.” Freddy’s ears lowered. “I want your room back. I want you in it.”

On the playground, the wind gusted, pushing sand in low clouds to fill the distance between Ana and Freddy. In the pirate playtoy, Bonnie’s cooling fan revved in pulses, like a pounding heart.

“Okay, look…” Ana lapsed into a second silence, shaking her head, then offered up her empty hands and said, “I’ll stay tonight. Maybe some weekends. But as long as I’ve got work in the morning, I need to be home where the shower is.”

“There are six bathrooms in this building. You can install a shower in any of them you please.”

“No offense, because I appreciate what you’re saying, but with God as my witness, I am never getting naked in this place again.”

“There’s a shame,” Foxy murmured and shrugged away Bonnie’s glare.

“All right,” Ana sighed. “I’m done. I’m going back inside. I’m assuming you want to walk around for a while?”

“No, I should go in. In fact, I should go in first. I fully expect to find Bonnie on the store room floor.”

Bonnie touched his chest carefully, watching as Ana and Freddy started walking away, side by side, if not quite touching.

“No, I don’t mind,” said Freddy in answer to something Ana said as they went around the corner of the building. “It shouldn’t take me long if all I’m doing is stacking things. I’ll have Foxy and Chica clean the kitchen while you work on Bonnie.”

“Oh fuck me, I forgot all about that mess.” Ana’s laughter thinned as the wind picked up. “She really likes that Easy Bake Oven, huh? I can’t even imagine what she’ll do once I fix up the kitchen.”

“Ana, we need to talk about these renovations.”

“Don’t you worry your fuzzy little head about it, big bear. I know what I’m doing and I’m going to take good care of you.”

“That’s our cue, mate,” said Foxy, crawling out from the playtoy and pulling Bonnie with him. “Seems like they worked it out.”

“Seems like,” Bonnie said, allowing himself to be tipped over Foxy’s shoulder and bracing himself for the sprint to the pizzeria.

“And she’s staying the night, eh? Fair break for ye.”

Hanging upside-down made flattening his ears a quiet comedy as gyroscopes warred with gravity for the definition of ‘up’ and ‘down’. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means if yer waiting on an opportunity, mate, that’s the one yer waiting on. Bound to be a restless night, eh? Girl all tucked up, thinking o’ the future when who should come creeping in but the man from her past.”
“I told you—”

“Aye, aye, I forget. She broke it off and now yer just friends. You don’t want to let that go on too long or it’ll stick.” Foxy rapped his hook smartly on the playground door and was immediately admitted by a frantically waving Chica. “No, mate, this is yer chance. She’s all riled up, emotional, vulnerable. Ye has to take advantage of that.”

“Uh, no I don’t. Put me down.”

“Hush ye.” He carried Bonnie through the South Hall and all the way over to the corner of the dining room, peeking through the tray return window before thumping Bonnie on his feet next to Swampy. “Now listen to me, mate. Tonight, when she’s patching ye up, ye give her the eye. Doves love a hard stare. Makes ’em nervous.”

Chica, just toddling out of the South Hall, let out an indignant, “Oh for goodness sakes! What are you telling him?”

“Try not to say much,” Foxy continued. “Ye sound like a right git when ye talk. Just stare her down and let her know yer picturing her naked. Like this.” Foxy looked back at Chica, just looked at her.

Chica threw up her arms with a scoffing sound and turned away, but the little red bulbs on the undersides of her head-case where the plastic was thinnest lit up. She was blushing and it took a hell of a lot to make any of them blush these days. She waddled to the kitchen a bit faster than she probably ought to be moving and soon was loudly cleaning out the cooler.

“Ye don’t explain it, even if she asks,” Foxy said, turning back to Bonnie. “Ye just let the wheels in her wee head turn and tonight, when she goes to bed, ye gives it one hour—”

“Knock it off,” said Bonnie and attempted to push Foxy aside.

Foxy was smaller, but he was also sturdier these days and he would not be moved. “Ye gives it one hour,” he said again and stopped, ears pricking up. The loading dock door was rattling open in the next room and Freddy’s voice was discernable even if his exact words were not. Foxy lowered his voice to a hoarse growl. “And ye go in and get her. Ye don’t flirt her up, ye don’t say a bloody word, and ye don’t take no for an answer! If she fights back, that’s good. She needs to fight, but she don’t want to win. Ye just pin her down and put the shivers to her and she’ll come around. If ye does it right, that is.” Foxy glanced meaningfully at Bonnie’s groin and sighed. “And yer at a hell of a disadvantage, so listen sharp. First off, how’s yer hand?”

“Stop,” said Bonnie. He didn’t shout it. Ana was on the other side of this window and a room away, talking with Freddy as they shifted things around in the store room. This was nothing he wanted her to hear. “Just stop. That is not…That is so not happening. Jesus Christ. Do you even hear yourself? Do you hear what you’re telling me to do?”

“Did ye hear her?” Foxy countered. “How many times did ye hear her tell Fred to push on? Just stop. Leave her alone. She’s fine. Eh? And if he’d done it, there she’d be, bottling up all that wasn’t said and burying it down deep to sour. Ye love the girl, don’t ye?”

“Don’t. Just don’t.”

“Then give her what she needs and stop giving in to what she says she wants when ye and I and all the little fishes knows that what she wants ain’t good for her.”

“Oh you are not going to stand there and tell me I should…that whatever you have in mind is therapeutic.”
Foxy groaned low in his speaker and paced away, rubbing at the hard plastic lines of his forehead and muttering, “Oi, we gots a long night ahead of us if ye can’t even say the word.”

Bonnie’s temper slipped and before he got a grip on it again, he’d somehow crossed the entire dining room, catching Foxy by the back of his neck on the way and throwing him out into the West Hall ahead of him. Once the door was shut behind him, he stepped right up close, nose to cute animal nose, and hissed, “I don’t know what word you’ve got in mind, but I only know one word for pinning someone down and not letting her say no when I ‘put the shivers’ to her!”

Foxy rolled his eyes forcefully enough to make one of them let out a pop and a puff of black smoke. “Right. Think what ye like of me, but I ain’t wrong about this. Some girls take to a gentle hand, aye. Some don’t. That’s just a fact, be it polite to say or no. Ye want to be the good guy for her, sure, fine, but sometimes, with some women, that means not being afraid to be the bad guy!”

“Hey, there’s good guys and bad guys and then there’s the Purple Guy,” said Bonnie and, like he’d summoned the devil by speaking his name, the camera came on.

They both looked at it, but it was aimed at Tux at the other end of the hall and couldn’t swivel all the way around to see them. After a few seconds, it shut off and a light came on in the Reading Room, then in the Party Room, then back in the hall.

Bonnie and Foxy exchanged a glance and a short, silent conversation.

*He’s looking for us.*

*Aye, I know it.*

*You want to move this somewhere else?*

*What’s the ruddy point?*

It was a rare moment of perfect understanding and by the end of it, the adversarial filter through which Bonnie too often saw Foxy had slipped entirely away and he found himself looking at someone who was never an enemy but no longer a friend…someone he had known for fifty years and still hardly knew at all.

“Look, I’m going to pretend you’ve got my best interests in mind, because in a weird way, I think you do. So I’m going to say this one time and you are never going to bring it up again, got that?” Without waiting for an answer, Bonnie said, “I love her, but there are things I won’t do to get her back. She always gets to say no. Not sometimes, not just when it’s what I want or what I think she needs. *Always.*”

Foxy started to speak, then just walked back to the door, shaking his head. When he got here, he looked back at Bonnie with an expression of frustration so profound it was nearly disgust. “Then yer going to lose her, mate,” he said. “Yer going to lose her and I’m starting to think ye deserve to lose her.”

“Is this where you threaten to step in and steal her away from me? Because I’ve got to tell you, that’s getting old.”

Foxy waited for him to stop talking before he shook his head—left, right, left, with his eyes fixed on Bonnie’s all the while. “Ye’ve had yer last threat from me, mate,” he said when the shaking was done. “From here on out, I’ll never say another word on it. Come on.” He pushed the door open and waved his hook at the room beyond. “Let’s go push some dirt around. Oi, Ana-llass! We got three hands and a hook here. Where do ye want ‘em?”
Ana appeared in the tray return window, already flushed with exertion and smudged with grime. “Bon, have a seat. I’ll be right out. Foxy…” She looked quizzically off to one side. “Can you use Foxy?”

“That I can,” Freddy rumbled. “But if you need him to hold a light—”

“No, I’ll just wait for the camera to cycle around. That light’s plenty bright enough and it doesn’t need much to stay focused on me.”

Bonnie looked back at the camera.

It snapped off in the hall and came on in the dining room, swiveling around the empty stage.

“There it is,” said Ana, ducking out of the window. “Grab its attention, my man. I’ve got to find my tools. Everything’s a mess…Freddy, do you see a roll of metal tape back there? No, that’s duct tape. This would be actual metal…Bonnie, keep the camera on!”

“It’s on,” said Bonnie, limping over to the stage. He picked up his guitar and sat down, looking up into the unblinking, black eye of the camera. “It’s not going anywhere, not as long as we put on a good show. And we’re sure doing that tonight, aren’t we?”

★★★★

The camera didn’t answer, but down in the basement, the thing watching grunted static through its old speaker. “Never cared for soap operas, personally, but I’ll stick this one out for the aftershow. Hello! Speak of the devil.” As Ana walked into view on the flickering screen, the thing tried to open its eyes wider, then clumsily scrubbed its hands across its face in an effort to push its eyelids up, and finally lifted its entire head off and set it aside.

Long, rat-eaten rabbit ears flopped forward over the cracked muzzle of the empty head, discolored by old greenish mold, blackened burns, and other, less identifiable stains, but beneath all that, there was a hint of the bright satiny gold it had once been, just as there was still a hint of the happy rabbit mascot in the design of the suit, somewhere under the decay. The thing’s real head wasn’t in much better condition. What was left of its skin had darkened to mummy-brown and its hair blanched almost white—where it wasn’t stained purple from the various oils and fluids of putrefaction leeching the dye out of the uniform the corpse wore, back before it had all dried up—but at least the cameras wired into the sockets of the gaping skull were no longer obstructed by sagging plastic eyelids.

“That’s better,” he said. The skull’s gaping jaw didn’t move; the voice came from a rusty circle of mesh set into the thing’s chest. Without looking away from the monitor array, it raised its arm in a beckoning gesture.

Several figures vied to answer, but a thin-limbed figure dropped down from its crouching place in the corner of the ceiling by the air shaft and straightened to its full, inhuman height. It sent the others back with a wave of its clawed hand and moved toward the thing watching the monitors, walking easily on long, long legs that tapered to rounded footless pegs. The thing in the suit put its arm around the Puppet’s lean hip and pulled it onto its lap, settling the two of them comfortably in the chair where it sat.

“She grew up nice, didn’t she?” the dead man in the rotting rabbit suit remarked, rubbing distractedly at the Puppet’s thigh.
The Puppet nodded.

“A little too skinny and it seems like she’s always bruised up, but she’s got a nice ass and amazing tits. Reminds me of you, way back when. Remember?”

The Puppet looked down, brushing the claws of one hand over its flat chest.

“Man, look at that hair. I wish she’d let it down once in a while. Not that I wouldn’t love to wrap that braid around my wrist, but there’s nothing like getting a good fistful of loose hair…” The cameras in the dead man’s eyes turned toward the high, hairless dome of the Puppet’s head, then dropped to look at his own hands—rotten cloth over a metal frame, supporting a mesh glove over a few withered digits. He tried to make a fist, but only two of the fingers moved, and only one of those managed to curl all the way closed. The speaker in his throat sighed static, but just then, Ana opened Bonnie’s chest-casing, exposing the delicate inner workings of the animatronic’s endoskeleton, and the skull aimed its cameras back on the monitor at once.

Ana opened her toolbox and got to work. The image quality was not the best. The lens of the camera mounted on the stage wall was caked by dust; the lenses of the cameras mounted in the dead man’s eye sockets grimed over by even worse. Still, even if the dead man could not see precisely what she did, he could see the confidence with which she did it.

“That’s it,” the speaker whispered as the dead man in the suit leaned intently forward. “Oh, that’s my good girl. Look at her, Mare. She can do this.”

The Puppet’s grinning mask turned toward the monitors, but only for a moment. It put a hand on the dead man’s chest, just below the rusty speaker, and moved it in slow, stroking motions.

The tangle of metal pins and wires climbing from the back of the springlock suit over the dead man’s skull to the place the rabbit’s ears should be affixed twitched at the sound of the Puppet’s claws snagging on threadbare and tattered satin. Without looking away from the monitor, he brushed the Puppet’s hand away. “Later. Go check on the baby if you’re bored. I want to see this.”

The Puppet unfolded its long limbs and leapt to the ceiling, catching handholds it had carved for itself years ago. Like a great spider, it crawled arm over leg over arm to the air shaft—an opening just ten short inches across at its widest—and slipped through. It made no more sound in the ventilation ducts than a rat as it scuttled away.

As soon as the Puppet was gone, one of the others came skulking over and attempted to take its place, but the dead man firmly shoved it away from his lap until it reluctantly settled on the floor. The dead man rewarded it with a few pats on its long, ridged snout, saying, “Go on, get down. You know better,” in a stern, yet distracted tone.

“Who is she?” someone asked, almost whispering, as if the speaker was not quite sure she wanted to be heard.

The dead man looked back, still petting the thing crouched at his feet. Disconnected mechanisms jutting where the rabbit’s face should be ground and whined; the skull was already grinning. “That’s my little girl, is who that is,” he said. “All grown up and back home again, where she belongs.”

“What is she doing here? Is…Is she looking for you?”

The dead man laughed and returned his attention to the monitors. “Yep. She doesn’t know it yet, but that’s just what she’s doing. And she’s a smart girl, my Ana. She’ll find me. And when she
does, we’ll all be one big, happy family again. Come here.”

All the figures huddled together at the back of the room moved toward him, all but one.

“Not you. Go sit somewhere. Shoo,” the dead man said, still cheerfully but with a note of warning in his voice. He pointed. “You. Come here, Peggy. You’re not going to like it if I have to ask again.”

Hard plastic tapped on the concrete floor, an oddly delicate sound despite her size. As she neared the monitors, her silhouette became more distinct from the mass of shapes crowded together behind her. A feminine figure, all curves, even to her hair, which hung off her round head in two playful hooks.

“Don’t be shy. Right here.” The dead man kicked the crouching thing away and patted his knee invitingly. When she sat, stiff and nervous, he slung an arm around her ample hips and pointed at the monitor. “What’s she doing?”

“Um… I can’t really tell. She’s got the rabbit—”

“Don’t call him that,” the dead man said, mildly enough but with a sharp slap of warning to her thigh. “This is your family and frankly, you are the runt of this litter. Now, it’s fine with me if you want to be the baby, but you don’t get to be a brat. You hear me?”

Peggy nodded, shoulders hunching.

“Good. So you show them some respect and call them by their proper names. Go on.”

“She’s got…Bonnie opened up and she’s doing something to his chest.”

“The endoskeleton or the casing?”

“I can’t tell. Looks like…both?”

“Both,” the dead man echoed. He looked at his hand again, flexing his metal fingers to the best of their limited ability. One of the mummified fingers trapped within the mesh snapped; the tip fell back through the glove and disappeared into the cuff of the dead man’s purple sleeve, leaving a pale nub of bone protruding from the time-browned flesh that had once been a human hand. The dead man acknowledged the loss with a disinterested grunt and put that hand on Peggy’s hip, absent-mindedly rubbing. “She’s going to fix him, Peggy, just you watch. Even when she was just a kid, she could take anything apart and put it back together again. And yeah, I know, kids…”

The dead man’s gaze wandered to the back corner, where one of the many figures sat in a slump on the floor, its stillness and silence somehow amplified by the fidgeting and twitching of the others who milled in front of it.

“They don’t always live up to their potential,” the dead man said, returning his attention to the monitor. His hand moved, slipping now between Peggy’s thighs as she squeezed her eyes shut, shivering as she struggled not to squirm or cry out. The dead man didn’t notice her reaction. He didn’t really notice what he was himself doing; it was almost as automatic a process as the pump and wheeze of his cooling system. “But Ana will be different,” he said in a staticky murmur. “You’ll see. She’s a little lion.”
Ana’s dreams that night were vaguely unsettling, but after the unrelenting night terrors and insomnia haunting her at her aunt’s house, ‘vaguely unsettling’ was almost a relief. Even better, she woke up alone exactly where she’d fallen asleep instead of finding herself tucked up in the basement playroom’s pirate ship bed with Plushtrap leering at her from an inch away. So a restful sleep, if not entirely peaceful.

It was a little stuffy here in Freddy’s since the air conditioning didn’t run at night, and despite all the work she’d done, it still smelled pretty bad, but it was a familiar stuffiness, a familiar stink, reminiscent of the closet where she’d slept so often as a child. A bad place, sure, but safe from her mother’s rage, so a good place, too. Bad children deserved no better than bad places to be their good places, and that was true, but bad children learned to appreciate even the smallest good things in a way Ana doubted good children ever could, like waking up alone exactly where you remembered falling asleep and knowing no one had hurt you while you slept.

She rolled onto her back, stretching the stiffness out of her joints, and that was all she did for a while. There was no way to tell the time without turning on her phone, but it felt early. Although she wasn’t particularly drowsy, she was tempted to close her eyes and see if she couldn’t drop off again. Her reserves of sleep had run awfully low lately and while the padded stage of the Party Room was not the most comfortable bed she’d ever had, it wasn’t the worst either. The late summer heat that would be so oppressive by noon was tolerable at night. The Party Room was cozy and quiet, and with the ratty purple curtain down, the intermittent sweeps of the security camera’s light couldn’t bother her. If Freddy had poked his head in to check on her from time to time during the night, she was unaware of it. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept so well and woke so rested.

It was like sleeping at home again after a long time away.

In the dark, Ana made a face. She couldn’t let herself think like that. She had a house and it wasn’t here. This was Freddy’s house and he’d made her welcome, but the little girl who’d once dreamed so desperately of running away and living at a pizza parlor had grown up. Freddy could invite her in all he wanted; in the eyes of the law, she’d always be trespassing.

These thoughts were not particularly weighty—facts were facts—but they did chase the lingering idea of sleep away for good. Ana sat up, found her phone and used its light to locate yesterday’s jeans and a clean tee.

Barefoot, she shuffled out into the hall, peeked behind the black plastic covering the windows at a sky that was only beginning to lighten, and headed for the kitchen.

In the dining room, she found Bonnie sitting on the edge of the stage, good leg propped up and bad leg resting at a painful-looking angle on the floor. The fingers of his left hand moved hypnotically on the neck of his new guitar while his other hand rested on the strings. His ears were folded forward, relaxed and intent. And he was smiling, just a little.

“Morning,” he said, still ‘playing’.

“Sure is,” she agreed and went on into the kitchen to start the magical process by which water
became coffee. Once she got the brewer hissing and dripping, she came back as far as the doorway to watch Bonnie’s fingers move on the guitar. He’d played her like that, once. She’d told him to let her body be his instrument, thinking it would be fun, a joke. But he’d played her, making music only he could hear but which she could almost feel, if only for that brief moment…

Now Bonnie’s hand stilled as he noticed her watching him. His ears shifted, broadcasting uncertain concern. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said and followed immediately with, “Where is everyone?” so as not to give him the chance to press her further. Things were weird enough between them without her having to think up awkward lies to innocent questions. Or worse, awkward truths.

Bonnie shrugged, his attention successfully deflected back to his guitar. “Chica’s been in the arcade all night. If Foxy’s not still with her, he’s back in his cabin. And Freddy’s walking around somewhere. You know how he is.”

He played. Her wrist tingled. His thumb twitched once, forgetting not to strum. Unplugged, the strings produced a flat thumping noise when plucked, but the secret threads in her stomach vibrated.

“Ana?”

She startled out of her open-eyed trance, blinking rapidly and probably blushing. “Huh? What?”

“I said, do you want me to go find him?”

Now she was sure she was blushing. “You did?”

He laughed. “What, were you so overcome by my rocking good looks that you didn’t hear me?” he teased, then glanced at her and his ears snapped up. “Whoa, really?”

“No!” she said, too late. “I just woke up and I’m slow to reboot, that’s all! Jeez, Bon!”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. You had a look for a second there.”

“I did not.”

“I’m just saying, all this hotness—” Bonnie resettled himself with his guitar, gesturing as he did so at his cracked, stained, chipped and, above all, plastic bunny body. “—it can be a little overwhelming for the uninitiated.”

“Yeah, right. I’d like to see what that initiation process is like.”

Bonnie’s light-hearted grin went crooked and his ears lowered for a moment before he visibly forced them back to their jaunty V. “It involves seven minutes alone with me in the janitor’s closet.”

Against her will, she found herself returning his bittersweet smile.

He held it for a moment, then managed to shrug it almost entirely away. “The rest is all paperwork. Mostly tax information. Pretty standard stuff.”

“How boring.”

“I know, right? I miss the good old days, when initiation really meant something. Hardcore hazing, you know what I’m talking about.”
“Running naked down a double-line of bunnies in black robes with wooden paddles,” Ana agreed, just as the West Hall door swung open.

Freddy froze in the doorway, his ears pivoting as they rose to the What in the hell did I just walk in on? setting. “No, don’t tell me,” he said, shaking his head as he came into the room. “I’m fairly sure I don’t want to know. How are you holding together?”

“Fine,” sighed Bonnie, moving his guitar to better display his chest, the cracks patched and holes filled in with quick-dry putty, and the whole thing made shiny with several layers of shellac.

Freddy limped over and bent down for a better look, allowing Ana and Bonnie to exchange glances over his head—his embarrassed, hers amused. Freddy looked, touched, and at last straightened and grunted his scowling approval. “Walk slow and watch your feet,” he ordered as Bonnie rolled his eyes. “And don’t flatten your ears at me. Ana does good work, but that is never going to be stronger than the stuff she used to seal it.”

“I can’t believe, after fifty years, you’re still lecturing me on personal safety around the house,” Bonnie muttered, picking up his guitar again.

“I can’t believe, after fifty years, I still have to,” Freddy retorted and turned to Ana. “Speaking of the house, I’d like to talk to you about these renovations you think you’re going to do.”

“Good morning to you too,” she replied and Bonnie snickered. “I slept great, thanks for asking. I trust you had a quiet night.”

Freddy’s ears twitched. “Oh, I do apologize,” he said with exaggerated solicitude. “Knowing your general disregard for small talk as I do, I thought it would be best to come to the point rather than dither around with pleasantries, especially as I know you like to get straight to work first thing in the morning and there are a few things I need to say first.”

“Manners matter, Freddy,” Ana said solemnly.

“Indeed they do. Allow me to start over.” Opening his abdominal cavity, he reached inside and brought out his microphone. He thumbed it on, amplifying his stage voice to an even greater volume, completely filling the empty dining room with his rich, rumbling baritone raised in song: “Good morning, good morning, good morning to you! Our day is beginning, there’s so much to do—”

“Oh my God, stop!” Ana laughed. “I’m sorry already!”

“Are you sure? Because there are two minutes and thirty-seven seconds left in that song and I want to be absolutely sure you’ve had the best start to your day.”

“A cup of coffee is all I need,” Ana assured him. “I’m ready for you, big bear. What’s on your mind?”

Freddy grunted and put his microphone away. “Get your coffee. I’ll get the others.” He headed for the East Hall, calling without looking back, “And good morning.”

Ana watched him go, waiting until his footsteps in the echoing hall could no longer be heard, then looked over at Bonnie. “I got to admit, I’m surprised he wants to get right into it,” she said. “He gets so uptight about what he considers me overworking myself that I honestly figured he wasn’t going to take me up on it at all.”

“Yeah, wait for it,” said Bonnie dryly, his eyes on his fingers as they danced over his guitar.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

But Bonnie just snorted and shook his head. Apparently, it meant ‘wait for it.’

Ana found a coffee mug, washed and filled it, and took it into the dining room with her. She sat on the stage across from Bonnie and waited.

Soon, she heard Chica’s voice in the distance, too far to make out words, only the cheerful quality of her tone and Freddy’s rumbling reply. Then their footsteps, mostly Foxy’s clanking metal feet and the drag of Freddy’s bad leg. As she sipped her coffee, Ana thought what a difference a little familiarity could make. Anyone else in this building, hearing those sounds, would be running for the door right about now; Ana was more interested in watching Bonnie practice on his unplugged guitar, trying to hear music in the clicks and whirrs of the servos in his hand.

Moments later, Freddy limped in from the East Hall with the others close behind him. “We discussed your offer,” he began.

“Meaning he talked,” Foxy interjected, flicking an ear in Freddy’s direction as he found leaning space on the nearest wall. “And we all kept quiet and nodded a lot.”

“To be fair, that’s what Freddy considers a discussion,” added Bonnie, still playing.

“Are you done?” Freddy asked coolly and when he’d collected a pair of shrugs from each of them, turned his eyes on Ana. “We talked,” he said again. Although he didn’t look at Foxy or Bonnie, his ears swiveled and went as low as their pins allowed. “Meaning, yes, I made a decision and I don’t care if it’s popular, it’s the right one.”

“That sounds like a ‘no,’” said Ana.

“I’m sorry, but it is.”

“I’ve heard a whole lot of ‘no’ out of you lately,” Ana remarked. “I’m starting to take it personally.”

Freddy’s cooling system vented. His ears came up and his tone softened. “I know,” he said. “And I’m sorry for that too. I realize what you are offering us. I do. I wish I could accept. I can only imagine what you could do with this place, given the time and materials.”

“Boy, that better not be your problem,” Ana interrupted. “Because if it is, with all due respect, you can just deal with it, bear. I can spend my time and money any damn way I want. You don’t live the consequences for me, so you don’t tell me what to do.”

“Here is where I could point out that you yourself have acknowledged that you cannot afford to work on both your house and mine given the limits of your time and money, but I won’t, because as you say, I am not the one who has to live with the consequences of your misplaced priorities and I trust you to use your judgment and come to the only sensible decision. No, my problem,” Freddy continued as Ana glowered into her coffee, “is one of appearances.”

Ana squinted at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you are too good at your job.” Freddy showed her his open hands in a peace-making gesture. “There will always be curiosity about these restaurants. There will always be trespassers. I can’t allow myself to simply hope I can keep them all out indefinitely. I have to plan for them to get in, do you understand?”
“Hey, if you want a fortress, I can build you a fortress.”

“No, Ana, that’s the point. You can’t. Because a fortress would be interesting and what is interesting to them becomes dangerous for us. When people come here, they need to see a derelict building, unfortified,” Freddy stressed, counting off each un on his fingers, “uninhabited, uninviting and especially unsafe. If they see that, they’ll get bored and leave. If they don’t—”

“Yeah, they’ll get bored, all right, after they set off their fireworks, spraypaint the walls and break your face with a fucking bat. Sorry,” she added to Bonnie. “That was kind of a brutal example, but —”

“Hey, it was kind of a brutal experience, but if it helps you make your point, go ahead and use it.”

“Thanks. My point,” she said, turning back to Freddy, “is that you’re not saving yourself one iota of difficulty by giving in to their expectations, you’re just letting them dictate how you live your life. Forget them and do what makes you happy.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Freddy said in a flat, unappreciative voice, “but before you get carried away quoting Sunday feel-good lessons for little pilgrims at me, please remember that I’ve been doing it professionally for decades. I can recognize an empty platitude when I hear one.”

“Please don’t fight,” Chica murmured.

“We’re not fighting,” Freddy and Ana said in unison, but only Freddy went on to clarify, “We’re talking.”

Bonnie laughed. “Sucks when they can talk back, doesn’t it?”

Freddy ignored him. “Ana, I would love to just live for myself and my family like no one else mattered, but I can’t. You, of all people, should know it isn’t that simple.”

“Hey, this is not a story about me, but for the record, let me tell you what me, of all people, knows.”

“Be nice,” Chica said, wincing in anticipation.

“Would you relax?” But Ana took a moment to smooth out her jagged edges and when she spoke again, she was calmer. “I know Freddy only wants to do what’s best here.”

Freddy grunted, lifting his chin slightly.

“But I also know...me, of all people...that when you’re dealing with that special brand of asshole who can only have fun by breaking shit, you can never be broken enough to make them leave you alone. Never.”

Freddy’s gaze did not drop, but his ears did. He pushed them up and said, “I can’t leave, Ana. And knowing that I can’t leave means doing whatever I can to reduce the risks involved with staying here. The more unpleasant our situation is, the less likely people are to want to come back. The more inviting you make it—”

“Inviting, for Christ’s sake,” she sighed. “Freddy, come on. You’re acting like I’m hanging fliers at Town Hall!”

“Ana, you’ve taken out the garbage, cleaned out the gym, fixed the roof, turned on the power and mopped our floors. That’s as much of an invitation as these hooligans need.”
“Okay, first? Hooligans? Really? And secondly, I also replaced your doors and put locks on every one of them. This place is locked up tighter than a nun’s legs. How are these hooligans of yours getting in? Down the chimney?”

“All the sarcasm in the world does not change the fact that a locked door has never kept anyone out who really, really wanted to get in.”

That was true. It sure didn’t keep out Mason.

Ana drank some more coffee, running words through her head and sifting out the profanity, then put the mug aside. “Freddy, let me ask you something. And if you can look me in the eye and give me an honest ‘yes,’ then I’ll back off. But first you’ve got to tell me, honestly…Are you happy here?”

Freddy did some hard staring, but when he finally spoke, what he said was, “My personal feelings on the matter are irrelevant.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you could,” said Ana. “Because no matter what your opinion is about trespassers and invitations and risks, at the end of the day, the fact is, this—” She waved broadly at the general ruin of the room around them. Freddy did not look. “This is awful. It’s cleaner, it’s less cluttered, it’s air conditioned, but it’s still awful and it doesn’t have to be.”

“It does if I say it does.”

“And what about them?” Ana asked, pointing at the other animatronics, watching and listening. “Don’t they get a vote?”

Freddy’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t look at them either. “This is not a democracy. This is a family. I am the head of this family. I have to do what is best for them, not what makes them happy.”

“I don’t think you’re giving them nearly enough credit. Chica—”

“Ana,” Freddy said warningly. “This is not a discussion we’re having.”

Foxy laughed. When Freddy shot him a steely stare, Foxy grinned and said, “Aye, it is. Yer first in a good long while, mate. And if’n ye ain’t worried yet, ye should be.”

Bonnie snorted. “Yeah. Just because you win every argument with us doesn’t mean you’re right.”

“That’s enough, both of you. Quiet.”

Bonnie glanced up from his guitar, although his fingers never stopped moving. “Is that an order?”

Freddy’s ear twitched and one note of the March slipped out, but only one.

Ana was not too proud to take advantage of his distraction. “Chica, if you could have anything you wanted in your home, what would you ask for?”

For a time, Chica’s only answer was the tapping of her fingertips and the whine of her eyes shifting back and forth between them. “Well,” she said finally in a small voice, “maybe some new books. Adult books.”

Foxy snickered.

Ignoring him, Ana said, “What else?”
“I don’t know…more games in the arcade? I know the consoles are probably super-expensive, but even a chess set would be great. And music.”

“What, like a new keyboard?”

“Oh gosh no. I was never any good at playing it. I mean, I practiced and everything, but all my parts had to be pre-programmed into me. I just let my hands do their thing. I think I could maybe pick out Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, but…” She ended that speculation with a shrug, peeking at Freddy from the corner of her round eye. “There used to be a way to play regular music through the house speakers. I’m not sure how, but the staff would do it at night while they cleaned and they weren’t the brightest, so it can’t be that hard. If you could figure out how to turn that back on—”

“Yer out o’ luck, luv,” Foxy broke in. “The master A/V controls be in the manager’s office.”

“And the manager’s office is to be kept locked at all times,” Freddy said, directing his emphasis at Ana.

“Oh. Never mind then, but a regular radio would still be fun. And I’m not sure you could ever get the theater working again…?” Chica glanced at Foxy.

“Aye, that would be the V in A/V,” he agreed, nodding. “And all that kit were in the manager’s office.”

“Never to be seen again,” said Ana, showing Freddy her open hands. “The manager’s office is off-limits. But I believe the electrical pipes run through every room in the building. I could easily hook up a new theater system independent of the old one.”

“It would be nice to see a movie,” Chica said, tapping her fingertips and stealing sidelong peaks at an impassive Freddy. “Adult movies.”

Foxy snickered again, shaking his head.

Ana ignored him. “Bonnie?”

Bonnie shrugged with his ears, all the rest of his attention fixed on his hands. “Like the song goes, I got rhythm, I got music. Who could ask for anything more?”

“What about you, Captain?”

Foxy scratched his hook thoughtfully along his chin. “A shower,” he said with a decisive nod. “Aye, I wants to see a shower stall. Hot water and soap and all the trimmings, including towels. Aye, nice fluffy towels, not too big. I ain’t particular as to color.”

“You can use the hose in the kitchen,” Freddy told him. “And you can stand dry like the rest of us. What do you need a towel for?”

“I don’t.” Foxy glanced meaningfully at Ana and dropped his eyepatch. “Ain’t meself I’m picturing in the shower.”

“Dream on, but see?” said Ana, intercepting Freddy’s glower and redirecting it to the conversation at hand. “Just a few cosmetic changes. No one’s asking for an in-ground pool with a water-slide and a statue of you as Cupid pissing pink champagne.”

“Coo, I wants to change me answer.”
“Shut up, Foxy. Can we compromise here, big bear? If I can’t take you home, can I at least build you a restaurant you’re a little more at home in? You don’t have to live like this!”

The word No was all but hanging over his head in flashing neon lights, but he didn’t say it. He looked at her, hidden mechanisms quietly ticking and humming under his skin, while the others watched him with trepidation, interest and amusement. Ana simply waited.

At last, Freddy vented a hot sigh through his joints and pointed at her. “I have a few new rules.”

“I’m shocked.”

His eyelids scratched at his plastic eyecaps as they slanted downward. “What was that?”

“I said, I’m listening.”

“You can make improvements, but under no circumstances are you to change the structure of existing rooms. You don’t take down walls. You don’t pull up floors.” His pointing finger pointed harder. “You do not remove locked doors.”

“You’re the boss,” she said. “So I guess I’ll start taking pictures. I’m assuming you want me to start with the lobby and the dining room?”

“No,” said Freddy. “I want you to start with your room. I want a real bed, a place to put away your clothes and whatever else you need to live comfortably when you are here, including a functional bathroom.” Again with the pointing. “Until you have those things, you are not allowed to change so much as a lightbulb for the rest of us, do you understand me?”

“Oh come on. I don’t need a bed. I don’t even have one at the house yet.”

“I said—” Freddy leaned in, eyes flashing in rhythm with the Toreador March. “—do you understand me?”

Da DA da-da DUM, just do what I say…

“Yeah, yeah, fine,” said Ana distractedly, scanning the room. She still had the virtual map she’d made of the building on her tablet. She could take the U-Haul home and dump its cargo in the garage, go to Lowes and pick up sheetrock and putty and at least get the walls done today. Then she could focus on the floor. Scraping off the old tiles wouldn’t take more than an hour. Replacing them was something else entirely. Assuming the underdeck was good (which it probably was; despite her warning to Freddy, she’d never noticed any soft spots), poured rubber was definitely the way to go, which meant ordering it and waiting however long it took to come in. In the meantime, she could get some drop-tiles and put the ceiling up, finish the walls, plug some lights into the magical sockets that brought electricity up from the Tesla condenser in the basement and maybe fix up the show stage. There was all that stuff from the old historic theater just sitting there at the Ranch in Warren…

“Bedroom first,” Ana said out loud, already mentally at work. “Then the bathroom and then you back up off me and let a girl work. Rule Number Thirty-Five is still in effect.”

“So is Rule Number Twenty-Nine,” Freddy agreed.

“Uh huh. Remind me, which one is that?”

“The one that says I’m in charge. That means I authorize all renovations before you implement them and that I approve your schedule.”
Reality snapped into focus around her. “Say what? Since when do you even know what a working schedule looks like?”

“Since I watched you work well beyond it when you put up this roof.”

“Oh I did not. Who’s the builder here?”

“You are,” Freddy said evenly. “Who’s the boss?”

Ana picked up her coffee mug so she could glare at him over the rim as she drank.

“And who has the final word on a schedule, in your experience?” Freddy pressed. “The builder or the boss?”

“Oh my God, bear!” Ana groaned. “Fine. Want me to find an actual stamp so you can physically stamp it with your approval?”

“Since you offer, I believe there’s still one in the top left drawer of the security desk, although it will undoubtedly require a fresh inkpad.” Ignoring Ana’s third unironic facepalm of her entire life, Freddy looked at Bonnie. “Winning an argument doesn’t come from shutting the other person up so they can’t argue back. It comes from letting them argue until they shut themselves up.”

The camera over the stage came on suddenly, focusing on Ana as she raised a hand against its unexpected brightness. Without discussion, they all seemed to take it as a signal for the end to the morning meeting. Foxy pushed himself off the wall and disappeared around the corner without a word and Chica followed with only a wave and a, “If you need any help, just come find me.”

“Sure thing,” said Ana, politely not pointing out that in her present condition, about the most helpful thing Chica could do would be to stay in the arcade and well out of Ana’s way. “I’m going to get another cup of coffee—”

“And something to eat,” said Freddy, already walking away.

“Sure, I’ll just grab a couple cupcakes. Healthy habits last a lifetime, right? Anyway, I’ll get my tablet, do some figuring, and I should have something for you to approve the next time you wander through.”

“Good. So as soon as I have that stamp, you may be allowed to begin.” And he left.

“He’s serious, isn’t he?” said Ana, watching him limp away down the East Hall.

“Yeah. You should know that sarcasm never flies with Freddy.”

Ana returned to the stage and sat to finish her coffee. The camera watched her for a while, then shifted back to Bonnie, who stared into it without expression as he continued his playing.

“You look good in the spotlight,” said Ana.

He looked at her (so did the camera, attracted by her voice), his fingers now motionless, still holding the last chord in place.

“You know, I’ve never actually heard you play,” said Ana, smiling at him. “I’ve only seen you on Aunt Easter’s tapes. Hint hint.”

He laughed, but not really. More like the reflexive kick that comes from whapping someone just right on the knee. “I don’t want to break the strings,” he said, shaking his head.
“You won’t,” she assured him. “If you do, I’ll get new ones, it’s not the end of the world. But you won’t.”

He lifted his hand and flexed the fingers as muted whines and pings accompanied whatever internal diagnostic he was running. At the end of it, he shook his head again and looked at her helplessly. “The pads are all gone and the sensors are completely fucked all the way to the shoulder. I can’t feel anything anymore. I’ll break the strings.”

“You didn’t break mine.”

Bonnie looked at the camera. It shifted back to him.

“Play for me,” said Ana. “Just like that. In the spotlight.”

Bonnie looked at his hand. After a moment, he haltingly opened his wrist and pulled out the amp cord. He plugged in his guitar. The white noise of readiness thrummed through some hidden speaker inside him.

“Anything,” said Ana when he looked at her again. “*The Farmer in the Dell. See the Pioneer Children. Chica’s Pizza Song.* Literally anything.”

The camera whined, focusing.

Bonnie’s ears lowered, but came up again at what seemed to Ana to be an artificially casual angle. He looked down at his right hand, watching the fingers intently and wincing just a little as he put them on the strings.

They did not break and to Ana’s uneducated ear, the music they produced was perfectly in tune, although Bonnie spent most of his introductory riff interrupting himself to fiddle with the tuning pegs. At last, he was satisfied and began to play.

In retrospect, she should have known, but she was expecting something from the Fazbear Band’s usual roster and it took an embarrassedly long time to recognize the melody buried in Bonnie’s embellishment. Once she finally did, she couldn’t help joining in.

“I’ll be your baby girl tonight, if you’ll be my man,” she sang and shook her head. “It had to be that one, huh? No, don’t stop. It sounds really good. Mia Rose never sang it better.”

Bonnie played a few notes more, but only enough to finish the verse. Then he stopped, resting one hand on the strings to silence them. “Sorry,” he said, not looking at her. “That probably seemed dumb or desperate or both. I swear I wasn’t trying to be cute. I just…I don’t even know. You looked at me and suddenly…it was the only song I knew. Besides,” he added with sour cheer, “I’d rather smash this guitar than play *The Farmer in the Dell* one more goddamn time, and I love this thing.” He fell quiet while the humming of his hidden speakers drew the moment out and wound it tighter and tighter. At the end of it, his gaze dropped to the cord connecting him to the guitar. He pulled the plug, silencing that electric hum. Without it, the air felt dead and heavy.

“I love it,” he said again, giving the cord that snappy little tug to make it retract. “Thanks. You know, you were pretty awesome just now. I think I’ve only seen Freddy back down maybe five times in my whole life.”

“Don’t be too impressed. He’s got a soft spot for me, that’s all, and I’m not above taking advantage of it.” Ana tried to drink, looked with surprise into her empty coffee cup, and then toward the kitchen. “I need some more of this,” she said, raising her cup, “and then I guess I’m going to get started. But listen, are you sure there’s nothing you want?”
“Naw, I’m good.”

“I’ve never built a music studio before, but I bet I could figure it out.”

“I bet you could too, but no thanks. Why settle for a studio when you’ve got the stage?”

“Don’t forget the spotlight,” Ana agreed.

Bonnie looked up into the light of the camera, then looked at Ana. “I’m probably not going to see too much of you today, am I?”

“I get the feeling a sleeping bag and a camping light aren’t going to qualify as a bedroom for Builder Bear, so probably not. I’ve got a lot of work to get through and with Rule Number Thirty-Five in effect, you don’t get to watch.”

“Hell, I’m on Auto now. I don’t give a damn about the rules.”

“You bad bunny, you.”

“That’s me.” He waggled his ears at her, glanced at the camera again, then picked up his guitar again and touched the strings. “I was just thinking,” he said casually. “If you were staying over, maybe we could watch a movie later on your chr…on your tablet-thingy. Out here, I mean. Not in your room. A purely platonic movie. I mean, the movie doesn’t have to be platonic, just us, watching it…” He covered his eyes again, shaking his head. “God, please tell me to stop talking.”

“Stop talking, Bon. And yes, I am sleeping over and yes, I will gladly watch a movie with you. I’ll even let you pick it this time. I didn’t think you were too impressed by Saw.”

“Aw, I wouldn’t know what to look for. You can pick. I don’t even care what we see, I just…I want to spend a little time with you.” He rolled one shoulder, keeping his tone light even as his ears lowered. His fingers moved on the guitar’s neck, fidgeting at chords he did not play. “I was hoping last night after patching me up and cleaning the kitchen, we could finally hang out. I mean, yeah, I get it was late and there’s the whole humans-have-to-sleep thing, but I miss hanging out. Even more than I miss the, you know, the other stuff. I miss just…all of it. Watching movies and listening to you bitch about work. All that good stuff.”

“Oh hey, I can bitch about work anytime you want.” Ana smiled, then sighed and sat beside him, bumping his arm lightly with hers. “I’m an asshole. I’m sorry. I’m not trying to avoid you.”

“Aw, you’re not an asshole. You are trying to avoid me,” he added with a sidelong stare that immediately softened. “But you don’t have to be sorry. We’re just at that awkward phase of the breakup.”

“You mean I am,” she corrected, making a face. “You’re dealing with this so much better than me.”

“I’ve had practice,” he said wryly. “And it could be worse. Remember, Chica couldn’t really talk, so she broke up with me with nursery rhymes and crayons. As bad as this is, it’s better than that.”

The urge swept over her to lean in and kiss him. Nothing serious, just a quick touch of her lips to the side of his muzzle. A platonic kiss, comforting and sympathetic. Friendly.

She closed her eyes until the urge passed. It was slow-going, but it went. She gave his bad knee a pat instead and got up to put some distance between them.
“Getting coffee?” Bonnie guessed. “Or getting to work?”

“Both.”

“Okay, well, have fun.” Bonnie shifted his guitar into playing position. He didn’t watch her walk away, or if he did, he hid it well, because when Ana looked back, all his attention appeared to be on his hands, dancing effortlessly and in silence over the strings.

He made a lonely picture there. The musician left behind on a rundown stage, with the spotlight on someone else and only a bit of second-hand glow shining on the cracks over his heart. A lonely picture and an unfairly handsome one—metal bones, quarry-stains, rabbit ears and all.

The camera stared at her while she watched him. When she finally turned away, the camera swiveled around and aimed itself at the stage again. Bonnie did not bother to raise his eyes, but he did raise a finger, just the one. The camera shut itself off and Bonnie switched his own eye-lights on and resumed his practice. When Ana passed through the dining room again with a cup of coffee, she found him just as she’d left him, alone on stage in the dark, absorbed in music only he could hear. All was well and so the day began.
Ana made three trips to the house on Coldslip Mountain, emptying the U-Haul into either the garage or the dump trailer, and bringing back the tools and equipment she’d taken away. She made one trip to Hurricane, browsing the display sets at the first furniture store she saw until Lowe’s opened and she could pick up the materials she needed to turn the party room into the bedroom Freddy insisted upon as her admittance ticket for renovating the rest of the building. With the truck and U-Haul packed to capacity, she made one final stop at the WalMart for sheets and other bedroom junk, plus some milk to help wash all those cakes down, and another absolutely for-sure final stop at a craft supply store for an inkpad, and by noon, she was back at Freddy’s and ready to work.

The next two days passed in a blur of sweat, sander dust, the screaming of power tools, a little blood, not enough pain-killers, and too many animatronics trying to help. Munchie Bear made her eat. Bedtime Bear made her sleep. Builder Bear made her take breaks. It was not the same as it was before, but having something to do made it easier to live with the way it was now, and when she collapsed on Sunday night, it was on a by-God bed with actual sheets and pillows and all the rest of that bed-shit, in pretty decent facsimile of a real bedroom, hidden there behind the curtain on the stage of the party room.

The bed still smelled of sawdust. The sheets smelled of the plastic they’d been wrapped in. Everything was too new to really be comfortable, but it was hers.

As she lay there, facedown and fully-dressed, too tired to even take off her boots, she savored her body’s exhaustion. This had always been the best part of her days—this imperfect blend of pain and the pride of work done well, seasoned this time with the rare pleasure that came from knowing this was her place, her things. Sure, she was trespassing, but only in the sense that the building and everything in it belonged to Fazbear Entertainment in the person of Fred Faust, condemned by the township of Mammon and off-limits to all. In another sense, the truer sense, this was Freddy’s house, and he had brought her in and given her a place, and it was a good place and all her own.

Mostly her own, she silently amended as she heard the door creak open. Had to oil that, she thought drowsily, listening to Freddy’s distinctive footsteps shuffle-drag across the floor. The curtain rustled. The light of his eyes came on, showing red behind Ana’s heavy eyelids. Too tired to speak, not even to say goodnight or ask if he couldn’t read the no-bears part of the sign posted on her bedroom door, she simply lay still with her eyes closed and listened to the whine-grind-hiss, whine-grind-hiss of his cooling system breathing for him.

After a short while, he let the curtain drop and limped away. She thought he was leaving until she heard decayed padding wheeze and old metal groan. He wasn’t leaving; he was coming closer, climbing the three short stairs onto the party room stage.

Ana sighed, but she didn’t sit up and tell him to turn his plastic ass around and push on so she could sleep. He probably thought she was already out and if he thought he had a reason to wake her up, he’d have done it by now. No, he didn’t want to wake her, he just wanted to look around and find a reason for her to keep wasting time in here instead of getting to the real work in the rest of the building. Hell, he’d probably have a list waiting for her tomorrow morning. Fresh coat of paint, which meant replacing the walls. New carpet, which meant resurfacing the floor and rebuilding the
stage. New ceiling, which meant—

Freddy stopped there, right next to the bed, close enough that she could feel the heat venting through his joints as he bent over her. She had time enough to wonder what the hell he was doing, but not enough energy to ask him…and then his fingers slipped carefully around her left ankle.

He lifted her foot a few inches, plucked at the laces, and pulled her boot gently off. Then her sock. Then her right boot and its sock, arranging her legs one over the other, so that all he had to do after that was nudge at her arm just a little and she just sort of naturally rolled over. He pulled the blanket up and folded her in its clean-sheet smell, and when she was all covered up, he smoothed back her hair and let his hand rest just for a moment on her head. A heavy hand, cracked and pitted and none too sweet-smelling, but gentle. His thumb moved once, stroking along the lie of the first knot in her braid. Then he turned around and limped away, leaving Ana smiling in the dark.

She fell asleep, sore but safe, and dreamed she woke up to a nightmarish re-enactment of that moment, only this time it was the Puppet tucking her in, its long black claws combing through her hair in horrific mockery of tenderness. She had dreamed this so many times in the last few weeks up at Aunt Easter’s house, but it had always been in shadow before, illuminated by nothing but the moon peeking through the window. Here in Freddy’s, with the curtain pulled back and the camera on, she could finally see it clearly. There were flakes of older color beneath this layer of paint. There were chips and cracks in the porcelain face, and a large divot in the top of its head where, long ago, someone had split it open with an axe. Its throat had been ripped open, leaving a crater from which wires protruded; when it leaned over to press its painted lips to her sweating cheek, she could feel them tickling at her skin.

But it was only a dream and hardly the worst one she’d had since returning to Mammon. Ana closed her eyes again and waited it out until oblivion took her away again. There were other dreams, but none made much of an impression and the next thing she knew, her phone’s alarm was going off, reminding her there was a world beyond Freddy’s front door and a job that expected her to show up and earn a paycheck.

She allowed herself a sleepy moment to wonder if Faust had come through on the mower, but only a moment. Of course he had. And the chipper and the edger and the truck. And Ana had a week’s backlog of landscaping jobs to break ‘em all in on. Joy.

She got up (out of a bed instead of up off the floor for the first time since the long night with Mike Schmidt, when she’d slept over in the Sugartree Hotel) and switched on the lamp situated on her brand-new nightstand so she could see her clothes instead of dressing in the dark. She was already starting to reconsider her position on having a shower installed here, but for now, it was back to Aunt Easter’s house on Coldslip if she wanted to wash the sweat off before work.

And she had less than an hour to do it in, so better get to it. Ana opened her brand-new wardrobe, got a fresh pair of jeans from the middle drawer, a clean shirt off the hanger rack, added some underwear and even made an effort to find a matching bra to celebrate how super-adult she’d become. She looked for her day-pack, but it was missing and after a short search (there weren’t too many hiding places, apart from looking under the bed and in all the drawers of the wardrobe), remembered she’d left it in the office. Now that she was thinking of it, she could even recall slamming it down on the file cabinet with an extra-loud sigh while Freddy in his new persona of Bureaucrat Bear meticulously went over her proposed schedule line by line, making adjustments wherever he thought she was working too hard (which was everywhere) and insisting she initial each change to verify she’d agreed to them before stamping his smiling face on the bottom next to his signature.
Ana collected her phone, her keys and her clean clothes and headed for the office, taking the long way through the dining room and up the East Hall. She did not consciously think of why she did this, but as soon as she’d pushed the swinging door open at the end of the West Hall, her sleepy ‘Good morning’ died on her lips when she found the stage empty. His guitar was there, but not Bonnie.

A moment’s confusion swept up her spine like the proverbial chill and she turned slowly in place, peering at shadows for the Puppet’s smiling/screaming face, certain she was still asleep and only dreaming that she was awake, then heard a soft scuffle of sound in the kitchen, followed by Chica’s dismayed, “Oh poop!” which was in turn followed by a gust of Bonnie’s laughter.

Nobody laughed in her nightmares, not even the Purple Man. Still wary, but reasonably certain she had no cause to be, Ana went to the tray return window next to Swampy and leaned in for a look.

“You’re so cute when you cuss,” Bonnie was saying, oddly distorted, although it was hard to say how. The echoes of his voice were wrong—not muffled or distant, just…wrong—and his voice was all she had to go by because the bunny himself was nowhere in sight. Chica was there, her round head with its little feminine cap of plastic feathers, mostly broken, just visible on the other side of the oven, but Bonnie was not. “Or when you think you’re cussing, I should say.”

“I don’t need to say the S-word to get my point across.”

“Hey, you can call it poop, crap, turds, butt nuggets, dookie, doing a deuce, taking a dump, dropping a log, blowing mud…I could go on.”

“I’ll bet you could,” Chica sighed.

“My point is—” Bonnie’s ears popped up and suddenly there he was, head and shoulders over the top of the oven. He limped to the corner of the room and dumped something heavyish and sludgy-sounding into the trash-box, then went to the sink and washed his hands. “—you’re talking about shit, no matter what word you use, so either commit or don’t cuss at all.”

“A poop by any other name would smell as sweet?” Chica said wryly.

“Say, that’s classy. You should write that down. What is this shit anyway? See what I did there?” he added in a casual aside, still scrubbing his hands. “But seriously, what even is it? How is this food? I had an easier time getting the gunk from the quarry off.”

“It’s just frosting. I don’t know what kind, exactly. It came with the mix.”

“Frosting, my ass. It’s pink tar is what it is, and it’s getting into everything. Ugh, I can see it under my skin, it’s so shiny. Like I don’t have enough trouble with my joints these days.” He held one up, wiggling the fingers one at a time to demonstrate. His ears snapped up straight. He wiggled them some more. “Hey, I just cleared, like, three friction errors!”

“Maybe you should leave it in.”

“No,” Bonnie said decisively, turning back to the sink and scrubbing twice as vigorously. “It’s pink and sparkly and I have to live with Foxy. I want this shit off. Go pack up the rest of the stuff.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t leave a few for Ana?”

“We did.”

“A few more, I mean.” Chica scraped past Bonnie and opened up the cooler, leaning in to inspect
the contents. “There’s not much here.”

“She doesn’t eat much. And considering that the two main ingredients of this fucking frosting appear to be machine grease and glitter, she probably shouldn’t eat any at all.”

Neither of them noticed her. She could have said something, but felt oddly reluctant to interrupt, even if they were only laughing over a dropped Easy-Bake cake. Ana lingered another second or two, long enough to see Bonnie playfully daub frosting onto the tip of Chica’s beak, and then she slipped away. They were having a good time and she didn’t need to interrupt them right now. She tried not to see an ulterior motive in her own actions, but could not quite escape the thought that this might be their second chance. And if so, then she was happy for them.

She was happy for him.

In the security office, Ana located her duffel bag and packed away her clean clothes. She zipped it up and right before shouldering the strap, she heard a sound. Not loud; one part of her brain immediately filed it under Mouse and tossed it on the Mysteries Solved stack. Vaguely mechanical; another part of her brain just as immediately filed it under Animatronic and also tossed it on the Mysteries Solved stack.

It hadn’t really been a mystery until that point.

Intensely aware of time ever pressing onward, Ana nevertheless paused and looked back in the direction she thought the sound had come from, and there, on the back left corner of the desk, was Babycakes.

Its eyes were open.

The sound she had heard was the opening of its eyes. Not a giggle, not a yawn, not its freakish little voice asking if she’d seen Chica, but just the opening of its eyes.

Right as this somewhat unsettling thought passed through Ana’s mind, Babycakes let out one of its elaborate yawns and announced it was sleepy. Then it shut its eyes and soon began to snore. Ten seconds later, it shut itself off and was silent.

Had…Had one of the animatronics been in here playing with Babycakes? She guessed it was theoretically within the realm of probability, but couldn’t see why any of them—of all possible people in the world—ever would.

Ana picked the cupcake up, waking it to fresh giggles for the few seconds it took to flip it over, pop its lower compartment and pull its batteries out. She tossed them in the top drawer of the desk (next to the rubber stamp of Freddy’s smiling face and its new only-used-once inkpad), and then opened the cupboard next to it and put the stupid cupcake back in the Lost and Found box.


But before she closed the cupboard door again, her eye fell on the collection of newspaper clippings and photos she’d taken out of the lobby, and again, she paused.

She wasn’t sure why she’d kept them. There was only one that meant anything to her.

Yet here she was, taking them out under the pretext of putting them in a neater stack, but really just looking at them.

She went through them twice, but the picture of David and Aunt Easter was gone. She’d probably
taken it one of those nights when she was drunk or high or both, and God alone knew what she’d done with it then. She made herself stop looking midway through her third pass and ended up staring at a photograph of the Circle Drive restaurant. Just the building. No guests, no staff, not even animatronics, unless she counted the cartoon versions waving from the sign. Still, she held on to it, studying it until she realized she could hear the soft puff and wheeze of a cooling system behind her.

The hairs at the nape of her neck prickled, insisting on a sense of danger. She ignored it and said, without looking, “Hey.”

Freddy’s rumbling baritone answered at once, but with unmistakable caution, as if he were the one concerned about intruding. “What are you looking at?”


He came into the office and took it from her. After a moment or two of frowning inspection, he grunted to himself and handed it back.

“Do you think I could keep it?” Ana asked impulsively. “Just this one.”

“Of course. You can keep them all if you like.”

“No, the only one I want. I don’t know why I kept the others, to be honest. I should have just thrown them all away when I took them down. I mean—shit, sorry,” she said, wincing at him in apology. “Here I am casually talking about junking your family photo album.”

Freddy grunted again, taking the rest of the pictures from her and flipping through a few. “I never thought of them like that. I certainly never looked at them. Until you took them down, I think I’d forgotten they were there.”

“Not the sort of memories you want to hold on to, huh?”

He grunted affirmatively, but said, “They weren’t all bad. In a way, that’s the worst part of all of this. I suppose that’s my original programming coming through, that when I think of how I wish things were, I don’t think of being somewhere else, doing something else. I just wish this—” He gestured once at the room around them with the photos before handing them back. “—had worked out.”

“But that first night, you said… I mean,” she interrupted herself, shaking her head, “not the first-first night, but the first night I came back after, you know, leaving…anyway, you said…” Ana tried to bring the memory of that night into focus, but the last thing that came in at all clearly was sweeping the dining room floor. “I don’t know. Something about bad jokes and hating the sound of children’s laughter. Maybe it was Bonnie who said it.”

“It was me,” said Freddy and offered her the shadow of a smile. “I also said it’s never too late to change. Not even for me. Will we see you tonight?”

“Um…I’ve got something I want to do at home,” Ana said evasively. “So you probably won’t see me until it’s done, but it shouldn’t take too long. I’ll be here tomorrow…or maybe the next day.”

Freddy’s features did not change, but the angle of his head tilted, turning his smile into a broody frown. “Or the day after that.”
“I’m a busy girl.” Ana gave him her best whaddya-gonna-do shrug. “But I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be back.”

Freddy didn’t answer, although his ears did some muttering for him.

Ana snuck an obvious peek at her wristwatch, hoping he’d take the hint so she wouldn’t have to actually say, ‘Hey, move your big bear ass, please.’

Freddy’s cooling system took in a deep pull of air and vented it hard through his joints. “I have to ask you something,” he said without inflection or expression. “I don’t think I’m going to like the answer, but I need to know.”

“O…Kay?”

Freddy’s inner mechanisms whined. His casing subtly shifted and locked into new positions. She had heard the expression ‘braced himself,’ but had never seen it so physically demonstrated. “Why are you here?”

“In Mammon?” she asked, knowing that was not what he meant but trying gamefully to play it off anyway.

He wasn’t fooled, as she’d known he wouldn’t be. “I know why you’re in Mammon. I need to know why you’re here. What do you want? What are you looking for?”

“My aunt, you mean?” she said uncomfortably.

“If that’s what you want, that’s what I mean. If not…Ana, I need to know. Why did you come here?”

“Originally? The road was washed out and this was just where I got stuck.”

“And if it hadn’t been for that, you wouldn’t have stopped? You’d have never come in?”

“Not that night,” Ana hedged. “I had kind of a lot of shit going on then. But eventually, yeah, I’m sure I would have. I had to…I had to see you. All of you, I guess, but especially you.”

His ears lifted. His frown deepened. “Me?”

“I saw you once,” she admitted. “I never got to go to Freddy’s when I was a kid, but I tried once. I saw you through the open door. You were smiling and waving. It was warm and there was pizza and laughing kids everywhere. It was everything I ever wanted and knew I could never have. I think I wanted…”

When she started to speak, she thought she knew what she was going to say. Something about confronting her past and grown-up reality versus childhood fantasy, but those words, ‘I think I wanted,’ scraped it all away like a scab and what came bleeding out instead was too awful to admit, too ugly to be anything but the truth.

“And now the truth, please.”

He nodded, just like he believed her, then said, “And now the truth, please.”
“Oh come on, bear! What do you want from me?” She turned around, heading out through the other door. “I have to go. I’m going to be late.”

“Ana, nothing you have to say can possibly be worse than what I’m thinking.”

She stopped walking, but didn’t look at him. Couldn’t look at him.

He waited, tiny motors whining as his ears swiveled, listening to the silence.

“I wanted to see you broken,” she said at last. “I wanted to see you in pieces on the floor. You were everything I wanted when I had nothing. I guess I just wanted to see it was never all that great and I wasn’t missing much. I thought it would feel good, walking through the ruin of someone else’s life for a change. It didn’t, I swear,” she said quickly, still not facing him. “I’m an awful person, but I’m not that bad yet. I just…I don’t know, I was having a really bad day and I’d just dropped some downers, so who the fuck knows what I was really thinking?”

“Ana…” And then he just sighed. She could hear the rhythmic whine of servos under the heavy thump of his feet as he walked up behind her; he was shaking his head. His hand found her shoulder, patting twice before firmly turning her around and then catching her chin so she had to look him in the eye. “Ruins are, by definition, what is left after a thing is ended. Nothing had ended here. As long as I live, I can always rebuild. You should know that better than anyone.” He released her chin to give her a careful, honkless boop on the nose. “And you would have, if you hadn’t been high. You need to stop that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Any other advice for me, DARE-Bear?”

“Plenty, but I don’t want you to be late for work. Drive safely, Ana.”

“Bye,” she said, watching him walk away.

He didn’t look back, just waved through the security window before vanishing into the dark.

Ana tucked her photo of Circle Drive into the front pocket of her day-pack and walked out, only to come back after just a few seconds to switch off the light. Even after fixing it herself, she still wasn’t used to having power in this building. She collected the box of cakes and cookies Chica had put together for her, complimented Bonnie on his pink sparkly manicure, and left laughing.

Not long after her truck drove away, the access hatch over the desk rattled and opened. The Puppet’s long body unfolded and dropped, first to the desk, then to the floor. It straightened to its full height, listening, and hearing nothing, went to the cupboard. It took Babycakes from the Lost and Found box, holding it in its long claws like a bird in a cage while it searched the cupboard, the filing cabinet and finally the desk drawers before finally locating the batteries.

The batteries were small and round and smooth. Its claws were long and pointed and if they had joints at all, they were rusted tight. It took a great deal of effort and time to install the batteries with these rigid sticks, and longer still since the Puppet put one of them in backwards. Twice. But at last, Babycakes yawned and opened its eyes.

The Puppet placed Babycakes on the desk and Babycakes interrupted its waking giggles to say, “Not here, she’ll see it,” in a rough, staticky voice.

The Puppet moved the cupcake to the top of the cupboard.

“No good,” whispered the voice through the cupcake’s cheap speaker. “It’s too high. All I see is the wall.”
The Puppet put Babycakes on the filing cabinet.

“Use your head. Now all I see the top three feet of the room and I’m out in the open. Oh for—what is wrong with you?” Babycakes groaned as the Puppet started to put it in the corner of the security window. “Look, just put it under the desk for now. Hurry up. Freddy’s coming.”

The Puppet obeyed, long arm easily reaching in to put the cupcake against the back wall and turning it so its eyes looked out into the room to the best of its limited ability.

“Good enough,” said the cupcake. “Come on, get out of there. He’s in the break room already.”

The Puppet put both hands on desk and flipped feet-first back through the access hatch. It replaced the cover, claw-tips sliding silently away just before Freddy walked in. He switched on his eyes and glanced around, but if his gaze lingered anywhere, it was on the dark window to the uninhabited manager’s office. Even if he had looked up, he was at the wrong angle to see the silver eyes watching him through the slats of the hatch-cover or the plastic ones over the lenses watching from beneath the desk. Freddy moved on, thinking he was alone and all was well, as the Puppet crawled away to the basement, leaving Babycakes, and the thing controlling it, to wait for Ana’s return.
The sun was rising in a fairly clear sky when Ana stepped out of Freddy’s with her box of baked sugar, but the air had that thick, damp feeling and she was not surprised when the first raindrop splatted across her windshield on the drive up Coldslip. By the time she’d had her shower and was on her way to work, the mountainside had become a vast network of channels and frothy falls washing away down to the quarry. Lawn-mowing was out of the question, but if Faust had really come through on the shopping list, Shelly might be moved to show his appreciation. She wasn’t holding her breath for that outcome, but she lived here now and had a giant stuffed ostrich to prove it, so it didn’t pay to be a pessimist all the time.

The cakes went over fairly well, although Bisano accepted his with a, “Haven’t you kissed enough ass around here yet?” and Big Paulie wouldn’t take one at all. Neither would he take her. When Shelly came to her name on his assignment list, Paulie didn’t even wait for an order he could refuse, he just said, “No.”

Shelly set the duty-sheet down on the reception desk with a meaty slap. “You were hanging on me just yesterday on how you needed more bodies to get back on track.”

“Not more bodies, more men.”

Shelly flushed and hitched at his belt. “I run an equal opportunity company, you know that. Unless you’ve got an objection to the quality of her work—”

“I don’t suppose I can do that,” Big Paulie said, looking her up and down with undisguised contempt. “Seeing as it just bought you one hell of a nice tractor, but the paver’s still working just fine, so I don’t need her and I won’t have her on my crew.”

Ana couldn’t get angry, so she did the next best thing and laughed. “I wouldn’t take orders from your incompetent ass anyway. You couldn’t even knock down the last building on schedule and you’re already, what? Six weeks behind on a simple resurfacing job? I could have had the whole damn building up by now and you don’t even have the fucking foundation in.”

“Watch your mouth, missy,” Shelly warned.

“Watch my mouth?! What about his?”

“I’m not using mine to keep my job,” Paulie declared. “He wants to talk about the quality of your work…You’re doing your mama’s work, that’s all. And her mama’s and hers and all the way back to the very first Blaylock who ever raised her skirts in the alley behind the miners’ saloon.”

“Are you still talking?” Ana scoffed. “The hell do I care what you think of me? You can’t even get my name right.”

“Oh, but I got your number,” Paulie shot back. “And you are nothing but your whoring bitch-mother’s whoring little pup.”

“Hey, come on now,” Jimmy said weakly, red-faced all the way to the roots of his hair.
“Stay out of this,” Ana snapped.

Too late. Paulie swung around, actually curling his lip at the younger man like he was a dog about to bite. “Jumping to her defense, are you? Gosh, I wonder why. When the whole town knows she turned up at your house last Sunday wearing nothing but sin and a smile, laughing in the faces of your family as she rubbed up on you!”

“What?” Jimmy gasped. “Wha…I…She did not!”

“That’s not what I hear. And I hear she stayed after,” Paulie continued, now addressing the rest of the room. “All alone with you a good half hour, with your wife and your girls right upstairs!”

Poor Jimmy’s mouth dropped open, filling up that first crucial moment where a ‘Bull-shit’ should have gone with a guilty-looking gape. “How would you even know that?”

“Does that matter?” Paulie sneered, and no, it did not. Had there been a nosy neighbor out enjoying the evening in their own adjoining backyard, listening in or maybe peeking through a knothole in the fence? Or maybe someone had just been out walking the dog at just the right time to see Ana leave, long after the rest of the Morehead clan. No way of knowing, and it didn’t matter anyway. The damage was done. Denial was a weak enough defense, but no denial at all was as good as admitting to a torrid adulterous affair, and while Jimmy may have been the last person in the room to realize that, it did at last hit home.

“It wasn’t like…It wasn’t…” He looked around, saw only staring faces and men who wouldn’t look him in the eye at all, and visibly blanched. “Nothing happened!”

“I wish I could believe that, for your mama’s sake. She’s been defending you all this time, just for that Blaylock bitch to make a fool of you in your own home, and for you to make a fool of yourself, defending her!” He turned back to Shelly. “If I need the rust sucked off the rebar, I’ll be sure to give her a call. Until then, I told you, I will not stand for that whore on my crew.”

Shelly’s expression shifted through several variations on the theme of ‘pissed’, but in the end, it was Jimmy who went off with Big Paulie to slosh through the mud at the site of the old mall, soon to be the site of the new dealership. Ana stayed at the office, keeping house in the hopes that the rain would stop and things dry up enough to get her hands dirty before it was time for her to go home. In the meantime, Shelly’s garage needed cleaning, the floors needed vacuuming, the break-room-turned-storage-room needed organizing and the bathroom needed scrubbing, so hop to it, little miss.

The rain did not stop, although it did ease up from a deluge to a drizzle as the dim grey hours of dawn lightened to the bright grey hours of morning. Ana continued to putter around with cleaning supplies, bored out of her goddamn mind, while Shelly kept mainly to his office in the back of the building, fielding phone calls from the work site with increasing agitation, until whatever was brewing out there came to a shouting head. Shelly slammed out of the building moments after the last call ended and Big Paulie came slamming back into it in short order.

“I don’t want to hear not one word out of you,” he snarled at Ana. “You open that smart mouth once and I’ll shut it for you.”

“Wipe your feet, tough guy.”

He looked down at his muddy boots and the trail he’d left across her newly-vacuumed floor, then by-God spent a good minute and a half grinding the mud into the carpet fibers. She half-expected him to stick his tongue out at her when he was done, but he settled for storming off to Shelly’s
office and slamming the door.

Ana went back to cleaning, taking deep slow breaths and reminding herself that, asshole though he was, Big Paulie was right. Much as she’d enjoy kicking the crap out of him, it wasn’t worth spending the rest of the day locked up and waiting for Rider to bail her out. So just watch her temper, keep her distance, and get through her shift.

It worked for a while. Then, at what would have been the stroke of nine, if the cheap clock hanging on the wall could strike the hour, the phone on the reception desk rang.

And rang.

“You too stupid to answer the phone?” Big Paulie called crossly.

Ana, on her knees in front of the toilet, rolled her eyes and yelled back, “I’m up to my elbows in your shit-stains. Be a sport.”

Keys jingled as Big Paulie jogged his bulk up the hall to the front of the building, cutting off the old-school jangle of the phone on the fourth ring. “Shelton Contractors, how can I help—Yes, sir…Paul Trammel, sir…Yes, sir.”

Ana finished with the toilet and gave it a flush to take the suds and scum away. The sound of rushing water in the small room briefly drowned out Big Paulie’s voice and when it settled, she heard him say, “I think we can accommodate that in the schedule, sir. When would you like…Today?…Yes, sir, I’m sure we can get someone out there this afternoon…Now?…I’m sorry, but it’s going to take at least a few hours to…Well, yes, she is, but…Yes, I’m sure she can…Yes, sir…Yes, sir, but can I ask…”

Apparently not. The question was not completed and the phone was returned to its cradle with a bit more than the usual force, only to be picked up again immediately. A moment later, she heard him angrily say, “Would you shut up a minute and let a man talk?…I’m not talking about any of that, I’m just letting you know that you got a call from the old man…He’s in the mood for a quickie, that’s what, and he wants you to send out the ‘quality’ worker…Because he asked for her by name. No one else, just her, and he wants her right now. How about that, huh? Thirty years, I built this company up and in less than one, you’ve turned it into a whorehouse. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Ana started scrubbing the floor, using the coarse bristles of her brush on the cheap tiles to scrape the conversation off her ears as much as take the piss off the floor. She was aware of Paulie’s voice rising in the other room, but was able to block it out until suddenly he yelled, “Oh you are, are you? Well, you go right ahead! I got plenty to tell them, too!”

The phone banged down, then banged down a couple more times before crashing up against a wall and tumbling to the floor.

Silence.

Ana stripped off her gloves before washing her hands in the sink. She waited, listening to Paulie fume in the other room.

“Looks like you’re working today after all,” he said at last.

Ana leaned cautiously through the door. “Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah. Old man Faust wants you up at his place soon as you can get there. He says he’s got
some renovations in mind,” he said with a leering emphasis on the last few words. “He wants you to make him an estimate.”

“Me?”

Big Paulie turned a scornful stare on her. “Don’t waste your breath. That innocent shit won’t fly with me. I know goddamn well why he’s asking for you. Everyone knows!”

Ana’s phone rang around the ‘shit won’t fly’ bit. Shelly. Still, she waited for Paulie to stop talking before answering. Manners mattered.

“Stark,” she said, watching Paulie stalk away from her, muttering under his breath and rubbing his face.

“You know about this estimate thing?” Shelly asked without preamble.

“I heard. What do you want me to do about it?”

“To start, I want you to get a company shirt out of the back, long sleeves, and button it up. Then you get your toy—”

“What toy?”

“I am not in the mood to put up with your sass, Missy. That stupid little toy you use to impress people who don’t know what real work looks like. You know damn well what I’m talking about. You take pictures and change them around to show how you’d remodel things?”

“Yeah, okay, the roombuilder. It’s on my tablet and my tablet’s at home.”

“Well, go get it, then get up to the old man’s house and see just what it is he wants done. You take lots of pictures, make it look like you’re working, eat up the time and whatever you do, do not offer a damn estimate. If he asks, you tell him you need to check on the cost for the materials and you’ll get back to him. If you presses you…” A harsh sigh blew into the phone. “Think what it would take you to do the job and then…”

‘Double it?’ Ana asked silently.

“Then triple the time and throw another zero on the pricetag.”

“Okay,” Ana said neutrally.

“I got men to feed,” he snapped and hung up on her.

Ana came out of the bathroom with her bucket of cleaning supplies and headed for the back of the building where they, and the professional shirts doled out only to those lucky few whom Shelly wanted to represent the company, were kept. Big Paulie followed her close enough that she expected at any second to feel him step on the heels of her boots.

“I don’t suppose Mr. Faust told you what renovations he had in mind,” she said, stepping into the supply room with Paulie still breathing down her neck.

“No.” Paulie watched her put her bucket down and pick through the shirts looking for one close to her size. “Probably something in the bedroom,” he muttered. “I expect you know what he likes in there.”

“I fucking heard that.”
“What are you going to do? Tell your wrinkly old sugar daddy on me? Nothing more he can do to me. I’ll be quit of this town soon enough. Never thought I’d see the day I’d be glad of that, but you…you Blaylock bitches. You ruined this town.”

Ana grabbed a shirt and gave him a shoulder as she pushed past him back into the hall.

“This used to be a good place,” he said after her. “This used to be a damned contractor’s company. That’s the work I do. Well, if that old man wanted the services of a contractor, he’d be talking to me. He asked for you and only you, so I think we both know what services he’s really got in mind.”

It did no good to deny it, none at all. She knew it and still swung around to shout, “Enough, already! The fuck did I ever do to you?”

“You killed Joe Stark, you little bitch!” he bellowed.

“Kill him? I never even met him!”

“I say you killed him! You killed him just by being born! It wasn’t enough he had to be…be neutered like a…like a dog! A laughingstock his whole life! Every stuck-up bitch in this town sniggering up her skirts at him, and him a good boy! And your mother! Your slutborn gutterbitch of a mother using his name on the—” His eyes raked over her, up and down. “—the living drippings of her adultery!”

“Like I have any say over who my mom fucks before I was even born?”

“Don’t you talk like it’s just her. Don’t you even dare. There’s not a decent drop of blood in your entire body. You were rotten from the day you were dropped and there is not one person in this town who thinks otherwise. Not one. You think that old bastard cares about you? Oh no. He just smells the whore on you, same as everyone else. That’s right, roll your eyes at me,” he sneered as Ana did just that. “But you’ll never get that gold ring you’re chasing. When he’s done with you, he’ll throw you away like—”

“Like the trash I am,” she chanted along with his tirade, and looked at her watch. “You want to speed this up?”

“You don’t believe me? Oh, I almost wish I could stick around just to watch him put you in your place. You think you’re safe just because you own that fancy house of yours? Hell, I owned mine. Owned it free and clear and when he decided he wanted me gone, he just—” His voice cracked. “—he just reached out and plucked it, easy as plucking an apple from the tree. You…You…You are fucking the Devil himself, do you know that? The Devil himself!”

“For the last time, I am not sleeping with him!”

“You are if I say you are,” said Big Paulie. He took a long step forward; Ana did not back away. “And I say you are. I’ll say it to anyone who’ll listen and you better believe there’s more of those than you think there are, and more and more every day.”

The cheap clock on the wall ticked. The rain dripped off the gutters onto the concrete walkway. Big Paulie breathed hoarse gulps of air, snorting on the inhales like a bull. Ana silently calculated the likely cost of bail for a charge of assault and battery and possibly elder abuse, considering the man before her was set to retire at the end of summer.

It took a lot more thought this time, but the ultimate conclusion was the same: The short term satisfaction of smacking down an asshat was just not worth the money or the jail time.
She turned around.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” Big Paulie told her back in a high, unmanly cry.

“Take a Midol, princess,” she said. “I’m going to work.”

Something hit the door after she closed it on him. Ana did not look back, but she did smile as she listened through the rain to the amazing sound of a grown man having a toddler-sized temper tantrum. She had no idea what had happened over at the work site to light Big Paulie’s fuse, but it had gone off with one hell of a bang. There were going to be holes punched in those walls the next time Shelly saw them for sure. With any luck, Shelly would fire him three weeks before he was scheduled to retire and maybe set off another one for the whole crew to see.

On second thought, no. She really didn’t want him to have an audience the next time he called her mother a whore. And called Ana herself a Blaylock bitch.

Not that most of them weren’t already thinking it.

This town.

Ana got in her truck and drove to Freddy’s, noting with a tired eye as she climbed the last hill at the junction of Old Quarry and Cawthon that the ditch between the foothills of Coldslip and the road was beginning to overflow. If the rain didn’t stop, she was going to end up sleeping here tonight. Maybe she’d stay here tonight even if the rain did stop.

God, she hated being alone in that damned house. Mostly because…it never felt like she was.

Ana parked by the front doors, knocked twice, then unlocked them and went in. “It’s just me!” she called, swiping rain off her face as she walked around Brewster and through the Out door into the dining room. “Hey, Bon.”

“Hey,” he said, settling back onto the stage where he’d been struggling to stand. “You scared me. What are you doing back this early?”

“I got called out on a special job, so I came back to get changed.”

“What’s wrong with the clothes you’re wearing?”

“They smell like I’ve been cleaning shitters all morning, because I have,” she told him as she continued on without stopping, raising her voice to add, “Fuck Shelton Contractors, fuck Big Paulie and fuck this town!”

The door to the Reading Room cracked open as Ana walked up the West Hall just enough to show her one pink eye.

“Hey, Chica,” said Ana. “Sorry about the noise. Did I scare you?”

“I don’t scare easy. Did you get fired?” Chica asked sympathetically.

Ana laughed. “Not this time, although I’m not surprised if I look like I have been. One of the guys from work…That looks familiar,” she interrupted herself quizzically. “Which one is that?”

Chica looked down at the book in her hands as if had materialized there without her knowledge. “Um…How the Trollusk Got His Hat?”
“That rings a hell of a bell.” Ana walked right by the Party Room and went to take it from Chica, flipping through the first few pages. “Holy shit, I know this book! I read it when I was a kid! And a bunch of others by the same guy…”

Ana trailed off. She had reached the last page and there, on the inside of the back cover, over the portrait of the titular Trollusk in his dapper new hat, was a faint hint of purple marker. Not as if a child had drawn directly in the book, because she hadn’t—she would never have done that, even as a child. She had only been trying to trace the picture, unaware that the ink had been bleeding through onto the page of this beloved book. She could all but feel the carpet under her elbows, all but hear the sound of the marker squeaking on the paper and smell its fake-grape smell…

This wasn’t just a book she’d read once, this was the same book. This was David’s own copy.

So. Aunt Easter had donated David’s baby books to the Reading Room at Freddy’s and surely there was no better home for them, but it still bothered her. Aunt Easter had literally destroyed her house trying to keep the things that reminded her of her son, but apparently she had at least started cleaning up, enough to start giving things away. That wasn’t always a sign of healing. Sometimes it was a sign things were about to get worse. Ana found it all too easy to imagine Aunt Easter giving up these books, one last symbolic letting-go, before walking off into the desert. Toward the quarry, maybe.

“Mercer Mayer,” said Chica, stepping shyly out of the doorway.

Ana raised her head, blinking as if waking out of sleep. “What?”

“The author. I like him, too. He wrote a lot about monsters, but they were all—” Chica rolled her shoulder in a shrug; gears ground alarmingly beneath her cracked skin. “—just people. My favorite is There’s A Nightmare In My Closet. It has such wonderfully reaffirming sociological implications. Do…Do you know that one?”

She did, suddenly. The tale of a boy determined to face his monster and the unexpected, just-right ending. She could vaguely recall some of the pictures, but mostly, she remembered snuggling up under a warm quilt in the bed where she slept when she was visiting David, listening as someone read it aloud. Not Aunt Easter, although she had surely read it to little Ana, too. Someone else. A man’s voice. The scratch of stubble in his goodnight kiss. The blur of purple and the glint of gold…

“I don’t have time for this,” Ana said, as much to herself as to Chica, but now Chica’s eyelids were squeaking, turning outward in concern, so Ana forced a smile. “The Trollusk one was the best,” she said, handing the book back. “Me and David could never decide whether Freddy’s hat was Squeezle skin or Pindlefez.”

“It’s silk-lined melusine,” said Freddy’s rumbling voice. The camera in the West Hall snapped on in the next moment, creating a spotlight for him to step out into as he left the short corridor to Pirate’s Cove, checked the door next to Tux, and then limped toward them. “But I do feel very dapper indeed.”

“So you’ve read it,” said Ana, smiling in amazement that she could recognize the quote years after forgetting the book even existed.

The camera swung toward the sound of her voice, but couldn’t turn all the way around. Its tiny motor whined, laboring.

“We’ve been locked up here for over a decade,” Freddy reminded her. “There isn’t a book, poster?
or bag of flour we haven’t all read at least a hundred times. I suppose it’s too much to hope for that you’ve suddenly begun to work reasonable hours, so why are you home so early?”

“I’m not home. Sorry, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” she said as Chica’s face fell and Freddy sighed. “I mean I’m still on the clock. I just—ow,” she said irritably, putting up one hand against the blinding light of the camera, which had just switched from the West Hall to the Reading Room. “Fuck off with yourself, you bulb motherfucker! No one wants your incandescent ass all up in their fucking face. Sorry,” she said again, glancing at Freddy as she stepped back out of the Reading Room’s doorway and the camera lost ‘sight’ of her again. “I’m a little on edge. Got into it a bit with one of the guys at work.”

Freddy frowned. “In what sense?”

“Nothing serious,” she assured him. “No shots fired or anything, just a respectful exchange of viewpoints with an anthropomorphic douchebag whose head was wedged so far up his own ass that the person who finally succeeds in pulling it out will probably be crowned king of England.”

Chica made a noise and wiped at her beak with a mumbled, “Gesundheit,” when Freddy glanced at her.

“As long as it was respectful,” Freddy said dryly, turning his attention back to Ana. “Are you all right?”

“Shit, yeah, I’m fine. I’m just tired of always having to be the bigger man,” she admitted with a grimace. “I have never done or said a damn thing to this man that was one whit out of line, not once. He calls me a whore in front of the whole company and goes on to proudly admit he’s been smearing my name all over town and why?” Ana spread her arms with a fierce, furious smile. “Because I was born.”

Freddy contemplated this without expression while Chica made soft sympathetic noises and finally said, “Is this poetic license on your part or were those his actual words?”

“His actual words. And only a few of them at that. He had plenty more to say on the subject. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before, mind you, and it’s not like I give a crisp goddamn what he thinks of me, but he got to stand there and say it to my fucking face like there were no consequences at all, because for him, for every-fucking-one else in this town except me, there aren’t! But if I so much as twitch, I’m the trouble-maker.”

“Did you hit him?” Freddy asked calmly.

“Of course not. I was on the clock. Why would you even ask that?”

Freddy rolled one shoulder in a relaxed shrug. “I would have hit him.”

Ana snorted. “Sure. I called you way worse than that and you couldn’t even give me a whole time-out. You’re starting to believe your own bad press, bear. You think you’re a whole lot scarier than you are.”

Chica sneezed again.

Freddy looked at her, then at the camera, and finally at Ana again. “So you walked away. Permanently?”

“Over Big Paulie’s big mouth? I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.” Ana took a cooling breath and shook her head. “He’s retiring in, like, four weeks anyway. I can put up with his shit-talk that
long. No, I just came to get changed. It’s raining, so while every other pair of hands is desperately needed over at the job site, I’ve been on housekeeping detail. Naturally, I just got called out on a priority job when I smell like a urinal cake fucked a lemon. Can’t meet a client like that. Bad for the company image.”

Chica made an overtly inconspicuous retreat, leaving Ana and Freddy staring at each other as the camera switched positions—West Hall, Reading Room, Party Room—over and over, trying to find her.

“Are you really all right?” Freddy asked when Chica was good and gone.

“I’d better be, because there’s nothing I can do about it,” Ana replied cheerfully. “He’s Big Paulie Trammel, thirty years seniority in the company and pillar of the damn community. I’m nothing.” Ana thought about it and uttered a short, sour laugh. “I’m worse than nothing, I’m just another—”

“Stop right there.”

“Don’t even, bear. Come on,” she said, quietly now, looking up at him without her words-will-never-hurt-me smile. “You know how it is in this town. Truth doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is what people say about you. And the more you argue, the more you just convince them they were right.”

“So what are you going to do?” he asked. “Just wait the rumors out? Because I’ve been waiting for this Freddy Lives nonsense to blow over for fifty years and it hasn’t happened yet.”

“He’s leaving at the end of the month,” she said stubbornly. “I only have to wait—”

“—for the next one.”

“Okay, so my options are suck it up and smile or leave town, and I’m not leaving so what do you want me to do, bear?”

“I think you should hit him.”

Ana clapped both hands to her face and first groaned, then laughed into her palms. “I’ll take that into consideration the next time I feel like spending six months in jail.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. And whatever happened to Rule Number Seven? No hitting.”

“Despite what I’m programmed to tell the children here, bullies are rarely defeated by kindness,” Freddy said. “Sometimes they get bored, sometimes they get distracted by another target, but the only way to be absolutely sure they won’t bother you again is through an overwhelming show of force.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“I’m told you handled yourself quite well against six grown men. I didn’t see that, as I was shut off at the time,” he added with a pointed glare, “but I don’t doubt you could cut this ‘big’ Paul person down to size with very little effort.”

“Oh, no doubt. And he’d have my ass arrested before the blood was dried on my knuckles. Whereas he could probably beat my ass to death in the middle of Main Street at high noon and the only thing the sheriff would do about it is wave traffic around us until he was finished.”
“Ana—”

“Don’t. Just…please. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Ana looked around for something distracting, noticed the shirt in her hand, and held it up. “I’ve got to get changed.”

Freddy looked away, stone-faced, and nodded. “I should keep moving too. If…If things escalate with this man, will you tell me?”

“Why? What possible good would that do?”

“It would do me good to know you’re talking to someone,” Freddy replied, still studying the wall. “Even if it is just me.”

Ana rubbed at her temples so she could hide an eye-roll, but relented. “Yeah, sure. But it won’t, you know. He’s working on the dealership site, I’m mowing lawns. In the normal course of things, we never talk. Today was just…one of those days. I’m pissed, but I’ll get over it.” She turned around.

“Ana.”

She bit down on the ‘Jesus Christ, Freddy, what now?’ knocking at her lips and looked back with a simple, “Yeah?”

He looked at her for what felt like a long time as the changing angles of the camera cast schizophrenic shadows across his unmoving face and finally said, “You don’t deserve the things they do to you. You do know that, don’t you?”

Ana could only shrug and tell him what she’d told Mr. Faust. “We don’t get what we deserve. We get what we get.”

Freddy took that in with a nod and a brooding, distracted scowl and finally let her walk away.

Ana opened the Party Room door and stepped into the spotlight of the camera, just like it was waiting for her. She took her wet tee off, ignoring the unblinking stare of the lens like she couldn’t even hear it whine as it focused on her.

She knew no one was watching her. She knew that. The camera could track her, sure, but it couldn’t watch because there was no one on the other end of the system to do the watching. Freddy said they were just a bunch of cameras on a closed circuit, motion- and sound-sensitive, with automated pathing protocols. And he ought to know how the security system worked. As he’d said, he was part of it.

It wasn’t like he had a long history of lying to her or anything.

After a baby-wipe-bath and a fresh application of deodorant, Ana put on her work shirt (leaving the topmost button defiantly undone) and, since Shelly would want it cleaned and folded and back on the shelf tomorrow morning, gathered up her dirty clothes for a trip to the laundromat after work. Once she had a good armload, she headed for the door. When the camera swiveled to follow her, she stopped and picked through her laundry until she found a black tee, and chucked it at the camera. The light, now dimmed, looked like a foggy moon behind the Bacardi bat, roosting upside down in the corner of the room. The camera’s movements added the illusion of life and even the shrill whines of its motor sounded like the grumblings of a fussy, perhaps drunken, bat. Smiling, Ana left her room.

Freddy had moved on with his patrol, unsurprisingly, but Chica had returned and appeared to be
“I’m kind of short on time,” Ana told her. “You need something?”

“Oh. No. No, I’m fine. Bye.”

“Chica—” Ana rubbed her eyes, glared through her fingers at the camera, which had found her and was now stabbing her in the face with its unwelcome light, then sighed and softened her voice. “Chica, seriously, stop. I’m sorry. I’m in a bad mood, but it’s not directed at you. What is it?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Chica insisted, tapping her fingertips. “But, um, do you think you could do something for me? Not right now, not even today if you’re really busy after work. And only if it’s not too much trouble or anything.”

“Sure. More Easy Bake mixes?”

“No. I mean, yes, please, but something else. I’ve seen…I mean, years ago, I saw fliers for, um, the summer reading program and the book fair and that sort of thing at the Mammon library. And I know you’re not ready to do the Reading Room, but until it’s time…Is there still a library in town?”

“Yeah,” said Ana with a laugh. “Shockingly. And as it happens, I have recently renewed my card.”


“Preferably one without pictures, huh? Well, Sure. Unfortunately, my work hours and the library’s hours of operation are pretty much the same, but I can check something out for you on Saturday. In the meantime, there’s a used bookstore in Hurricane by the Lucky Buffet. I’ll fill up a bag from their bargain bin tonight and pick me up some bad Chinese food. Two birds, right? What?” she asked, lopsidedly smiling at the look on Chica’s face. “I better not be about to hear a lecture on the evils of MSG, because I ain’t hearing it right now, sister.”

“No, no! I mean, I certainly could, but no. It’s just…well, you just bought me a bunch of aprons.” Chica plucked self-consciously at the ruffled trim of the one she was wearing. “Not to mention the roof and…well, you’ve already spent an awful lot of money on us.”

“So? I’m going to spend an awful lot more before I’m done,” Ana said, pushing open the West Hall door into the dining room. “Come on. Five bucks more or less isn’t going to break the bank, and if I get the ones without covers, they’re only ten cents apiece. Sheesh,” she concluded, looking up as the first thunderclap of the day set itself off seemingly directly overhead. “It’s really getting nasty out there, isn’t it?”

“Does that mean you’ll stay tonight after all?” Freddy called from the kitchen.

“Not unless the road washes out. Doesn’t really look like it will, but you never can tell in this town.”

“So you’ll either turn up or you won’t, and if you don’t, it’s either because the road washed out before you got off work and you were stranded in town or it washed out while you were on it and you’re stranded somewhere between here and town.”

“Or I just went home and am enjoying a nutritious home-cooked meal and a good night’s sleep.”

Freddy appeared in the kitchen doorway, eyebrows thunderously low. “Is that supposed to be a
joke?"

“No. Did you hear about that new restaurant on the moon? The food’s great, but there’s not much atmosphere. That’s a joke.”

“I’ve heard it,” grunted Freddy, heading for the South Hall. “In fact, I’ve told it, and the reason I stopped telling it is because it isn’t funny. Apart from that, your delivery leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Everyone’s a critic.”

“You need to get me a phone,” Freddy announced, rattling the playground door before moving on to the gym. “In the future, you can call after work to let me know you’re either on your way or that you arrived home safely.”

“A phone,” Ana echoed and threw half a smile back at Chica. “Look at you, getting fluttery at the thought of me spending five bucks on a book, and meanwhile, Freddy wants a smartphone.”

“And a nib,” Freddy called implacably, “so I don’t scratch the screen.”

“And a nib,” said Ana, shaking her head. “Whatever the hell that is. Okay, I’m off. You need anything from town when I come back, my man?”

“Be nice to have a beer,” Bonnie replied without looking up from his guitar.

“Oh my God, yes.” Ana considered extending the question to Foxy, but the Cove was clear on the opposite end of the building and she’d wasted too much time as it was. “Okay, I’m out,” she declared. “If you see Foxy before I get back, tell him he’s an antisocial cheesebag.”

“Will do,” said Bonnie.

“No, we won’t,” said Chica patiently. “But we will tell him he missed seeing you because he was holed up in his cabin.” She waved, already heading back to the West Hall, back to the Reading Room, no doubt. “Have a nice day.”

Ana was pretty sure that ship had sailed, but she was in a much better mood for having stopped by. Clutching her tablet to her chest to shelter it from the worst of the weather, Ana heaved the door open against the wind, locked it behind her, and ran to her truck. It took less than half a minute and she was already drenched. Maybe Mr. Faust would let her borrow a towel.

Ana pulled out of Freddy’s and turned the truck onto Cawthon, windshield wipers slapping and water splashing up against the undercarriage. She passed only a few cars on the streets of town and no one at all once she was out on the other side and snaking her way up Canyon Drive.

When she came to the gate that blocked stately Faust Manor away from the common rabble, Ana was forced to lower her window and lean out into the weather to push the intercom button. Naturally, lightning chose that moment to snap down and strike ground out in the desert, simultaneously miles away and too goddamn close. Ana punched the button and quickly retreated to the imaginary security of her truck’s cab, tasting ozone in the rain.

The intercom made a few noises, reminding her in an abstract way of the animatronics clicking through their soundfiles, then let out an odd, muted double-buzz, like an old 90s ringtone, and clicked again.

“Yes?”
“Hey,” said Ana and immediately winced. Keep it professional. “Hi, it’s Ana Stark from Shelton Contractor’s. I’m here to see Mr. Faust? I have an appointment.”

“Thank you for coming,” said the voice and only then did Ana realize it was Mr. Faust’s voice. The rain and the speaker had distorted it out of all recognition, making it seem weak, thin and strained. “The doors are locked, I’m afraid, but if… if you bring your vehicle around to the eastern side, you should be able to climb onto the balcony without much difficulty. I never lock it. Please be careful on the stairs.”

A number of questions raised themselves, like the fine hairs prickling on the nape of Ana’s neck, and about as important at the time. The gate buzzed and swung open. Ana put her boot to the floor and drove through with a roar and a splatter of desert-red mud.
As the old man had said, it was not difficult to climb onto the balcony from the roof of her truck, even with the rain drumming down. The door to Faust’s master suite was indeed unlocked. The light was on. A black suit jacket had been draped over one arm of the chair beside her, a man’s pale grey pajamas over the other.

The master bathroom door was open. Through it, she could see the sink, along with a number of items arranged around it: a contact lens case and a bottle of solution, a pill caddy with Monday’s compartment open and empty, an old-fashioned shaving set, including a straight razor and brush. The bath lift Chad had insisted upon had been pushed to the wall as much as possible and the seat that Mr. Faust had so memorably used for a play-swing transformed into a shower caddy, so he was using it after all, despite his assertion to the contrary, just not the way his grandson intended. There was nothing particularly ominous about any of this, but she turned away from the sight with real dread knotting up her guts.

Ana checked the bedroom next. The light had been left on and the ceiling fan was turning, just wasting electricity to illuminate and cool an empty room. The bed had not been made. There was a glass of water on the nightstand, half-empty and gathering dust, if there was any dust in this house. Hardly neglected, but still…like the bathroom, even these little hints of disarray appeared uncharacteristic for a man who cut his onion rings with a knife and fork.

Ana went out into the hall. It also appeared empty. Apart from the rain on the windows and the pounding of her heart, the house was silent.

“Mr. Faust?” she called and heard, faint with distance (and only distance, she hoped), “Here. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah.” And although she didn’t know what she would find, some prescient part of her guessed, because she added unthinkingly, “Don’t move. I’m coming to you.”

“Mind…Mind the stairs,” he said again and that was all he said.

Ana ran down the hall as buried memory struggled to rise, trying to tell her she’d done this before—exactly this, right down to the panicked tightening of her throat—even though she knew damn well she’d only ever been in this house once, to install the stuff in the bathroom, hardly a panic-inducing experience. Yet her hand struck a door as her wet boots lost traction on the hardwood floor and she came to a stumbling stop in the doorway, staring at a long empty table, a dozen empty chairs, and three evenly spaced table lamps with long fluted necks and carnival glass shades in a delicate smoky-amber color with a pattern of grapes on the sides that would look, when lit, like bubbles rising in champagne.

For a moment, she imagined she could smell cigarettes. In the distant thunder, she imagined she heard the echo of her mother’s voice: Where is he? Where is the son of a bitch?

Confused, she backed up and shut the door, slammed it, then ran again. Down the hall, around the corner, to the wide T that was the staircase—in design, virtually the twin of the grand stair at Aunt Easter’s house, except this was white marble and not the black stone mined out of the quarry. She looked at that for a long time, her brain inexplicably fixated on comparing white and black.
stonework, with all the moral implications that symbolized, rather than directly acknowledging the man lying at the bottom.

Black slacks. Black socks. Polished leather shoes, one on his foot and one over by the door. Blindingly white shirt, very clean except where blood spotted it, and partially untucked, although this had presumably happened during the fall and was not due to sloppiness on his part. Dark tie, neatly knotted. Hair, slightly mussed. His cane lay halfway down the stairs.

Ana started down to get it and there, that strange other-vision that allowed her to look at what was and ‘see’ how it was made or look at what wasn’t and ‘see’ how it could be built suddenly surged and brought what she was already seeing into sharp focus. Time did not stop, but it slowed to an unreal crawl. She saw her boot swing out, ready to drop onto the first step. She saw her boot reflected and felt a pang of embarrassment at the realization that she’d been tracking the storm in, making a mess on Mr. Faust’s clean floors. She saw a drop of muddy water form from her swinging bootlace and fall, plopping into the center of the puddle on the stair and she saw the red stain of desert dirt spreading like blood over the top of the puddle, but not mixing in. She thought, very distinctly, ‘That’s what I’ve been dripping all over his floors. What the hell is that other stuff?’

Her brain unlocked. Time kicked in. Ana yanked her foot back, holding it high in the air like a stupid flamingo for a few seconds before slowly setting it down.

She looked up; the roof was not leaking.

She looked down; there were puddles all down the first six stairs, big ones, almost completely covering each step.

She reached for the bannister as she began to lower herself to one knee, but pulled her hand back in dark un-confusion at the touch of cold wetness. Her fingers glistened. She rubbed them together, frowning. Slippery. She sniffed, but smelled nothing. She touched the puddle on the stairs. Same stuff.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, wiping her hand off on her jeans. “Don’t nod or shake your head. Especially not that. Have you called 911?”

“No yet. Please—”

“Okay, I’m on it. Don’t try to get up.” She pulled her phone out and woke it up. “You having any chest pains or shortness of breath or anything else I should be aware of?”

“No. What are you doing?”

“What do you think? I’m calling 911.”

“No!” He raised his hand, in which he still held his phone. His other arm was crooked against his chest at a not altogether natural angle. “Please, not yet!”

“It’s okay,” she told him in her most comforting voice, which was only about half as bitchy as her normal speaking voice. “Just relax and don’t move. I’m going to get you a doctor.”

“Miss Stark, I appreciate your concern, but I am not panicking and I am not confused. I am in significant pain and I would very much like to see a doctor, but I cannot allow a paramedic in this house until it has been cleaned. Please.”

“Mr. Faust, the paramedics aren’t going to care whether or not your damn house is clean,” Ana
began and then stopped to look again at the stairs. Oil all over the steps and the top of the banister, but no empty bottle lying on the tiles next to the old man where he’d dropped it in the fall. Because he hadn’t dropped it. Whatever this was, it hadn’t been spilled in the fall.

She looked at him and found him already looking up at her, his features quite calm, if pinched with pain. “This wasn’t an accident,” she said, because someone had to say it. She had to hear it out loud before she could really take it in.

“No,” he said, not without humor. “No, it most assuredly was not. Please. The maid will be here in an hour and she mustn’t see any of this. She talks. They all talk in this town. Please. I need your help.”

“To clean it up?”

“Please.”

“This is evidence of a crime,” she said, emphasizing the key words. “You seriously want me to clean it up?”

“I do.”

“That’s also a crime. You’re involving me in a crime.”

“Yes. I’m sorry,” he said. He did not point out that she had a phone in her hand and he could hardly charge up the stairs and wrestle it away from her if she chose to dial it. He simply waited, watching her and taking swift, shallow breaths, as expecting mothers are taught to do to manage labor pains.

“Is he still here?” Ana asked and snapped, “Don’t shake your head!” when he started to do just that. “You could have spinal injuries! Jesus, man!”

“I’m relatively certain I don’t.”

“The only relative I’m concerned about is the one who just tried to bump you off. Is he in the house or not?”

“He was here last night. I haven’t seen him this morning. That in itself leads me to believe he’s gone, since I can’t imagine he would allow you to witness his handiwork without intervention. In any event, you would be better able to determine whether he’s here or not. He parked at the front entrance. Did you see a car?”

“No, but you’ve got a hell of a big garage out there—Don’t shake your damn head! How many times?”

“I’m sorry. You’ve said that. I’m sorry. Perhaps I am confused after all. I only meant to say that he can’t get into the garage. I keep it locked and I keep the only key in the safe. No, if the front turnabout is empty, then he left, although he may plan to return at any moment intending to discover me. Please, Miss Stark. You will find towels in the linen closet, in the hall to your right, first door on the left. Please.”

Ana looked at the stairs, then at him, lying at the bottom of them, and finally at her phone with 9-1-1 on the screen and waiting for her hovering thumb to seal the deal.

He waited.

“Fine,” she said, almost spitting it at him, although she was more disgusted with herself than with
him. She pointed her phone at him angrily. “Do not fucking move. Internal injuries will fuck you up, but not half as hard as I will if you fucking die on me and leave me to explain how I broke into your house and ended up standing over your fucking body.”

“Understood. Please hurry.”

Ana went, tight-jawed, adrenaline throbbing in her ears and coppery in her mouth. She found the closet right where he said it was. Shelves of soap and other toiletries, neatly arranged like with like and labels facing outward. Bedding of all descriptions folded into perfect squares and stacked with uncanny precision…except there, where one set of sheets, top and bottom, had been folded as Ana herself might have folded them—corner to corner, over and over, good enough—and shoved them carelessly among the rest, where they now stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. And towels, separated first by color and then by size.

Ana took as many of the biggest as she could easily carry and something small to wipe down the bannister. Returning to the stairs, she got to work. It didn’t take long. The towels were thick and soft and wonderfully absorbent. She was tempted to ask him where he got them, except now was not the time and he probably wouldn’t know anyway. The rich had other people to do their shopping. And their cleaning.

When she’d mopped up as much of the oil as a mere towel could take away, she gathered them all together and tossed them over the bannister to land in a loose heap on the foyer tiles. She ran her boot over a step—still slick, but not lethally so—then picked up the old man’s cane and rapidly descended the rest of the stairs, dropping to her knees beside him.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, loosening his tie and unbuttoning the first two buttons of his shirt. She checked his pulse—fast, but steady—and his pupils—even and responsive—and looked in vain for the source of the dried blood blotting his shirt and the tiles around him. “Where are you hurt?”

“I’m r…reasonably certain my right arm and left leg are broken. I struck my temple rather hard, but I don’t believe I lost consciousness.”

“What’s the blood from?”

“My mouth. I’ve broken some teeth and cut my lip.”

Ana carefully ran her fingers over his scalp. She could feel a few bumps through the thick crust of whatever product he used to tame his hair, but nothing open and nothing so broken beneath the skin that her unskilled touch could find it. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Fredrich. With an H.”

“You know what day it is?”

“August 3rd, 2015.”

“When did this happen?”

“Around six, I think.” He indicated his bent arm apologetically. “My watch did not survive the adventure.”

“You’re goddamn lucky you did. Wait…six? You were lying here for three hours before you called Shelly?”

“I didn’t know your personal number and wasn’t sure when your shift started.”
“So you waited three hours and then called the place I work? What by the unspeakable name of the almighty Cthulhu were you thinking, old man?”

“How imperative it is that I do nothing to attract the interest of the local authorities. And to that effect, I would appreciate it if you gave the time of this event as occurring shortly after your arrival, should anyone inquire.”

“You are seriously pushing the boundaries of our friendship.”

“I’m well aware of that and I do apologize, but I can’t risk having my grandson’s efforts at securing an early inheritance made known.” He paused for a few pained breaths, then said, “Can I trust you to keep that secret?”

“Yeah, sure. I think that’s a mistake, but yeah, I will. Can I please get an ambulance now?”

She had the dispatcher on the line almost before he’d finished sighing his assent. After spending several frustrating minutes relaying questions and answers, she finally passed her phone down to him and just listened in (not without grudging admiration) as he mixed truth and lies in the same matter-of-fact manner that he said everything. When he had finished his account, he said a polite goodbye, thumbed the End Call button and gave her phone back.

“I’m surprised they let you go,” she remarked, returning her phone to her pocket. “They usually want to keep you on the line and talking right up until the paramedics arrive.”

“Yes, they said something like that, but I don’t need to be reassured that help is on the way and if I took it into my addled head to become hysterical, I trust you to slap me calm again.”

“That shit only works in the movies,” she told him, settling herself on the bottom step and leaning back against the bannister. “Not saying I wouldn’t be tempted, but I’m not about to throw hands when I don’t know if you’ve got neck or spine injuries yet.”

“I appreciate your consideration, Miss Stark. And your discretion.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Out of curiosity, what did he use? I never got a good look.”

“Nothing to see. Colorless, odorless.” She shrugged. “You keep baby oil around the house?”

“No,” he said and was quiet a moment, thinking. “I do keep mineral oil, however. I use it…used it to clean mechanical parts. I must have gallons of the stuff down…down in the basement.” His brows slowly knit. “They were moved.”

“What were?”

“My keys.” His long, bruised fingers brushed at his pocket, letting Ana hear the muted clinking of metal. “He invited me for a swim last night…it was rather hot…and afterwards, after I showered, I thought…thought my keys had been moved…” His frown deepened before he sighed it away. “I don’t know why I’m so surprised. He’s done it before.”

“Stolen your keys?”

“He’s been picking the place over every chance he gets in the futile hope of locating a convenient list of passwords and account numbers,” he replied, dismissing his grandson’s moral character with a wave. “That is understandable. What surprises me is that he’d bother himself to steal my keys
just to root around in the basement.”

“Nothing so enticing as a locked door,” Ana told him with a shrug. And then, not without a
mercenary interest of her own, casually asked, “Got any more equipment liberated from the old
base back in your glory days?”

Or from the old pizzerias.

“My glory days,” he echoed with a faint, strained smile. “But no, I don’t. At least, I don’t think so.
There may be something tucked away and forgotten in some shadowed corner, but I doubt it. I
cleaned the place out…oh, it’s been more than a decade ago and I’ve scarcely been back a handful
of times since then.”

“Why not?”

“It’s haunted.”

Ana nodded sympathetically.

“And it’s empty,” he added. “Empty rooms at the end of empty halls make a long way to walk
purely for sentiment. I’ve become quite sedentary in my old age…and shall shortly become even
more so, I suspect. In fact, I think there are strong odds I shall never see my own basement again in
my lifetime. Small loss. There’s nothing there now but odds and ends of my old life. Some of it
surely has some marginal monetary value, but I shouldn’t think any of it would be of interest to
anyone…apart from you, perhaps.”

“Then why keep it locked?”

“Habit, I suppose. Habit rules us all. The poor boy. One can only imagine his high hopes when he
first availed himself of my keys and skulked into the basement, expecting hoards of dragon’s
plunder and finding…old tools and a few gallons of mineral oil. Still, he found a way to put it to
good use, didn’t he? He has at least some brains.”

Ana had to laugh at that, as unfunny as it was. “Brains? Please. If he were any dumber, you’d have
to put him in the window and water him.”

“Clumsy as the effort was, he wasn’t completely inept. He took great care to arrive after Cook had
gone for the night and Canyon Road sees very little traffic in the normal course of things. I doubt
anyone saw him, but even so, he came in a rental car. No one would have recognized him.”

“A rental car,” Ana sighed and slapped her palm over her face. “Oh my God, a rental car.”

“He said his was in the shop.”

“Uh huh. Did he eat anything while he was here?”

“We had a light supper.” Faust thought about it. “He drank a bit more than is usual for him.
Nerves, I suppose. Or perhaps he wanted an excuse to stay the night. I brought him sheets and he
went to bed early.”

“So let me see if I’ve got this straight.” She began to count the points off on her fingers. “Once he
makes up his mind to bump you off, his first act is to create a paper trail for him renting a car
that’s the same make and model of the one everyone in this stupid town definitely noticed driving
to your house, on account of the fact that no one recognized it, and in small towns, everyone
notices everyone’s car. Then he doubles the amount of dishes you go through in a night and plows
through the alcohol so there can be no mistake that someone was over last night, someone you were comfortable allowing to sleep over, which I have to think is a spectacularly short list. On a related note, he lets you make up the bed for him, but then he unmakes it and puts the sheets back in the closet, which the maid is definitely going to notice.”

“Will she?”

“I did.” Ana jerked her thumb in the direction of the top of the stairs. “Every other set of linens in that closet is folded as neat as a damn metaphor for a neatly folded sheet, except for one. But I’m getting ahead of myself. So far, all he’s done is make it undeniably obvious that he was in the house. Now the stupid really starts, because his master murder plan is to—” She started counting again on her fingers. “—lure you into the pool so you get chlorine in your hair, so you have to take a shower before bed, so he can steal your keys, so he can go down to the basement and get one of those bottles of mineral oil he saw the last time he was sneaking around, so he can spill some on the stairs…and then he takes the bottle away with him, presumably because he remembered fingerprints are a thing. Can we stop and talk about that for just a second? What were the cops supposed to think, that you went downstairs for a handful of oil? Also, can we just talk about the fact that his murder weapon of choice was oil on the stairs and the bannister? The bannister?! Maybe, just maybe, someone could plausibly spill something on the stairs, but the bannister makes it a murder, end of fucking story. Maybe he thought the evidence would have evaporated by the time your maid got here, not knowing that mineral oil takes for-fucking-ever to evaporate and even if it had, there’d be an obvious residue on, and I can’t stress this enough, the bannister! The local cops may have their blind spots—”

Mr. Faust made a low, wordless comment, one Ana had heard a hundred times grumbling through Freddy’s speaker at just that volume and just that tone.

“—but they’re not incompetent. They’d have no trouble at all connecting those dots. And that’s if you’d actually died. What kind of moron tries to kill someone with a random tumble down some greased stairs? No, I’m sorry, but this was a stupid plan and your grandson deserves to be Jailbird Johnnie’s prison-wife for the next eight-to-twenty just for thinking of it, much less going through with it! Why are you protecting him?”

“I do realize how this looks and I’m touched by your concern, Miss Stark, but make no mistake. I am not protecting the boy. I am protecting myself.” He touched the loose knot of his tie, the open collar of his shirt, and returned his hand to the cradling place on his bent and now visibly discolored wrist. “Investigations are messier than murder and there are particulars about my life which are….sensitive to disruption. I can manage the boy. Do I hear sirens?”

Ana got up and checked the nearest window. “Yup, that’s your ride,” she said, spotting the distant flash of red and white through the rain.

“Do me the kindness of disarming the security system, please. The panel is just there, on your left. Do you see it?”

Ana looked and after a moment’s examination, spied the discreet panel. It opened exactly like the hidden panel set in the back wall of the show stage at Freddy’s and revealed an identical keypad. No sooner had she done this than Mr. Faust’s phone rang—a brisk double-buzz.

“Yes,” she heard him say to the tiny voice that came through the speaker. “It should be opening now…Good. They’re at the gate,” he said, returning his phone to his shirt pocket.

“You can open that from your phone but not the door?”
“A lack of foresight, Miss Stark. I was content to modernize the gate’s security after the retirement of the man who previously held that post, but I neglected to anticipate that I should ever be unable to open my own door. I’ll be sure to remedy that at my earliest convenience. Today, you will just have to do this the old-fashioned way. The access code is 1-2-0-8-1-9-8-3, enter.”

The same code used to access the Parts Room backstage at Freddy’s. She didn’t know why she was surprised. He built it; who else would program the security system?

“You’ll have to change that now,” said Ana, pushing buttons.

“Why?”

“I’ll remember it.” It would be easy, even for her. It was her birthday. August 12, 1983.

“Oh, I think I can trust you.”

“Nothing brings two people together like covering up a crime,” Ana agreed. “It’s asking me what I want to do. Is there an unlock option I’m not seeing here?”

“Scroll down with the arrow key. You should see one that says Disarm system. Select it. At the prompt, select All, then confirm. There is a small light at the bottom of the keypad. It should turn from green to red.”

“Yep, that’s what it did.”

“Then the system is disarmed. You may open the door.”

Ana did and was greeted with the sight of flashing lights just cresting the last rise before the bluff on which the glass house stood.

A short silence fell between them, broken only by the sirens and the rain.

“Are you very upset with me?” he asked suddenly, almost timidly.

“We’re fine,” she said and was blackly amused to discover that she meant it. “This isn’t the worst secret I’ve ever kept.”

“No.” In the dim mirror of the windowpane beside her, his reflection passed a transparent hand over his transparent face. “Nor I. Things…Things are about to become rather chaotic, I fear. May I impose upon you once more?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Dispose of the towels, please. Don’t leave them for the maid. Oil stains. Grime and dirt and even blood wash away, but oil stains forever. Take them away.”

“Sure,” said Ana, wearily thinking, ‘Score. Free towels.’ As requested, nice fluffy ones, not too big. So there was Foxy’s wish list half-done.

“And lock the door when you go. Here. Here.” His long fingers felt at his hip, finally locating his pocket and scratching out a set of keys, surprisingly small considering the size of the house. A few door keys, several car keys, a couple outliers that might fit lockers or safety deposit boxes somewhere in the world…and one odd, bent metal bar, like an Allen wrench, with a star-shaped head. And if that wasn’t enough, the keys were all held together on a single ring to which had been attached a small string doll—a dark-haired doll in a now-dingy but once white lab coat.
Just a generic scientist or doctor doll, taken on its own merits, but it wasn’t on its own, was it? It was one of a pair. Frankenstein’s Monster guarded the keys now burning in her hip pocket and that made this none other but his father, Dr. Frankenstein.

“Remember to arm the system again before you leave,” Mr. Faust was saying. “And be sure the door is closed and locked within thirty seconds of doing so. If not, the alarm will go off and calls will be made and passwords must be provided and I’m afraid I’m at my limit for coping with aggravation.”

He had been forced to raise his voice for the last several seconds as the ambulance neared. Now the sirens shut off, and then the engine. Doors opened and slammed. Feet came splashing through the puddles in Mr. Faust’s well-kept driveway.

“It’s been rather a dreadful day,” Mr. Faust said in the last private moment they had. He reached out his good arm and Ana came back so that he could shake her hand. “But it was good to see you again, under any circumstance. Thank you for coming.”

“Thanks for having me,” she replied sarcastically.

Oblivious to her tone, he smiled, and the smile held so much pain that she tried to think of something else to say so she wouldn’t have to leave him on a sour note, whether he knew it or not, but she didn’t have the chance. The EMTs burst in and Ana was forced to retreat to a distance where she could answer questions without getting in the way.

* * *

It seemed that it took forever to assess and stabilize and finally carry the old man away, but when Ana looked at her watch as the ambulance’s tail-lights vanished in the distance, she was astonished to see that only a little more than an hour had passed since she’d arrived. The blow-up with Big Paulie felt like last week’s bruise—still a sore point, but no longer raw—and yet he was probably still pacing around the building waiting for her to show up so he could start Round Two.

Well, fuck that. If he was there when she walked into the office, she’d damn well clock out and go home. She could take the hit on payday, even if Shelly vented his feelings by docking her the full day’s wages. She doubted he’d fire her, not until he’d secured his precious library contract, and even if he never admitted it, he’d probably be grateful she left on her own with money so tight and no real work for her to do today. Meanwhile, she had a shit-ton of work to do at Aunt Easter’s house, as well as a certain photograph and a certain pile of lumber burning a hole in her brain, and to paraphrase Mr. Faust, she’d reached her limit for dealing nicely with the fuckery of others.

Ana did some more cleaning up, beginning upstairs by locking the balcony doors in the master suite and mopping up the worst of the mess she’d tracked in. She went over the stairs and banister again, this time with soap and water. Finally, she picked up the oily towels (holding them well away from her body, because oil did stain, didn’t it, and Shelly would rake her over for this shirt if she ruined it) and left, arming the system and locking the door behind her. She tossed the towels into the back of the truck, got in, and just sat for a while, gripping the wheel and staring at the rain as it poured in sheets down the windshield. But only for a little while.

Then she went back to work.

She pulled into the parking lot of Shelton Contractor’s, so fixed on not thinking about Mr. Faust that she didn’t notice the half a dozen cars and trucks sharing the lot with her when there should
have been only the work vehicles and maybe Big Paulie’s own ride. She parked right next to the sheriff’s marked police car, still not seeing it, grateful just to have the craziness over and so ready for her day to get back to normal. She went fast up the walk to the front door, hearing nothing and seeing no one, and reached for the latch.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Ana recognized Jimmy Morehead’s voice first, then realized she was looking at him, and then realized further that she was looking at six other guys too. The entire work crew was huddled out under the eaves in the rain. Two of them were smoking, but the rest were just standing there, and as Ana puzzled over that, she belatedly processed a manly shout-off just on the other side of this door.

It gave her pause…but at the end of that pause, she was left with the fact that too much drama had squeezed itself into one day and it wasn’t even noon yet. She did not have even one fuck left to give for anyone else’s problems but her own.

She opened the door and walked into a warzone.

The shouting stopped at once, giving her a good long stretch of silence in which to stare around at the utter wreck that had once been the contracting company’s reception area, the self-same space that she had renovated for three hundred bucks over a single sweaty weekend as her admission ticket to this job. Broken glass, smushed cake in a variety of flavors, glittery pink frosting and coffee made an abstract painting of the carpet she had just steam-cleaned that morning. The shelves she had built behind the reception desk had been torn out of their brackets and used to knock holes in the walls that still sort of smelled like the paint she’d spent an afternoon applying. The chairs had been upended. The windows were cracked. The Mammon Homesteaders’ Insurance calendar was still on the wall, but it hung crooked.

Ana looked at the three men sharing the scene of the carnage, one by one. Big Paulie on the right, red-faced and clenching his fists to hide the trembling of his bruised hands. Sheriff Zabrinsky, looking especially underpaid as he took notes. And Shelly last of all, giving her his best not-one-word-little-missy-so-help-me-God stare.

“What happened to the old man?” Zabrinsky asked. When Ana looked at him, he tapped the radio clipped to his shoulder. “Emergency call for the cab up to Canyon Road, Protocol 17-B. That’s a man on the ground, injuries to an unknown extent.”

Big Paulie let out a high, angry laugh. “Got a little rough, did you?”

“He slipped on the stairs,” said Ana. “Didn’t look too serious to me, but he probably broke some bones, so…looks like the renovations he wanted are indefinitely postponed.”

“Good,” said Shelly and immediately harrumphed in a flustered way, hitching at his belt. “Which is to say, not good for him, but good for me. Listen up. And you, out there! You get in here, because I am only saying this once!”

Rain fell. Feet shuffled. Jimmy peeked around the side of the open door and a few other faces showed themselves behind him.

Shelly glared at them, then pointed at Ana. “Stark, I am putting you in charge of the dealership job until further notice.”

“You are not giving that whore my job!” Paulie bellowed.

Shelly swung on him at once, huffing and puffing (but allowing Zabrinsky to hold him back with
just one hand). “You think you still got a job? Look around you! Look what you done to me!”

“I gave you thirty years—”

“No, sir!” Shelly bellowed. “You didn’t give it, you sold it! And I paid! I’m the one kept your wife in shoes all this time! I put your kids through school! I have supported your family while you pissed everything you had away and now you want to use the last days of grace I gave you to ruin me? As of this moment, you are not my employee, you are not my neighbor and you are not my friend! You are a goddamn criminal! I will see your ass in jail, I promise you! And I will see your wife, your boys…and their wives and their boys in civil court! I will take back every penny of what you owe me even if it means your grandkids are wearing paper bags instead of shoes for the rest of their goddamn lives! Sheriff, I want this man arrested! And you!” he snarled, turning back to the men still clogging the doorway. “All of you shiftless jackasses who were happy to keep quiet and let his bullshit slide while you were cashing my paychecks! Trammel here just spent your overtime pay on rebuilding my office and until I am back in the black, the new working hours are nine to five—strike that, nine to four! Part time, every one of you, and not one minute more!”

“Hey now,” Taylor began. “You can’t do that! I got five kids starting school soon who all need new clothes!”

Shelly turned on him at once, barking, “I been paying you time and a half for three months so you could look the other way and laugh while this bastard stabs me in the back and you got the goddamned gall to complain? Here’s something you can tell your kids tonight! You’re fired!”

Taylor’s jaw dropped open. Otherwise, no one moved until Shelly advanced on them, roaring, “Yes, I damn well mean it! Out! And you! You got a problem too, Hageman?”

“Nope.”

“Bisano?”

Bisano exchanged some glances with the other fellows, found no support, and shook his head.

“Stark, you’re in charge,” Shelly said again, even more grimly than before. “You’ve got three weeks to fix that mess and get me back on schedule, you hear me? If you aren’t exactly where the calendar says you ought to be by September 1st, I will shit-can the lot of you.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, wondering what she was agreeing to.

“Get out of here,” he ordered and scarcely had she cleared the door than Shelly slammed it on her.

Outside in the rain, Ana looked at her new crew.

They looked back at her.

“You all eaten yet?” she asked finally.

Wary surprise crossed a number of faces. They all answered in the negative.

Ana nodded once and turned to Jimmy. “Morehead, you take orders and go pick up lunches. Tell Lucy to put it on a tab and if Shelly won’t clear it at the end of the day, I will. Betty Burger and fries for me, two coffees. And that,” she added, pointing at Jimmy as a living embodiment of her words, “is the only shred of human feeling I got in me today. The days of killing two hours at Gallifrey’s every time the boss calls break are dead and buried. From now on, I expect you all to work as hard as I do.”
Bisano snorted.

Ana looked at him and maybe he saw just how close he was to watching her shrug off this circus and all its monkeys and just clock a bitch, because he shut right up and wiped at his nose, like Chica faking a sneeze.

“All right, let’s go,” said Ana, motioning at the parking lot in a grand sweep of her arm that metaphorically caught up Big Paulie, Chad and his nefarious bottle of mineral oil, and the unknown injuries of the old man, and pushed them all firmly from her mind. She had a job to do now, thank God, so Ana went to work.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At four o’clock, the working day was done. Ana saw her crew off-site, did a quick walk-around to make sure equipment was secure and then headed back to the office. Shelly was waiting on her, slumped in the back room with his head in one hand and a bottle of Jim Beam in the other. He spent a good hour talking about the damage in the front room and what it was going to take to fix it. She used up another hour talking about the dealership job and what it was going to take to fix that. He did a lot of drinking while he listened and at the end, he offered her the bottle, which she refused, saying she preferred to wait until she was home.

He thought that over, took another deep swallow, and said, “I shouldn’t maybe be driving, maybe.”

Maybe not,” she agreed, resigned. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

He rose erratically to his feet, reaching for her, and Ana put a steadying hand on his arm, which quickly became a shove when he leaned in, going for a kiss. She didn’t mean to push him quite so hard, but it was push or have her head swallowed by a whisky-soaked beard, so she didn’t exactly hold back either. He staggered, hip-checked the desk and fell into his chair again, nearly tipping it over and flailing like an upturned turtle, pouring Beam all over himself and spitting it out in slobbery gasps.

“What the hell is your problem?” he demanded.

“My problem?”

“You…You…You walk in here…You and your…” He glared at her chest and hitched at his belt. “I know what you do. I know what you…you Blaylocks do.”

“You want to walk home?” Ana snapped. “Keep your goddamn hands to yourself. Now come on.”

“I haven’t…I haven’t…” He mumbled, belched, and said with sudden clarity, “I haven’t been with a woman in ten years.”

“Yeah, well, there’s an app for that, but you aren’t getting it from me.”

“Everyone else does,” he said petulantly. “Whole town knows about you and lemme tell you something, missy. That old man may have got you this job, but he won’t be around forever and when he’s gone, I’m the one who decides if you keep it. Me. So you better…you better think about that.”

“Okay, we’re done.” Ana turned on her heel and walked away, pulling her phone from her pocket in an effort to find a taxi service in a town of…what did Mike say? Six hundred and some-odd God-fearing souls, most of them within walking distance of one another. A fool’s errand and yet, she found one: Moms With Wheels.

Within five minutes a rather reproachful-looking ‘Mom’ and her burly male companion were folding Shelly into the back of a minivan. Ana paid them (plus a generous tip against the extremely likely event of an upholstery cleaning fee), locked up the office, and climbed up into her truck. She pulled three sets of keys from her pocket, found hers and started the engine. She started to put the
others away, then brought them out and fidgeted them around so Frankenstein and his Monster were side by side in her palm.

Two simple string dolls, just like the ones she and David used to make so little Ana had toys to take home. Her mother would throw them out if she found them, but Ana didn’t care. It was fun to make them. So many rainy Saturdays had passed with her and David on their bellies on the living room floor, colorful thread laid out all around them, snipping wire and tying knots…

Aunt Easter had made a few with them, all one color because she couldn’t get the trick of tying in new strings, and even her best efforts came apart if they were actually played with. So here was the answer to another question, one Ana had never even thought to ask: Had David and Ana simply improved on Aunt Easter’s clumsy design, or had someone else taught them to make dolls? The same someone, maybe, who used to read her to sleep?

Tentatively, Ana shut her eyes and tried to remember, but all she got back for her efforts was one blurry image, unmoving as a photograph, of big hands wrapped around her small ones, helping her with the wire snippers. She couldn’t even be sure they were a man’s hands.

But whether she remembered or not, she supposed she knew the truth. If Aunt Easter had taught Ana the fine art of tying string around wire, it was only because Erik Metzger had taught her first. He’d taught them, her and David both, just the way he’d probably taught Fred Faust.

For a moment, she could see that too, so much clearer than her own uncertain memory. She could see the young man, barely out of his teens, sitting on the floor with the small boy in the back of some top-secret lab on the old base, making string dolls together while their fathers pioneered robotics under the watchful eye of Uncle Sam. Maybe these were even them—the first toys Fred ever made with Erik. She could be holding Freddy Fazbear’s great-great grandfathers here in her hand.

She could just take the keys back to his house, she supposed. Somebody might be there to take it. The maid. The cook. His lawyer.

“His grandson,” Ana murmured and that was all she needed to convince herself that she should really go see the man in person. Just to drop his keys off and see how he was doing. Not to interrogate him about a past Ana couldn’t really remember and things that surely didn’t matter anymore, but just because…because…

Fuck it. She didn’t need a reason.

The nearest hospital was Mercy General in Hurricane—reading the name, Ana could suddenly recall the fish tank in the waiting room just off the general reception area, the posters pinned to the ceiling of the X-Ray Lab and the teal-green color of the curtains in the patient rooms—but just to be on the safe side, Ana drove to Gallifrey’s first. As she paid for her crew’s lunches, she asked Lucy if she knew where they had taken Faust. Lucy claimed she did not, but the guy waiting behind Ana for chance to pay his bill did: He’d been taken to Mercy for the surgery and then transported out to Tranquility Recovery Center in St. George.

God bless Mammon and the good people who lived there, minding their own business.

Ana had never heard of the place, but fortunately, Google-Maps had, and soon enough, she was pulling onto the long, tree-lined drive with the hospital at the end of it. Although she’d never seen a hospital with a gate on it. A manned gate.

The guard came out as she rolled down her window, smiling in a friendly enough fashion, but
looking her over damned close. “Name?” he asked.

“Fredrich Faust. With an H.”

“You’re a Fredrich?”

“Me? No, I’m looking for Faust. Someone told me he was admitted here earlier today.”

“Name?” he said again, still smiling, but looking even closer.

Ana sighed, defeated. “Stark,” she said and as he picked up his phone, she added, “But I’m just trying to drop something off, so if you can’t let me in, can you just—”

He held up his hand, listening to the phone.

She shut up and waited.

He hung up and the gate ahead of her buzzed and opened. “Straight down the road,” the guard told her, pointing. “The visitors’ lot is on your right. Be sure to check in at the desk.”

Well, that was easy. After the day she’d just had, she would have expected—

She shut that thought-train down before she could jinx it and just said, “Thanks, man. I really appreciate it.”

The guard nodded and closed his window.

Ana rolled on.

The building she came to was small, especially for something calling itself a ‘medical center,’ but the landscaping was definitely nicer than she remembered Mercy’s being. There were statues in the walking garden, quiet little spaces tucked away amid the flowers where patients could meditate in serenity or catch a quick smoke away from the hawk-eyes of their nurses. The glass awning over the front doors had been strung with lights; in the reflecting rain, there seemed to be thousands. The reception area had actual furniture: stylish sofas and coffee tables arranged around a gas-lit fireplace, a selection of tasteful art and even a hanging bottle garden to frame the wall behind the reception desk. It looked more like a hotel than a hospital to her.

Glancing down at herself, she had to wonder what she looked like to them.

The receptionist behind the desk was on the phone. She gave Ana the Just-a-moment finger and a strained smile that suggested the conversation she was listening to was not a pleasant one. After some sympathetic sounds, she finally managed to get a, “May I put you on hold, please?…Yes, I’m sorry, I know…Thank you.” Finally freed, she turned her attention to Ana. “May I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Stark,” Ana began, taking care to wipe her boots thoroughly on the mat before stepping out onto the tiles. Her eyes sought and found a posted information area where, among other things, she learned no one would be admitted unless they were on the patient’s list of approved visitors, so that was a thing. Also, visiting hours were between 6 am and 8 pm, unless otherwise indicated by a doctor according to the patient’s best interests and according to Ana’s watch, it was now 8:03. Strike two. Nevertheless, she put on her most confident face—confidence, she had found, could get a person in where mere permission often did not—and approached the reception desk.

“I’m looking for Fredrich Faust. I’m not going to stay,” she promised, wincing to show she
understood the inconvenience of the request. “I just need to drop something of his off. I know it’s late, but—”

“That’s quite all right,” said the receptionist, typing. “Room 404.”

Ana felt her eyebrows twitch. No way a place like this just let anyone who asked up to see the patients. After an awkward moment, she said, “Really?”

The receptionist seemed surprised by her hesitation. She checked her sleek little computer and said, “Ana Stark?”

Ana’s eyebrows climbed higher. So there was indeed a visitor’s list and she was actually on it. She nodded.

The receptionist smiled that polite smile unique to receptionists who have had a long day listening to people’s petty bitching and know they are moments away from picking up that phone and getting right back into it. “Room 404. Right over there to the elevator, fourth floor, on your right.”

After another awkward moment, Ana went to the elevator. She pushed the button, sneaking a glance over her shoulder, but the receptionist had already picked up her phone and was politely, yet firmly, telling whoever was on the other end that she was very sorry, but his or her name was not on the patient’s list and that in any case, visiting hours for the day had ended. She would certainly let the patient know he or she had called…

The elevator’s arrival closed a soundproofed curtain on that little drama, leaving Ana with even more uncertainty.

It was a long, long ride to the fourth floor. The music piped through the hidden speakers was a soft, soothing instrumental whose purpose was not to play any actual song as much as cover the drone of the lift’s engine with the strange percussive comfort of casually-played bongos. Because when you’re closed in a small metal box and caught between floors in a strange building, nothing comforts like the synthetic sound of a rapid heartbeat.

The doors opened.

Ana stepped out into another quiet, clean, well-appointed hall and turned right. She came to the duty desk first, where she was again asked her name, and again directed to Faust’s room just like she was expected. The door was slightly ajar, allowing Ana to hear Morgan Freeman’s unmistakable voice talking about space. She knocked twice, heard no answer, and went in anyway.

Hospital beds had a way of making even the biggest men look small. Mr. Faust, although tall, was not a big man. Among the monitors, machinery and rigging that supported his arm and leg, he had all but disappeared.

Ana moved closer, doing her best to walk quietly in heavy work boots determined to squeak away every drop of rain she’d picked up on the way in. Sounded like she was walking on a carpet of mice, but he never moved. His eyes were sunken, bruised…and closed. His thin chest rose, hitched, and fell. His hair was a mess, sprouting out in all directions like it was physically trying to crawl off his head, and of all the unsettling things there were to see on him, that was the worst. He had always been so meticulous in his appearance.

She hadn’t thought to bring her day-pack in, but there was a comb in the bathroom, along with a number of travel-size toiletries: unwrapped soap, untouched safety razor, even a plastic case with his dark contact lenses floating inside. No styling gel, but she made do with a little bottle of tearless
shampoo and a cup of plain water, lathering up her hands and smoothing back his hair as she combed.

The door opened as she was finishing. “Knock-knock,” the woman who entered whispered. “Are you Ana?”

“Yeah, um…” She looked at her hand, sticky with shampoo and flecked with fine, white hairs. “Give me a second.”

The woman followed her to the bathroom and stood outside as Ana washed her hands. “Did you have a chance to speak with the surgical team at Mercy?”

“Uh…no? No, I was at work.”

The woman nodded and consulted her clipboard. “Well, we had a quite a bad fall. There’s a bit of swelling and discoloration around the face, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, but it all appears to be thankfully minor. He did have some damage to his mouth. The dental surgeon has done some of the work there, but…ah, more removals may be necessary. We’ll just have to see what develops. Let’s see… Displacement and fracture of the elbow, dislocation of the wrist, some bruising of the ribs, but again, for the most part, very minor damage from what could have been a much more serious fall. The most critical injury involved the comminuted fracture of the patella—that’s the knee, his right knee—and, ah, he’s come through the initial surgery quite encouragingly, but he’ll need to have further reconstructive surgery after the swelling has gone down and he’s a bit more stable.”

“More stable?” Ana turned away from the sink, hands wet, frowning. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing in the way that you’re thinking, but you need to understand that any break is a concern at his age,” she said softly. “We’re being cautious right now, but he’s in good health overall and the doctors are optimistic. I just need to warn you that rehabilitation will be a long hard road and he may never regain his full mobility. Physical therapy will be very important.”

Ana opened her mouth to say that she wouldn’t be having anything to do with the road of his rehabilitation, long or otherwise, then just closed it again and nodded.

“But tonight, he’s doing very well. He’s just had his medication, so he’s a little…” The woman twirled one finger expressively, smiling. “…but he was very lucid earlier and very cooperative. He’s very well-spoken.”

“Yeah,” said Ana with a huff of laughter. “Yeah, he is.”

“He’s NPO at the moment—that means no food or drinks—as a precaution following surgery. The anesthetic can make you a little whoospie. But he can have ice chips if he asks and if all goes well tonight, he can have breakfast tomorrow. There’s a menu by the phone, if he’d like to look it over.”

The woman consulted her clipboard and her smile grew shadows of professional concern. “Have you noticed changes in his appetite at home?”

“I…don’t live with him.”

The woman nodded with a smile of understanding on her lips, but that crinkle between her eyes deepened. “His records indicate an ongoing problem with maintaining a healthy weight and in fact, he’s a good ten pounds less than he was at his last check-up, when his weight was already what we would consider…”

“Concerning, at his age.”
“Concerning,” she agreed, “at any age. I’d like him to meet with our dietician tomorrow and if possible, it would be a very good thing for you to be present as well.”

“Me? Why?”

“Good nutrition is so very important to the healing process, and having a strong support network who can keep him on track will aid his recovery. I would really encourage family to try and be there.”

That certainly raised some questions in Ana’s mind, but she didn’t give any of them a voice. All she said was, “My work schedule is pretty demanding right now. I’m not sure I can get any more time off.”

“We can schedule around you to some degree. If weekends would be any easier…?”

The sound of Morgan Freeman’s melodious voice died to a sudden murmur. Ana and the other woman looked over and there was Mr. Faust, remote in hand, looking back at them.

“I’ll leave you alone,” the woman said at once, patting Ana’s arm. She waggled her fingers at Mr. Faust, mouthing her goodbyes—he watched with an expression of detached curiosity—and backed out, gently closing the door behind her.

“That was weird,” Ana said. “Did you tell these people I’m a relative?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” he replied with a convincing slur just threading through his measured words. “Possibly. I can recall…asking about the visiting regulations and…and becoming quite concerned that you might not be admitted.” He visibly thought about that, surprise pouring slowly across his face, and when it was all the way there, he said, “And here you are. Why are you here? It’s good of you to come. I meant to call you, but I don’t recall doing so. Did I call you?”

“No. I came to bring you your keys,” Ana said, holding them up.

“Oh. Quite all right. I appreciate you taking the time…taking the time…Forgive me, I’m not myself.” He leaned out and picked up his dark glasses, fumbling them on with one hand before switching on the light. “Will you please sit down? Are there chairs? Shall I call for a chair?”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, setting his keys on the table beside his bed, not quite in easy reach. “You go on back to sleep. I got to get going anyway. It’s past visitor’s hours.”

He caught her wrist as she turned away. “Please,” he said. “Don’t go yet. Please, sit with me. We need to talk. It’s quite…It’s quite important that we talk. Please.”

Ana gently pried him off, but then found a chair tucked up against the wall and pulled it closer to his bed. “For a little while. But when they tell me to go, I got to go.”

“They won’t,” he said as she sat. “Thank you. I’m sorry…so sorry to be such a bother. I’ve always been…so bothersome.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I am,” he said, looking very mildly affronted. “I annoy everyone. I don’t mean to. It’s just that I don’t…I don’t understand people. The way they think. Their processes, their…cogs and wheels…move in such unpredictable ways. I would call it chaos, except it clearly isn’t, because they all seem to understand the rules by which they flail about. I do not. I could never see people the way I see machines.” He pondered this with a faintly dismayed frown, then looked up at her. “I’m
broken, you know. My father…My father told me…All my life, he told me I was bad. A bad child, badly-made and badly-bent.”

“Yeah, okay, but you need to consider the source. Your father was a child-beating asshole.”

“Yes, he was,” Mr. Faust said intently, “but that doesn’t mean he was wrong. One has nothing to do with the other, do you…do you understand? It is so easy to believe that what is evil is always ugly and stupid and wrong, but it isn’t. Evil is…Evil is so painfully ordinary. It can hide in anyone. Like good. Like…I…Forgive me, I’ve forgotten what we were talking about.”

“It’s okay. Maybe you should just rest—”

“No. This is important.” He thought and visibly pulled a memory out of the tar his brain had become. “I was…but broken. My father told me…Yes, that’s it. He told me I could never be the same as those around me. I tried. I did try. The best I could ever do was pretend, but I could never truly…be…one of them. Something is wrong with me. Something in the…in the wiring, something in the code. And as I grew older…and older…I learned to be afraid, because when code replicates itself, you see, such defects can be passed along to the next generation.”

“With all due respect, sir, that’s horseshit.”

“I’ve reason…” He ran his brooding gaze over the damage done to his body. “Very good reason to believe it is not. At least, not always.”

“Hey.” Ana leaned toward him, trying to make eye contact through the tinted lenses of his glasses. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not broken.” She paused, glanced at the mess of wires, supports and monitors surrounding him, and amended, “You’re a little banged up at the moment, but you’re not broken.”

“Am I not? Am I not? Oh, but I have done terrible things…”

Ana took a moment to really think about how ready she was to hear the answer, and then went ahead and asked, “Like what?”

“The most terrible thing,” he whispered, turning his face away to the window. Sunlight behind the rain threw shadows across his face, trickling down his cheek like tears. “I did nothing. Nothing.”

“Believe me, there are worse things.”

“No. There aren’t. The evil that men do pales beside the evil of those who do nothing. How many people walked past you that day?” he asked without a pause, without change to his tone or his expression. “The day you went to Freddy’s against your mother’s wishes?”

Ana couldn’t answer at first and when she could, she didn’t. She sat, staring at him until he turned his head and looked at her through the black, eyeless mask of his glasses. “You know about that?” she said finally, although she didn’t know why she was surprised. God bless the good people of Mammon, far too good for gossip.

“How many?” he asked again.

The IV pump purred every few seconds, counting out time.

“Eight,” she said.

“And who did you blame?” he asked, so quietly. “When you lay bleeding on the wet pavement,
who did you curse in your child’s heart? Who did the greater evil? Your mother? Those eight indifferent passers-by?” His voice roughened. “Me?”

Ana couldn’t have put a word to what she was feeling, but it was not surprise. “Were you there?”

“No, but I heard about it. Afterwards when, as some might say, nothing could be done, but of course something could have been done. I had ten thousand opportunities to end the hell you were forced to endure and I…I let it happen.” His voice splintered, cracked and finally broke. “I let it happen to you, Ana. I let it happen.”

He cried ugly, as children do, and he felt ugly. She knew it because he tried to cover his face, but the IV line caught on the rails of his bed and he couldn’t reach. He fumbled at the rail with his shaking hand, exposing the peeking edge of an incontinence pad and the piss pouch discretely tucked under the hanging end of the blanket, but failed to free the line.

Ana got it for him, then got up and found the box of tissues that was always discretely tucked away in every hospital room. She tore off a few sheets for him and found something else to look at while he got himself under control.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered, pulling his glasses away to wipe at his eyes while Ana studied the unremarkable landscape prints framed on the wall.

She glanced at him, took the wet tissues and gave him a few more dry ones, and sat down again.

“Are you very angry?”

She thought about it.

“No,” she said and had to laugh because she meant it. “Seriously, what could you have done? Made a phone call? Involved the cops? The first time my mom really felt like someone in that town was looking at her too hard, she lit out and took me with her. The second time, she drove into a lake.”

She’d tried to take Ana with her that time, too, but there was no way she was telling him that. Instead, she said simply, “My mom didn’t want to be saved. And she for damn sure didn’t want me to be saved. Besides, you’re taking care of me now.”

“And does that make up for all those early years of unchecked abuses?”

“Make up for? No. But it matters,” she told him and, on impulse, reached out to rest her hand over his, careful not to touch the place the needle pierced him. “Look, whatever it is you want to tell me…I’m not going to sit here and lie and tell you I don’t want to know, but…this doesn’t feel right. And I…” Ana clapped a hand to her face and rubbed hard, punishingly. “I admit I came here for just this reason and I’m…sorry. Because this isn’t right. Getting answers like this is like…like getting laid because I roofied you. I’m going to go, okay? If you still want to talk, well, I’ll see you when you get out. Okay?”

He didn’t answer.

Ana fidgeted. “Sir?”

He still didn’t answer. After a long moment of increasingly tense silence, his lips parted for a thickish little snore and she realized he’d fallen asleep. Ana spared the IV pump a blameful glance, but didn’t get up and leave. She knew how disorienting it was to wake up and find the person you thought you’d been talking to gone, just gone. She wanted to at least say goodbye, so she found the remote for the TV instead and flipped through the channels—they had a full spread here, including the premiums and streaming services—until she found a horror movie, and settled in to wait.
Time passed, faithfully measured and recorded by his health monitor. The nurse on duty came by at regular intervals to do the things nurses did, polite and efficient and reassuring. She did not tell Ana to leave.

The rain fell, now heavy, now light. The sun set, hidden behind the clouds. Lights came on in the tasteful gardens surrounding the hospital. After some internal debate, Ana picked up the menu by the phone and ordered herself a dinner on the old man’s tab, justifying it by reminding herself he had promised to get the next check. Roast pork shoulder with red potatoes and apple-mango salsa—not the usual hospital fare. It arrived too fast to be anything but a glorified TV dinner, but even so, it was a damned good TV dinner. Ana spared a thought for the Lucky Buffet in Hurricane and for the end-of-day leavings she might have gleaned from its copious chafing trays (the bookstore next door would already be closed by now, poor Chica), and then ate it all.

The old man slept through her fork tapping at the plate, the nurse’s rounds and an hour and a half of co-ed screams and chainsaws, but when the orderly rattled a few dishes cleaning away her tray, he woke with a start. He peered uncertainly up at the television for several seconds before he noticed her sitting beside him, and startled again. “How good of you to come,” he said with obvious confusion. “Did I call you?” And before she could answer, he blinked, passed his hand over his eyes and murmured, “I’ve said this. You…You brought my keys, yes? I asked you…to lock the house…”

“Yeah. Sorry, I should go and let you rest. It’s way past—”

“No! No, please stay…a little while longer. I’m talking, I think. I’m talking too much. But we need to talk, you and I. What…” He touched his glasses, adjusted them, looked at the bruised back of his hand where the IV line entered him, and then looked at her. “Did you find the basement?”

“No,” she said, startled. “I locked the front door and I left. I didn’t go trawling through your house after you were gone.”

“That was rather short-sighted of you,” he said reproachfully. “However, it’s a small matter in the greater scheme of things. As I say…as I think I said…there’s nothing there anymore…nothing of interest. But…was he there? The boy…Did he leave in the night or was he still there? Hiding…in the basement. Forgive me, I know I should know this,” he said with plaintive apology. “I’m having rather a difficult time separating what I’ve been dreaming from reality.”

“I know the feeling. And no, he wasn’t there. At least, I didn’t see him. You said he parked outside, so…”

“Yes,” he said, with greater confidence. “That’s right. He parked outside. He rented a car. A grey car, very grey, inconspicuous. Was it you who said everyone saw it, because no one recognized it?”

“Yeah. I said that.”

“And you asked if he might not have parked in the garage,” he recalled, his face pinched with the effort of memory. “And I told you I kept the key in the safe. Did you find the key?”

“Uh, no,” she said, not quite laughing. “I wasn’t looking for it either.”

“It’s in my office, behind a false panel on the south wall.”

“Are you crazy? Don’t tell me where your secret safe is!”

“It’s where I keep the box,” he told her. “He may have seen it…I’ve tried to be careful about
opening the safe, but he’s cunning, even when not particularly clever. And he must have stolen my keys for a reason, and I doubt it was to explore the basement. It must have been the box he was after. There’s nothing else of any great importance in the safe. Just some official documents, you know the sort…patents, schematics, family papers. A few million dollars. Some photographs.”

“Jesus Christ, old man!” she sputtered. “A few million—?”

“I prefer to use cash, whenever convenient to carry,” he told her with an air of wounded defensiveness. “It’s so annoying to have to wait upon the leisure and approval of banks when one wants to buy a car.”

“How often does that really come up?” she asked and then surprised herself with a short bark of laughter. “Often enough to keep the dealership in business.”

Faust grunted Freddy’s distracted, affirmative grunt. “The garage only holds so many, of course. I keep one for driving and one for…sentimental reasons. The others come and go. When they start to…to stack up, I donate them to charities or…give them away.” He was quiet a moment, then frowned at her. “Would you like a car, Miss Stark?”

“No thanks. I’m good. How many do you have now?”

“Five, I think. Five or six. I haven’t counted recently. I suppose I should, just on the off-chance the boy’s managed to ferret his way in. I keep the garage key in the safe, but the keys to all the cars and such are simply tucked up under the individual visors.”

“You’re a trusting one, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” That invisible shadow crept over him again. “So I have learned, to my cost. My…My great cost. Far, far greater than the price of a few cars.”

“Which you wouldn’t even miss, since you don’t even drive.”

“I do. Whether it is morally or, indeed, legally correct that I do so is another matter. But I do. On rare occasion.” He lapsed into a pensive silence for a few seconds before continuing in a distant, daydreaming way, “I don’t sleep well. Some nights, I take pills. Some nights, I go for walks through the many unvisited rooms of the cold, sterile house my father left to me and which I have stained…with oil…and blood. But some nights, I take his car and drive along the edge of the canyon as far as the road will go…the way we used to go.” His attention wandered to the window, watching trickles of rainwater fork down the tinted glass. Several minutes passed, comfortably silent, before he turned suddenly back to her. “Have you ever been to the end of the road?”

“Canyon Road? No.”

“It just ends. One would think there would be more than that, after following the road twenty-three miles. A scenic overlook, perhaps, with an informative plaque and a picnic table. But no. There’s nothing but a sign. Do you know what the sign says?”

“Road closed ahead?” Ana guessed.

“Ah, but that would imply the road could at times be opened.”

“Road ends?”

“So one would think, but no. The sign says No Warning.”
“Doesn’t the fact that there is a sign make that a lie?”

“Yes. In my youth, I found great depths of meaning in the paradox. We used to sit out on the hood of his car and smoke and discuss the sign and all the things summed up by its message. But you see, the road does continue on past the sign for several miles. Then, all at once—”

“Without warning.” Ana prompted.

“Without warning,” he agreed, “it ends and the car drops six inches, ten inches, however far it falls, and you find yourself careening across the uneven desert, dodging boulders and crushing through brush. It was terrifying the first time, exhilarating every other time. You can’t just stop and turn around. The ground is broken, treacherous. You have to drive, trusting there will be a safe place eventually. But there are no safe places, only dangers of varying degrees. That first night, the first time, I drove in happy terror, both of us shouting and laughing until we fetched up at last against the edge of the desert, where the mountains end and the canyon begins. Have you ever been?”

He’d already asked, but she didn’t remind him, just shook her head.

“It is a terrible place. Beautiful, in its own broken way, but terrible. Desolate. Loveless. The trees are dead, the rock is fallen. Nothing there is, save that it is wretched.” He lapsed into a long, glazed-eyed silence, smiling and frowning both at once, then said, “I lost my virginity there that night,” and looked very vaguely surprised. “That was inappropriate. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Ana told him, giving his hand a careful pat around the IV line. “They got you on the good shit, don’t they?”

“Oh yes,” he sighed. “I’m a great believer in better living through chemistry, but this has been a marked cut above my usual recreational curative and well worth the breaking of a few paltry bones. I should have flung myself down the stairs years ago.” His attention wandered toward the IV pump, then dropped to the nightstand beside him.

His brows rose, but did not furrow as they fell, showing surprise, but no apprehension. He moved his phone aside and picked up one of the sets of keys. The one with the Monster doll attached. He coughed—no, he laughed. “You found these in your aunt’s house, I suppose,” he said without curiosity, now picking up his own keys and putting the dolls together, as she had done, side by side in his hand.

Without warning, without even a sign to tell her there’d be none, he was crying. His thin, bruised fingers folded over the dolls and he folded around his hand, sobbing in the same dry coughing way that he’d laughed just a moment ago.

Ana got up to get him a few more tissues, but when she turned around, he was asleep, still slumped forward with the IV line loosely wrapping the dolls together in his slack hand.

She put the tissues down on the nightstand and went to the bathroom to wet a handtowel. Nice, much nicer than the sandpapery cloth found in most hospitals, assuming they provided better than paper at all, but a definite downgrade from his home linens.

He didn’t stir when she lifted his glasses away to wipe his face or when she put them back, even when she accidentally stuck the arm on one side into his ear, but when she tried to take the keys, his hand closed at once into a fist.

He coughed as Ana backed up, then looked at the keys and said, “Oh. I am awake. Am I? Yes, but
I thought…I dreamed you’d gone…”

“I’m sorry,” said Ana. “I should have left. I shouldn’t have even come here.”

“Not at all. You’re very kind, which is…unexpected…and much appreciated. Forgive me that outburst. I don’t…I don’t quite know what came over me.”

“Opioids.”

He looked at the bruise on the back of his arm where the needle entered his body. “Do you think so? There’s a pity. I was rather enjoying myself, but I…I simply cannot allow myself the loss of my self-control. I do things, you see,” he said, not looking at her, “when I’m not myself. I do…regrettable things.”

“Don’t we all? Look, I’m sorry.” She nodded at the keys, still in his hand. “I didn’t mean to…”

To what? To confront him with them? Of course she had. Why else would she lay them both out like that? She wanted to see his reaction. After telling herself she was taking the high road by not using his medicated state against him, she’d dug out those stupid dolls and all but threw them in his face while he was at his most vulnerable. ‘Hope you’re happy,’ she told herself disgustedly and to him, could only say, “I thought maybe they belonged together,” and hope he believed that was all there was to it.

“I thought they did too, once.” He untangled the dolls and set one, the Doctor, in the drawer of the nightstand. The other, the Monster, he studied for a time, his thumb brushing down the threads of the doll’s body before moving to rest on the Allen wrench with the star-shaped head. Then he closed the drawer, shutting the Doctor away, and held the Monster out. “Take them. They’re your aunt’s keys now and that makes them yours. So make them yours, Miss Stark. I feel better for knowing you have them.”

The words struck a chord and no wonder. Freddy, the real Freddy, had said almost the same thing, but he at least had a reason to trust her.

“Why?” she asked, taking the keys. “Why me? You don’t know me.”

“I know all the children of Mammon.”

“Well, yeah, okay, and you obviously knew about me and…everything at home, but it’s not like we ever met.”

“We met,” he said, and at first, Ana thought he was only repeating her last words in a drugged haze. Then he said, “You won’t remember that, of course. It was long ago and you were young. Oh, you were so young…so small. Like a doll. Like a…a broken little doll.”

Ana leaned back and looked at him, but it was another hospital she was thinking of now, and herself in the bed, wrapped up tight with bandages, wires and pain. It had been the Fourth of July and Ana had awakened in the night to the sound of fireworks, only there had been people in her room. Two men…

Had that really happened? She had dreamed of it after meeting Mike Schmidt, but the dream was not a memory and the true memory was all but gone.

“In the hospital?” she asked now. “Is that where you met me? At Mercy General?”

He’d been dozing. Her voice woke him, although she could tell he wasn’t all the way with her.
“Met you,” he echoed and stared at her through his dark lenses for half a nerve-wracking minute before he said, “Yes. That was where I met you.” And then, before Ana could even think of what to ask next, he added, “Your mother…didn’t want to hold you, so you were in the neonatal ward.”

“Hold me…? What are you…? You mean when I was a baby? You were there when I was born?”

“No, no. I was at home then, but he called to tell me after the fact and then Marion came to fetch me. I didn’t think I would know you,” he remarked, sounding very faintly pleased with himself. “I have a terrible eye for faces. There were several other newborns on the ward and infants do rather look alike. But I knew you. Even before he pointed you out, I knew you. The nurse came and gave you over to him and he asked if I would like to hold you, but I was afraid I would drop you. The world in that moment seemed made of sharp corners and hard floors, and I have never been good at recognizing danger. So that was how I met you, with you in his arms…and me on the other side of the glass. And there, I suppose I have remained. It seemed the safest place.”

Ana wrestled with her integrity and lost. Her earlier words were no less true. She was taking advantage of his morphine-softened sense and if it was not the worst thing she’d ever done, it was absolutely the worst thing she’d ever done to someone she considered a friend, someone she knew trusted her. She should leave. If there was any part of her with a shred of human decency left, she should leave right now.

Ana scooted her chair closer to the bed. “Did you know my cousin? David?”

“I did. Very well. His mother often brought him to see me.” Now the old man’s face changed, although it was difficult to say how. Again, she was reminded of Freddy, the real Freddy, and how expressive his inflexible features could be in the right light, or the right shadow. “Less as he grew older. His mother and I, we…we were close once, but…our shared past became painful. I wanted her to forget it. She wanted me to embrace it. We were both of us wrong,” he murmured, rubbing absent-mindedly under the lip of the cast on his arm, “but by the time I accepted that, it was too late. We were divided, we who had been so close, the two sides of his coin…and she wished to remain divided…and I, coward that I am, chose to respect those wishes. Even so…Even so, I would see him now and then, as one does in small towns. A happy child.” Another pause, longer than the first. “Less as he grew older.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

He was quiet long enough this time that she thought he might have fallen asleep again (not quite long enough for her to think about leaving), and then he said, “What were you told?”

“My mom said he was dead.”

“No,” Faust said at once, quietly but with conviction. “No, he’s not dead.”

A strange feeling. Ana had been carrying the weight of David’s death for twenty years, carrying it until she couldn’t even feel it anymore. She felt it shift now…but it wasn’t relief and it didn’t float away.

“My aunt said he went to live with his father,” she said.

“No,” he said and looked away. “No, that’s not true either, although I suppose I can understand why she said so. I’m sure she wanted very much to believe it. The truth is…”

The air in the hospital bed’s mattress circulated, preventing pressure sores. The monitors hummed softly. The tiny motor in the IV pump wheezed and purred.
“The truth,” he said at last and sighed. “The truth is not so much a complicated thing, but the telling of it is. I knew Marion, you see. I knew your mother. I knew their mother. I knew them all. It is difficult for me to speak of them now without judgement. I, who made so many of the same mistakes. I...who made worse ones. Is it enough for you to know that David lives? And that his mother, who loved him so much, lost him and never recovered from that loss? She loved you too, Ana. For her sake...for mine...can you not remember her how she was? And not as the thing that she became. The thing...I helped to make her.”

‘No,’ thought Ana. The words strained, choking her from the inside out, pounding in her skull like a migraine. ‘No, it’s not enough. I want to know what happened. I need to know. For real. For sure. Tell me she started drinking and drugging. Tell me she’s crazy. Tell me she went nuts and threw herself into the quarry when David’s dad took her to court or tell me she kidnapped him to get him back and died in a standoff with the cops or, hell, tell me she killed herself at Freddy’s and you got rid of the body. I can take it. I can take anything, just tell me!’

But she didn’t ask again. Because when it came right down to it, right to the bone, the Aunt Easter she wanted was the one she remembered. The laughing one, so young and pretty, who’d given Ana the only happiness and peace she’d ever had in this town. The patient mother, who held her hand when she crossed the street and blew on her scraped knees and showed her how bunnies go around trees and into holes and tie your shoes for you. The beautiful queen of the castle on the mountain that had been Ana’s only safe place. The gentle hand on her forehead when she had a fever. The lullaby on a restless night. The memory, just a memory, of the family Ana almost had.

And memories were fragile, after all. So much more than people knew.

So Ana didn’t ask. What she said instead was, “It’s getting late.”

“It is. So late. Too late, perhaps. I should have never let it get so late, but it’s difficult...difficult to know how to start. Who to trust.” Mr. Faust groped for Ana’s hand again and gave it a weak squeeze. “Stay with me a little longer. Please. I apologize for being bombed out of my brains. I understand it must be frustrating for you. I don’t mean to be so cryptic...not always...not now, not with you. Please, I want to tell you, but I can’t...” He threw a despairing glance at the IV pump. “I can’t think clearly. If I could...If I could only sleep a little while...”

“Yeah, okay,” Ana said reluctantly. “But they’re going to throw me out eventually. Visiting hours were over a long time ago.”

“They’ll make an exception for you. I’ve informed the administration that you are to be admitted at any hour and shown every consideration.”

“This isn’t Mammon,” she told him. “That may not work here.”

“I own this facility,” he said, drifting away. “It’s true my...formidable reputation does not far extend beyond Mammon’s accursed borders, but money...money works everywhere, Miss Stark.”

Her name ended somewhat raggedly. His next breath was a thin snore.

Ana shifted, but didn’t leave. After a moment, she found the TV remote again and put on another horror movie, although she was unable to watch the relentless dismemberments occupying the TV screen with the proper sense of desensitized good humor. She thought about Aunt Easter—the patient mother, the devoted lover, the missing person. She thought about David, who was not dead. She thought about Freddy’s, although as the night wore on, she thought more about the work there was to do there and not the secrets it may or may not still be hiding. She thought about Bonnie, but that hurt, so she thought about Erik Metzger instead. And, in another quiet demonstration of Fate
with a capital F, at the exact moment that her wandering thoughts lit on Big Paulie and the scene he’d made at the office, the man in question was thrown across his kitchen into the stove. Before he’d found his feet, his attacker picked up a cast iron skillet and hit him in the face, flattening all his features at once with a cartoony splatting sound.

‘Hope you enjoyed your little tantrum, dumb-ass, because life as you knew it is over,’ thought Ana, as, miles away in Mammon, the body of Paul Trammel fell to the floor in a great lake of blood on the worn linoleum, splashing red onto the white-and-black-striped legs that stood over him. His killer, dissatisfied, picked him up and heaved him into the sink, spitting him on the faucet like a fish on a hook to help hold his weight. The killer fumbled in the dish drainer for a new weapon and then went right back to work, while in Room 404 of the Tranquility Recovery Center, Ana yawned and changed the channel, mid-movie.

Not enough gore.

∗ ∗ ∗

The mood at the pizzeria that evening was a hopeful one, if hopeful was the right word for the tension jangling inaudibly through the air. It felt hopeful to Bonnie anyway, at least until his internal clock popped up an alert telling him the sun had gone down. That meant the other restaurant Ana had gone to was closed (Bonnie knew that he and the other animatronics were unique in the world and that they had been made to play a Game played nowhere else but at Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria, but for all that, it had never occurred to him that other places had different ways of establishing hours of operation; in his mind, at sundown, all restaurants closed). He managed to keep fooling himself that she might be on her way for another half-hour and then gave up. She wasn’t coming. Not tonight. Tomorrow, maybe.

No big deal. He put his guitar aside and got up. Not to peek out windows (not that he’d be able to see much through the rain and in the dark), but just to give his restless servos a stretch with a walk around the building. He started with the arcade, but it was empty, so he went to the Reading Room instead, taking the long way around back through the dining room rather than cut through Pirate Cove. Not that he was avoiding any place in particular, or anyone, but just to keep those leg-pumps pumping.

Chica looked up too brightly when he opened the Reading Room door, but although she managed to hold on to her smile when she saw who it was, her disappointment was obvious. She’d cleared a little space on the shelves beside her chair in anticipation of the books Ana had promised to bring. ‘Adult books,’ as Chica so innocently called them. Bonnie wasn’t about to draw her attention to the reason why maybe that wasn’t the best description, in part because Foxy would be only too delighted to do that for him when he got tired of listening to her do it, and in part just because correcting her might dim her excitement for them. Excitement looked good on her. She got to wear it so rarely.

“She’s not here yet?” Chica tipped her head, looking up at the roof as she listened to the rain. “Is the road washed out?”

“Freddy hasn’t said so. Doesn’t really sound like it’s raining hard enough to me.”

“No, I guess not.”

A moment of comfortable quiet stretched out between them as they listened to the rain…and to the scratching of some small animal in the crawlway. For all the trouble she’d been, the one thing
Mangle had been good for was keeping the local wildlife out. Something had moved in a few weeks ago and while it was a quiet neighbor most days, it tended to go out at night. Raccoon, maybe. It sounded pretty big.

“She forgot, didn’t she?” Chica said, running her fingertips wistfully along the bare shelf. “Poor Ana. She works so hard. She’d have remembered as soon as she saw the bookstore, you know, but that special job probably dragged on super-late and I bet she just went home when she was done.”

“Yeah. You’re not too upset, are you?”

“My? No. Another day, another magical journey through the worlds of Mercer Mayer.” She picked up an oversized book—*How the Trollusk Got His Hat*—and put it down again with a sigh. “I’m more upset that Ana probably didn’t get any dinner. You know, Freddy can be…well, a bit pushy when she’s here, but at least he makes her eat.”

“Ana can take care of herself.”

“Oh yes. I’m sure she thinks she does. But from what I’ve been able to gather, she didn’t have a father and her mother wasn’t very nice, so I can’t imagine she knows much about what taking care of herself ought to feel like.”

“I’m pretty sure she knows the difference between feeling good or bad.”

Chica shrugged, avoiding his eye. “When you get used to feeling bad, feeling nothing may seem like an improvement, but it’s not. She doesn’t have enough good in her life, Bonnie.”

“Yeah, well.” Bonnie gave the painted garden of the Reading Room an exaggerated looking over. “She’s in the right place then, isn’t she?”

“No tonight, she isn’t. Tonight, she’s alone. And hungry, probably. And she’s exhausted and maybe hurting and she’s got no one to talk to—” Chica’s cooling fan began to rev. Her speaker crackled as her words ran together a little faster, a little louder. “—and nothing to do except work some more on that *horrible* empty house and think about the *awful* things the *awful* people of this town say about her! Oo, I just wish…!”

Words clearly failed her, as words so rarely did with Chica. She gave the shelf a frustrated slap, immediately followed by an inarticulate cry of dismay when the shelf snapped and spilled a colorful wave of children’s books onto the floor.

“Don’t move,” said Bonnie, already limping over to clear the books away from her feet.

“Oh, look what I did!” Chica wailed. “Oh…Oh damn!”

“Come on now. There’s no call for that kind of language.”

“Don’t you patronize me, Bonnie the Bunny! She’s going to have to fix that now! I’ve gone and made more work for her!”

Ana was already planning to pull these shelves down and build new ones. It was on the work schedule for anyone to see and Chica probably already had, but she was in no mood to hear reason. Bonnie wisely kept quiet and gathered books into stacks.

“I just wish she was here,” Chica said softly. “I’m worried about her. She looked so…so…”

“Come on now,” Bonnie said again and gave Chica a careful nudge to the arm where he knew she
could still feel it. “You’re working yourself up over nothing. You’re more upset than she was.”

“That’s what worries me.” Chica must have seen his confusion, but she didn’t explain. Waving toward the door, she said, “Thanks for your help, but I’ll finish cleaning up.”

“You want to meet me in the arcade later? I kind of feel like playing a little handball.”

“You’re sweet, but I know you don’t, really. You go play your guitar. Maybe I’ll come watch for a while.” Chica managed a small smile. “When I’m done sulking over things I can’t change.”

Bonnie touched her arm again, she patted his hand, and they both turned away. He left her rearranging shelves and headed back to the stage. As he sat down and reached for his guitar, he dimly heard one of the metal shelves in the Parts Room fall over. He’d heard Mangle thrashing around back there so often that it didn’t register as anything at all right away. When it did, he briefly considered opening the door and seeing if he could catch the whatever-it-was, but decided against it. He didn’t want to just kill it and if he threw it out, it would only find the hole it was getting in and out of and come back in. Besides, he could already hear it scratching faintly through the crawlway, so it clearly wasn’t stuck in the Parts Room.

‘Must be a big-ass raccoon,’ thought Bonnie, picking up his guitar, and that was all he thought about it as the Puppet crawled back down to the basement to report its job done.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

The old man slept for hours and eventually, so did Ana. At some point in the night, one of the staff brought a blanket and covered her over against the chill of the air conditioning. She roused now and then, but never really woke. The sounds and smells of the hospital unearthed long-buried memories in which she was small and hurt, but safe. She slept easily, her breaths aligned to the rhythmic whirr of the IV pump, and dreamed she was a child with a broken shoulder and then a teenager with the pneumonia that had been her runner-up prize for surviving her mother’s attempt to murder her. Nurses came and went, often exchanging a few words with one another or with the patient, if he happened to be awake for their rounds. Ana slept through dozens of these exchanges before the sound of a voice softly speaking woke her, first into the pizzeria, because that she thought it was Freddy talking, and finally into reality.

Once she’d dragged her eyes open and convinced them to focus, she saw Mr. Faust sitting up in bed with the amenities menu open in his lap. He saw her, said, “That will be all, thank you,” to the phone in his other hand and set it aside. “Will you do me the honor of joining me for breakfast, Miss Stark?”

“Breakfast? You even allowed to eat? You were NPO last night.”

“As a precautionary measure, yes. I was cleared earlier this morning following a lengthy evaluation. You don’t recall?”

“I don’t think I woke up for it.”

“No? I thought you had,” he remarked, “especially as you distinctly said, quote, ‘If I’ve got to wake all the way up to tell you to shut your muzzle, I’m going to kick your plastic ass,’ as I was speaking with the doctor.” It was difficult to know for sure, since he was already wearing those damned dark glasses, but she thought he glanced at her, the kind of glance that feels as heavy as a touch. “Plastic?”

She shrugged. “Apparently, Sleep-Me thought you’d had one of those newfangled ass replacements we’ve all heard about. I don’t know, I was out of it. Sorry about that.”

He accepted that with a nod and perused the menu for several seconds before saying, “And muzzle?”

Ana was waiting for that and had her innocently quizzical face polished up and ready to go. “What, you don’t say that here? Shut your muzzle? Huh. I guess it’s a West Coast thing,” she said, making a point of checking her watch, only to see that it was a quarter to six already. “Sorry, I’m going to be late for work as it is. No, wait!” Pressing the heels of her hands over her eyes, she sorted back through the events of the previous day to the scene at the office when she’d received her unexpected promotion. “No, I guess I’m not. New hours. Barely any hours. What the hell am I going to do with myself all day?”

He raised the menu a little higher, as if in answer.

“Sure,” said Ana, getting up and stretching the stiffness out of her limbs. “Get me some coffee and something to take the taste of hospital coffee out of my mouth. But then I got to get going.
seriously. I am not showing up to work in yesterday’s clothes. I get enough side-eye around here without giving people reasons to wonder where I’ve been all night.”

“Tell them the truth.”

“What, that I’ve been with you all night?” She had to laugh, unaware that she would soon be saying just that to Sheriff Zabrinsky and most of the rest of her co-workers, not only willingly but with a shell-shocked sort of gratitude that on the one night she needed it, she actually had an alibi. For now, the thought only gave her a good-humored flare of annoyance for the gossip mills of Mammon. “Yeah, I get enough of that, too.”

She left him to place the order while she got herself cleaned up and braced for the day in the spacious and tastefully decorated bathroom. Again she found herself thinking that if it weren’t for all the handrails and call buttons, she’d swear she was in a hotel, not a hospital. It wasn’t very big and there didn’t appear to be many patient rooms. The medical business was, beneath all the crap about saving lives and providing care, still a business. She couldn’t see how this place could be turning any kind of a profit.

Maybe it wasn’t. Faust said he owned the building, and as Mike Schmidt so memorably said, Faust could shit out a failing business every year for the rest of his life and still make money. He probably wanted some red ink in his portfolio here and there, just for tax purposes, and if it also gave him a more comfortable place to stay than Mercy, if ever he chanced to take a fall down the stairs, so much the better.

And it was none of her business anyway, but when Ana returned to the main room, her idle curiosity got the better of her and she said, “Are you the only patient here?”

She’d caught him tapping at his smartphone and when he first looked up at her, what there was of his face behind the dark glasses registered only the distracted frown that seemed to be his default expression. Then he laughed that startled, delighted, unpracticed laugh that did such alarming things to his oxygen levels that the monitor beside the bed went off and a nurse came to investigate.

“No, I shouldn’t think so,” he said, once he’d collected himself and the nurse had left (not without a quiet word on over-exciting himself). “Although I may be on the only one on this floor.”

“Is it really a hospital care center or, like, rehab for the rich and famous?”

“It is really a hospital care center,” he assured her. “For children recovering from traumatic injury. Thankfully, it is rarely filled to capacity and they were able to accommodate me on such short notice. Did you think I’d purchased it merely for this occasion?”

Ana shrugged.

He chuckled, saying, “I admit, I’m flash at times, but not that flash. No, Miss Stark. This facility has operated under my invisible banner some thirty years now.” The last of his smile faded as he stared through her into some other memory. “Thirty years,” he murmured. “How did that happen, I wonder? I was so young for so long…However did I come to be so old?”

“No, I shouldn’t think so,” he said, once he’d collected himself and the nurse had left (not without a quiet word on over-exciting himself). “Although I may be on the only one on this floor.”

“Is it really a hospital care center or, like, rehab for the rich and famous?”

“It is really a hospital care center,” he assured her. “For children recovering from traumatic injury. Thankfully, it is rarely filled to capacity and they were able to accommodate me on such short notice. Did you think I’d purchased it merely for this occasion?”

Ana shrugged.

He chuckled, saying, “I admit, I’m flash at times, but not that flash. No, Miss Stark. This facility has operated under my invisible banner some thirty years now.” The last of his smile faded as he stared through her into some other memory. “Thirty years,” he murmured. “How did that happen, I wonder? I was so young for so long…However did I come to be so old?”

“A knock on the door. Their breakfast, fresh from the kitchen. A cup of plain yogurt for him, eggs
benedict for her, and a pot of coffee to split between them.

“That’s what you call breakfast?” Ana remarked, nodding at his half of the tray.

“All I can manage at the moment, I’m afraid. It may be some time before I can replace the teeth I lost in the incident.”

“Yeah, I get the soft foods thing, but that’s not enough. The least you could have done is ordered a protein drink or something.”

“I don’t care for the taste.”

“Pardon me for being blunt, but pull up your big boy panties and deal with it. The doctors here think you’re too skinny.”

“And what undergarments are they wearing?”

“Ha-ha, but seriously, if you don’t make at least half an effort, you’re giving your grandson all kinds of ammunition for a court ruling on your competency. Once he gets his mitts on your money, you’ll be spending the rest of your life in a care facility and I doubt like hell he’ll let you buy one and spruce it up first.”

“Hmm. I take your point. Protein drinks from now on. Nuisance,” he grumbled. “I don’t have much of an appetite, I’m afraid. I never have.”

“Me neither. It helps if you don’t think of food as something fun to enjoy. Think of yourself as a machine that needs fuel. Power up and get on with your day.” She opened her packet of plastic utensils and tucked into her eggs before the sauce skinned over. “Feeling any better this morning?”

“In what sense?”

“You kept trying to talk to me last night. Seemed to be having some trouble keeping your head on.”

“Ah yes. At my request, they’ve changed my medication and decreased my dosage,” Mr. Faust said, indicating the IV pump. “As enjoyable as the experience was, I prefer a clear head to a numb body. Would you do me the kindness of pouring my coffee, Miss Stark? My hand is rather unsteady yet. Thank you. Two creams. No sugar. And tell me, how are things with you?”

“Small talk? Really?”

“Not at all,” he said with a convincing frown. “I want very much to know.”

So she told him, although she kept it light. She told him about stepping into Big Paulie’s shoes down at the new dealership site, but not why said shoes were vacant four weeks from the man’s planned retirement. When he asked about the house, she told him she’d decided to make it hers, as he’d suggested, and would have told him about the ostrich she’d bought in commemoration, but there, he interrupted her.

“You mean to stay?”

“Yeah,” said Ana with either half a smile or a full wince, depending on whether one was an optimist or a pessimist. Ana, of course, was a relativist. Most of the time. “Yeah, I’m staying.”

He stared at her while she pushed the last bit of egg around her plate. “That’s good to hear,” he said
at last in an odd, hoarse voice. “That’s very good to hear. I should not be glad of it, but…I am. Miss Stark, I…” The cup in his hand shook. He set it down, but continued to grip it, as if it were steadying him now. “I have something to tell you…something that may be difficult to hear. May be,” he echoed and shook his head, brows pinched. “It will be…very…difficult, even though I suspect you already know much of what I have to say.”

And with that, he lapsed into another deep, strained silence.

‘Christ, here we go,’ thought Ana, and said, “Want me to start?”

He looked at her, plainly startled. After a moment, he warily said, “And where would you start, if you did?”

“Well, I’m not sure I know where the beginning is, so I guess I’d start in the middle,” she replied and gestured at the room around them with her coffee cup. “You said you bought this place thirty years ago?”

Confusion wrinkled the edges of caution around the old man’s guarded eyes. “Yes.”

“For children suffering traumatic injuries.” Ana nodded, examining the walls like they were talking to her. “Traumatic…like the Bite of ’87?”

His breath left him in a long, slow hush. The monitor beside him recorded each beat of his heart as it first leapt, then slowed and steadied, dispassionately broadcasting his relief for all to see.

“You remember that,” he said softly, almost a whisper.

“Nope. Didn’t spend enough time listening to playground tattletales, I guess. To be honest, I wasn’t told until pretty recently.”

“And what did you think, when you were told?” he asked, leaning slightly toward her. His hand where it gripped the coffee cup was white as bone. “Another ghost story in a town already choked by them? A harmless thrill passing from playground to playground? Or do you believe there was a Bite? That one of my animatronics, built by my own hands in my own home, lunged out from the stage under its own power and by its own monstrous will and sank its metal fangs into that boy’s skull?”

“I didn’t think the guy who told me was lying, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Mr. Faust’s dark glasses stared her down, unblinking. At last, he leaned back, muttering, “It’s a start, I suppose. And no, your storytelling friend wasn’t lying. There was a Bite. More importantly, there was a Biter. And most importantly of all, there was a Bitten. His name was Jeremy Fitzgerald and you are very correct, Miss Stark, he is not where the story starts. In fact, by the time he wrote his chapter in this town’s terrible book, most would have thought the story was nearly over. But it wasn’t. Isn’t. Not yet.”

Some of the tension left his thin body. He looked out the window, where the rising sun on another side of the building had just begun to creep onto the far edges of the lawn. Fresh rain made the grass there sparkle. A light breeze set the ornamental maples to dancing. But here, in the shadow of the building, the grounds were dark, dull and still.

“Monsters,” said Mr. Faust. “Monsters tend not to die unless they are killed, and so stories about monsters tend to live on…unless we end them.” He looked at her again; she could see his eyes dimly through the dark lenses, as if they were glowing with the intensity of his suppressed emotion. “Shall I tell you a story then? Shall we tell it together? If I begin…If I begin, will you—”
The sound of a man arguing with someone somewhere out in the hall cut him off mid-sentence. The walls here were nice and thick, but despite their excellent muffling qualities, Ana recognized the voice.

“Your grandson is here,” she said, looking at the door.

“Yes. And not for the first time, I understand,” Mr. Faust said, also looking at the door. “I haven’t amended his name onto my list of approved visitors, but I’ve no doubt he’ll talk his way in, sooner or later. It is his one great talent…that poisoned charm that is the fault in his code.” He looked at his hand, sighed, released the death-grip he had on his cup and lay back in his pillows, scratching up under his cast. “Perhaps it’s for the best. This is not the place, and yet…ah, I am running out of time.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can do nothing more,” he said quietly, but with a peculiar emphasis on the first word. Then he looked at her with some surprise. “Or do you mean the boy? Chad?”

“Of course I mean Chad!”

“What is there that needs doing?” he asked, seemingly with genuine confusion and just a hint of impatience, as if Ana were the one without a firm grip of the situation. “He’s caused some temporary inconvenience, but ultimately, he’s of no consequence. I can manage his ambitions easily enough. In the meantime, I have more pressing matters requiring my attention. These gears—” He touched his chest. “—are running down. His aren’t. His never will.”

He fell silent, brooding.

Ana waited, knowing damned well that when he spoke again, it would be to tell her about the animatronics he’d built. That it was not merely advanced AI and top-secret technology, but life—unnatural, monstrous life—and he would even tell her exactly how he’d done it, no matter how incriminating the truth was. He’d tell her Freddy Lived and then he’d warn her that not only were his animatronics alive, but also programmed by the matched set of psychopaths that had been his second father and his only friend. He’d tell her about the missing. He’d tell her about the dead. She knew without a doubt that he would not whitewash his own part in the story, but admit it all, exactly as he’d told her about sabotaging the device that had killed his father in that confession that had been the test run for this one.

Except ‘confession’ was the wrong word. He didn’t want absolution and he didn’t want the truth to come out. He wanted her to do something. Just what exactly that ‘something’ was, she didn’t know, but if it meant she had to hear the rest of it first, it could only end with her either digging up old bodies or burying new ones. And as much as she liked the old man, this was not her circus, these were not her monkeys, and she was not going to buy his peace of mind for his few remaining years at the expense of hers for all the rest of her damn life.

“Look,” she said. “Whatever it is you want to tell me, I’m pretty sure I already know.”

He showed no surprise, merely said, “You don’t know all of it.”

“No, but…you know, there comes a point when…when knowing just doesn’t help anymore. It doesn’t need to be stirred up again. If you can’t change something, maybe just…just let it be.”

“Agreed, but what if you can?” he countered, leaning toward her.

“Mr. Faust, I’m sorry, but this has gone far beyond the point where just telling the truth can fix it.”
“Yes!” Even through the dark lenses, his eyes lit with intensity. “Yes, it has, Miss Stark! So far beyond that making all the truth known to all those involved can only do more harm, terrible harm, with repercussions that would be felt around the world. The greater good in this case means not bringing the truth to light, but in burying it where no light will ever shine on it again. To shut it away…but no. I thought I could shut it away, but I can’t. This has to end, Miss Stark. Finally and forever.”

Someone knocked on the door.

Mr. Faust, broken from his momentum, shot the door a severe stare. Even if she couldn’t see his eyes, Ana knew that look. It was Freddy’s—the real Freddy—the one that meant the Toreador March would be playing soon, if it wasn’t already. They were so much alike in so many eerie little ways…

“Not now, please,” he called, not quite in Freddy’s annoyed grumble, but pretty close. “I am engaged.”

“Congratulations,” a woman’s voice replied through the door. “She’s a very lucky lady. Now make yourself decent, I’m coming in!”

Mr. Faust visibly startled at the first word, all his irritation at this interruption wiped out in an instant to an expression of astonishment. On the last word, the door swung open, revealing what Ana could only think of as a ‘California Grandma’—slim and well-kept, sensibly but stylishly dressed, blonde with a few streaks of white to nod at the age the dye-job disguised, and boobs that defied time and gravity. At first, Ana also thought she’d had one too many facelifts, but then realized the other woman really did look surprised, and that the focus of her shock was not Mr. Faust on his bed of pain, but Ana herself.

“How on earth did you get here?” asked Mr. Faust with almost childlike amazement, as if the woman had poured herself out of a cup of water and not walked in through the door.

The woman spoke like one in a dream, still staring at Ana. “I took the first flight out and rented a car. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, dear.” She blinked, coming at least partway out of her reverie, enough to give him a look of faint reproach. “I actually arrived late last night, but that dragon at the gate wouldn’t let me in after hours. I told him who I was, but ‘rules are rules, no exceptions.’”

“I do apologize. I’ll see that’s changed.”

“You’d better.” Her mock severity wavered, became something darker. She came all the way into the room and closed the door behind her. “I didn’t come alone, either. Chad is out there, saying God knows what, trying to weasel his way in. He’s been hovering around me since I got here and the way he’s acting…Freddy, is there something you want to tell me?”

Mr. Faust gave that serious, if somewhat bewildered, consideration and finally ventured, “Hello, Abby. It’s good of you to come.”

“Not that!” the woman said with the kind of weary exasperation that suggested this response was not entirely unexpected. She came to the bed, looking at the monitors, the IV, the metal frame supporting his leg. “This,” she said, softly now. “Tell me how this happened, Freddy, because I have a terrible feeling I already know.”

“I should go,” said Ana, rising, but Faust caught at her hand again.

“No, please stay. Allow me to introduce Abby Mills…or do you go by Wentmore?” he asked,
looking up at the other woman. “I’m sure you’ve told me. Forgive me, they’ve given me quite a lot of morphine and I’m having a difficult time sloughing it off.”

“Either is fine by me,” the woman said with a fond smile, smoothing back his hair, which had utterly defeated Ana’s simple shampoo fixative overnight. “I suppose since I’m here, it ought to be Faust, but I never cared for it. Everyone I ever met was only too happy to remind me about the price you pay for dealing with the Devil, and only some of them were joking.”

“Wentmore, then. Abby Wentmore, my wife. Abby, I’m pleased to introduce Ana Stark.”

“Hi,” said Ana, straining not to sound as uncomfortable as she felt.

Abby nodded, smiling a yeah-this-is-weird-for-me-too smile. “And is this your…your ‘special friend’?”

“No,” Ana said quickly.

Mr. Faust appeared confused and a little hurt. “No?”

“She means like a boyfriend/girlfriend thing,” Ana explained.

“Does she?” Mr. Faust looked at his wife in surprise. “Do you?”

“Not that I’m in any position to judge,” said Abby with a special sort of half-squint that meant she was judging anyway. “It’s just…she is a little young for you.”

“Of all people, I should think you would know better. No. Miss Stark is…” The old man trailed off, frowning at Ana. “Her mother was Marion’s sister,” he said at last. “You remember Marion Blaylock?”

“Oh!” Surprise lit Abby’s face, fading into an uneasy smile. “Yes, of course. That must be it. I’m sorry,” she added, reaching across Mr. Faust’s bed to offer her hand for shaking. “When I saw you, I got that feeling…you know the one. Like a memory of something that never happened.”

“Yeah,” said Ana. “Yeah, I sure know that feeling.”

“You reminded me so much of someone and I couldn’t think of who. Of course it was Marion. You look so much like her…and not at all. Not so much her twin as her reflection…in dark glass.”

Abby stared at Ana while Ana looked over at the tinted window. “Marion. My God. I haven’t thought of her in years. How is she?”

Ana wasn’t sure how to answer that. She looked at Mr. Faust, who merely looked back at her, masked and unreadable behind his dark glasses.

Abby winced. “I’ve put my foot in it, haven’t I? I’m sorry. Is she…?”

“Missing,” Ana said. “For about twelve years now. I don’t think she’s coming back.”

“I’m sorry,” Abby said again and seemed to mean it, although it was a strange sort of sympathy. Her mouth expressed apologies; her eyes, relief.

“Did you know her well?” Ana asked.

“I thought I did.” Abby thought about it, memories drifting across her face like shadows. “And if I didn’t, well, it wasn’t all her fault, was it? I was at a difficult time in my life. Left alone in this godforsaken part of the world…and no one else in my entire family wanted me. Marion made me
feel wanted,” she said, but she didn’t smile and her eyes remained far-off. “She made me feel…oh, grown-up and special and pretty and loved. I would have done anything for her. And I did. Oh…it was a very bad time.”

Mr. Faust picked up her hand and held it. His expression showed concern, but the gesture itself was stilted and plainly unnatural for him, making the overall effect seem like Item #1 on a mental list of approved modes of offering comfort.

Abby looked at him with the tolerant, slightly exasperated smile of a patient mother with a high-strung child, gently withdrew her hand from his clasp and smoothed his hair back again. “But there were good days,” she told him. “It’s good to see you, Freddy. It shouldn’t take something like this.”

“It’s good to see you as well,” he said. “But, and forgive me for asking, but why are you here? Did I call you?”

“No, your lawyer called,” Abby replied and looked back over her shoulder just as the door opened again. “Would you like to tell him why? Go on, tell the man who took you in what you’ve been doing, you…you back-stabbing little monster!”

Chad stood in the doorway, his broad grin of greeting turning to a scowl and a blush and a startled blink as he caught sight of Ana.

“As I was saying,” Abby continued, turning furiously back to Faust, “your lawyer called. It seems someone was attempting to get power of attorney, just in case you should become incapable of making legal or—and he stressed this part—financial decisions, and he wanted to know when I’d rescinded our existing agreement. Hint-hint, I had not.”

“Hey, I had no idea what the situation was,” Chad said defensively. “I was just trying to be prepared for any eventuality. All I heard was, he’d fallen down the stairs and suddenly, he’s in surgery. They wouldn’t let me see him, they wouldn’t tell me anything. For all I knew, he was going to be in a coma.”

Abby showed her teeth. “And you wanted to be sure you were the one to pull the plug, is that it?”

Chad flushed, but quickly rallied. “Someone had to ready to step up and be responsible and where the hell were you?”

“Manners, Chad,” Faust said.

“Hey, fuck my manners. She wants to call me out, I’ll clap right back! Yeah, I called the lawyer! That’s what’s called being there when someone needs you! When is she ever around except to cash your checks? And what are you doing here?” he demanded, turning on Ana. “How the hell did you even get in?”

“I sent for her,” Mr. Faust said before Ana could answer. “Circumstances being what they are, I am forced to conduct a great deal of business from this room. In point of fact, you needn’t have bothered calling the lawyer at all, as I will be meeting with him here in person later this afternoon.”

“You are?” Chad shifted his suspicious glare from Ana to the old man. “Why?”

“This accident has illuminated a rather glaring oversight on my part, in that I have neglected to see that you’re provided for in the event of my death.”

Chad recoiled as though slapped. The blush of embarrassment and righteous indignation in Chad’s cheeks stayed; the rest of his face lost all color beneath his Utah tan. After several false starts, he
managed to say, “I’m not in the will?”

His grandmother turned toward him with a fanged smile. “That’s put a real crimp in your plans, hasn’t it?”

“Abby, please.” Faust extended his hand. When she took it, he gave her a small smile and a squeeze, then turned his attention back to his grandson. “I find wills to be unpleasant things, provocative of messy situations. Death always seems to bring out the worst in the living, particularly when money is involved. I prefer the appointment of trusts. That way, my beneficiaries don’t have quite so long to wait and I am alive to see my money do some good for them.”

“Trusts?” Chad echoed, slow to recover.

“Yes. Abby and her special friend, their children and grandchildren…and great-grandchildren now I hear,” he added, looking up at his wife. “Little Alina, a mother! And her husband had something to do with it, I suppose. Lord Byron.”

“Brian,” Abby corrected, smiling.

“Yes. And they named it Cerulean. Terrible burden for a child, but easily remembered. ‘Good God,’ people will say of it. ‘Isn’t that the child whose parents named it Cerulean?’ But I digress. Each of my loved ones has a trust that provides for a modest annuity as well as some allowance for living expenses and education during the individual’s life, after which, the remainder of the trust is donated to charity.”

“Charity?”

“Yes. What did little Alina pick for Cerulean again?”

“The Coral Restoration Foundation,” said Abby while Chad fumbled his way to the nearest wall and let it hold him up.

“Yes, of course. A particularly apt legacy.” He studied Chad’s expression of complete stupefaction for a moment, then added, helpfully, “Cerulean means ‘ocean blue.’”

“You don’t have a will,” Chad breathed, staring.

“Of course I have a will,” said Faust, looking very mildly offended. “I’m a billionaire many times over with billions more tied up in legacy assets. It would be idiotic and nigh on criminal not to have a will. You’re just not in it. Apart from some considerations for my staff and various charities, the bulk of my estate…” Faust passed a hand over his face, shook his head, and said, “It doesn’t matter. Suffice to say, knowing as I did that your father enjoyed a rather reckless lifestyle, I thought it prudent to make allowance for as-yet unknown progeny, and so there is a clause in my will to divide a sum of money between all my blood relatives at the time of my inevitable demise.”

“Tell him how much,” Abby prompted.

“One hundred thousand dollars.”

Chad rocked back, open-mouthed, and Ana could certainly sympathize with his dismay. That was the sort of money that sounded like a lot when you didn’t have any, but when a person broke it down, it really wasn’t much. It could buy a sensible car and put a decent down-payment on a sensible house, but it was by no means enough to set someone up on Easy Street. Enough to kill for? Sure. Ana had known people who’d killed for seven bucks and a beer, but if you were going to off the golden goose, you’d better make damn sure you had enough golden eggs in the nest to last
you the rest of your life.

“Of course, if you wish to be considered a legatee, you will have to submit to a DNA test that bears you out as being of my bloodline,” Faust continued. “Forgive me. It isn’t my idea. One has only to look at you to see…You are your father’s son.”

Abby let out a low and singularly unpleasant laugh.

“But the lawyers will require a better proof of your father’s identity than your mother’s say-so before they allow you to inherit even so small a sum. And that is all you would be allowed to inherit, as of this moment. The car you’re driving, the ranch where you’re living, and all the material assets of that estate…none of that is yours,” he said, frowning. “No, I really must see about a trust just as soon as I am home again. Just imagine, if I had died during yesterday’s adventure, or if I had struck my head and rendered myself somehow unsound of mind and unable to amend the present legal situation in regards to my estate, you, poor boy—” Faust’s wool-gathering tone abruptly hardened and took on a quiet edge. “—you wouldn’t get a bean.”

Chad managed somehow to go even paler. He’d tanned too much to really go white, but he managed an unhealthy sallow hue, like yellow chalk.

“Therefore, I will speak to the lawyer this afternoon so that he might begin drawing up the paperwork for the founding of your trust. It’s rather a lengthy process, as all legal things are. Fortunately for all concerned, I was not seriously injured and anticipate a full recovery. However, I am tired and I would like to rest before the lawyer arrives.”

Chad nodded, recovering some of his equilibrium to gesture at Ana. “That means you need to go.”

Ana got up.

Mr. Faust touched her hand, staring at his grandson. “Kindly do not dismiss my guests, Chad. I meant you need to go.” He paused, suppressed a sigh, and softly said, “I’ll add your name to the list. It was good of you to visit. Please come again, if convenient.”

“Don’t forget to pick a charity,” Abby added as Chad retreated. “You might be especially interested in a prisoner reform organization.”

“You mustn’t bait the boy,” Mr. Faust said once the door had shut behind him.

“And you shouldn’t have him anywhere near you!” Abby punched her hands onto her small hips as she rounded on the bed, only to notice Ana still sitting there. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name, but could I please have a moment with my husband?”

“Sure,” said Ana, only to have Mr. Faust increase his grip on her hand.

“Oh fine, you want her to hear this? I don’t care who hears it.” Abby pointed at the door. “Don’t you even try to tell me he had nothing to do with this and you want his name added to the visitor’s list?! If I was just ninety-nine percent sure you’d stop me instead of the full hundred, I would call the police and report an attempted murder!”

“That would be ill-advised of you,” Mr. Faust said calmly. “There’s no evidence of a crime.”

“Oh, I’m sure there isn’t. You were always good at cleaning up.”

Mr. Faust did not flinch, but faced with his silence, Abby did.
“You drive me crazy,” she said. Sending Ana a shame-faced glance, Abby paced away from the bed, all angry heels and restless hands. “You’re the smartest man I’ve ever known, the smartest man who ever lived, and you can be so stupid about people. Why are you trying so hard to save him?”

“Because I want to believe he can be saved,” Faust said in a soft, unsteady voice. “I want to do more for him than I did for his father. I want to…be better, now, while I still can…and see something better come from it. Is…Is that possible, do you think? It’s not too late, is it? I left it so long, but it’s not too late.”

Abby looked back with a hopeless, frustrated and oddly resigned sort of smile and then came back to take his hand. She pressed her lips to his forehead, wiped away the maroon stain of her lipstick, and whispered, “You’re a good man, Freddy. You drive me crazy, but you’re a good man.”

Which was not the same as agreeing with him and Ana thought he knew it, but all he said was, “Thank you for saying so.”

The two of them shared a heavy moment while Ana stood awkwardly to one side and at the end of it, Abby straightened and put on a smile. “I saw a cafeteria downstairs. I’ll go and get a cup of coffee. It was nice meeting you,” she told Ana, putting out her hand.

Ana shook it. “You, too.”

Abby’s smile turned crooked. Her grip lingered. “You look so much like her,” she said in a distant way, “…and not at all.”

“Maybe if I smiled,” said Ana.

“That must be it. She was always smiling. Laughing. Which is funny because I don’t think she was very happy. So maybe that’s it, but personally…I think it’s your eyes.” She glanced at the bed, released Ana’s hand, and left.

“I know you have to go,” the old man said once they were alone. “I had so much to tell you, but as they say, too much morphine, not enough time.”

“Do they say that?”

“They should. Morphine is nothing if not an eater of time. But please, Miss Stark, will you…will you visit again? If convenient. It’s a bad time and not at all the correct place, but one never knows how many chances one has. Please. I would very much like to see you again.”

“Sure.”

He nodded, frowning. “Forgive me, but do you mean that? Please don’t leave me waiting on your return if you mean not to.”

“I mean it,” she said and sketched a quick X over her heart. “Probably not tonight, but it doesn’t look like you’re going anywhere anytime soon. But here.” She picked up his phone from the nightstand, tapped at the keypad, and handed it back to him as her phone rang in her pocket. “If you need something, just call. And hey, if you can talk the dietician person into coming after I’m off work, I’ll be there.” She winked. “You should have a strong support network to aid you in your recovery.”

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely.
“No problem. Get better. I’ll see you when I see you.” Ana raised her hand in a careless wave, already turning her back to the bed. She stepped out into the hall, paused a moment to listen, and followed the sound of raised voices to a waiting room across from the duty desk. Three nurses and an orderly had formed a small watchful cluster, but they broke up as Ana approached.

“Morning,” she said, as through the open door of the waiting room came the dulcet sound of Abby calling Chad a money-grubbing botched abortion and Chad calling Abby a dried-up old whore.

“Good morning,” one of the nurses replied with a wincing sort of smile. “How can I help you?”

“Have you called Security yet?” Ana inquired, smiling.

The staff exchanged a group glance.

“Not yet,” the more matronly of the bunch replied, in the sort of tone that suggested the moment was not far off.

“Great. Give me five minutes and if I can’t sort that out, then you just do what you got to do. One question.”

“Yes?”

“Is there a security camera in there or…?”

“Certainly not,” said the nurse with convincing indignation. “This isn’t Mercy General. We value our patients’ privacy here!”

“Great. Just checking.” Waving again, Ana backed up to the waiting room. “Five minutes.”

When she entered the room, Abby and Chad both shut up and walked away from each other, although neither of them looked particularly guilty to have been caught bitching each other out.

“What the hell do you want?” Chad demanded.

Ana shut the door, waving soothingly at the desk. And then she locked it.

“I said—”

“I heard you.” Ana moved on to the windows set in the inward wall, closing the privacy blinds one by one, smiling broadly at the duty desk right up until the last sight of them was shut away behind the tasteful beige slats.

“We’re having a family discussion,” Chad began, red-faced. “You need to leave, right now, or so help me God, I will call someone to throw you out. I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but Grandad owns this building. That means I—”

“Shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you,” Ana replied pleasantly.

Chad’s baby-blue eyes bulged. “What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“I said—” In two swift strides, Ana crossed the room and slapped him. Open-handed, not too hard. As he staggered back, grabbing at his cheek and gaping at her, she said, “And I’ll say it again if I have to, as many times as it takes for you to hear me. Because you’d better hear me. That bit, I’m happy to repeat. Everything else, I’m only saying once.”

Chad stared, his mouth working, but in silence. When Ana glanced at her, Abby held up both hands
in a by-all-means gesture and then folded her arms to watch.

“I know what you did,” said Ana, adding, “I can’t prove it,” when Chad started to speak. “But here’s the thing, kid. I don’t have to. No one would take me at my word and that’s not the way he wants to go anyway. You are free and clear. You got away with it.”

Abby shook her head, lips pressed tight together.

“I didn’t do anything,” Chad muttered, sullen beneath a hopeful stare.

“I’m not going to argue with you, I’ve got shit to do today. I’m just here to tell you that I’m fond of the old man, so here’s the deal. If something happens to him, whatever happens to him, I’m just going to go ahead and assume you did it. Okay? Sound good? Slipped in the shower, hit by a car, struck by lightning in the middle of the goddamn Founder’s Day Parade? You did it,” said Ana, not blinking, not backing up. “And I will find you.”

Chad tried to laugh, because it was a laughing sort of situation, if you’d only ever heard that sort of thing in movies. And because that was exactly the sort of person he was, he went on to say, “Is that a threat?” like the absolute tool he was.

“Nope,” said Ana, amiably playing along. “That’s a fact.”

He laughed again and, like everyone else who’d ever stood in his place and heard similar words throughout the years, the laughter died and the quiet was there and he looked at her until he finally began to understand what he was looking at.

“I will find you,” Ana said again and this time, Chad didn’t laugh. “And I will be the last person who ever finds you.”

“You…You can’t do that. You can’t…talk to me like that!”

“I got a long, long list of people who aren’t here to tell you that, yes, actually, I fucking well can and you want to think real hard before you dare me to prove it, because I don’t think there’s a hell of a lot of people who are going to miss you.”

“But…But he’s old,” Chad stammered. His voice cracked and came back, high and hoarse, like a child whispering. “He could go anytime!”

“He sure could,” Ana replied cheerfully. “Heart attack, stroke, Alzheimer’s…hell, he could already have a tumor tucked away somewhere no one knows about, just ticking away, and guess what? You did it. I don’t know how you did it, but you did it. So you better pray for him to have a long and healthy life or you better invest in some goddamn great running shoes, because when he goes, I am coming for you and it’s just that simple.”

Chad looked at Abby. “Are you…Come on, are you hearing this? I didn’t do anything! I wasn’t even there!”

Abby raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow and said, “No, that’s right. You didn’t do anything. I certainly can’t prove otherwise. But am I hearing this?” She shrugged. “All I hear is my husband’s nice young lady-friend asking where the cafeteria is. It’s on the first floor, take a right off the elevator and then a left and it’s across from the gift shop.”

“Thanks.” Ana checked her watch. “I’ve got to get going. You got anything to say to me?”

“It was really nice meeting you,” said Abby with a bit more passion than she’d said in Mr. Faust’s
room.

Chad, it appeared, did not have anything to say.

“Good. Now I’m not going to tell you what to do with your day, but I did tell the nice people at the desk that I was going to sort you out and then you were going to leave. Are we sorted out?”

Chad stared at her.

Ana waited.

“Yeah,” he said, in a small voice pulled thin by baffled anger.

“Then it’s time for you to leave. Go. And if you slam that door and embarrass me, I will follow you home and kick the ever-loving shit out of you. Mind your fucking manners, Chad. Manners matter.”

He flushed brick-red, backed up a few steps, then turned around fast and stormed out. But he didn’t slam the door.

* * *

After waiting a suitable length of time so as to assure she would not be sharing an awkward elevator ride with the grandson, Ana followed Mrs. Faust’s excellent directions to the cafeteria, where, in keeping with the better-than-the-average-hospital theme Tranquility already had going for it, she discovered a coffee corner to rival any Starbucks. She treated herself to a large white chocolate and chai iced mocha for the road, which kept her in a great mood all the way home. Even after cleaning up the dirty dishes and take-out leavings she’d left in the kitchen days ago—gross—and a leisurely shower in Aunt Easter’s spacious bathroom, she had that glow in her heart that could only come from scaring the piss out of someone who deeply deserved it, and it lasted right up until she pulled into the parking lot at Shelton Contractors.

It was ten minutes to clocking-in time, and under normal circumstances, she might be the only person here apart from Shelly himself and maybe Jimmy or Hageman, but after yesterday’s explosion, she wasn’t surprised to see a lot full of cars owned by men who had a new drive to prove to their employer that they were worth keeping around. That in itself was hardly a mood-killer, although it promised plenty of extra headache when it came to putting these ponies on a rope later and getting them to all pull together under her whip. No, what put the piss in her metaphorical corn flakes was one car in particular, parked right up by the door.

The sheriff’s patrol car.

“Oh, fuck me,” she muttered, but she went ahead and parked. She was reasonably certain Abby wouldn’t rat her out and could maybe even be counted on to lie her up if a witness were needed to break the he-said/she-said stand-off, but she was equally certain that wouldn’t matter if the sheriff really wanted to push her around a little, and he might.

Oh well. She knew how to talk to Rider with outside ears listening in and still get her point across. As soon as the sheriff let her have a phone call, Rider would get her out, but hopefully not too quick. She wanted to be damn sure she was sitting in a jail cell with eyes on her when Rider erased that son of a bitch Chad out of the Big Book o’ Life.

So thinking, Ana walked up to the front door with her head high and opened it wide.
There was no conversation to fall silent at her grand entrance. Only a few of them even bothered to look at her and none of them for long. Ana took a moment to process the scene—no one reading the paper, no one drinking coffee, no one laughing at someone else’s inappropriate joke. Half the room was gathered around Hageman, leaning in close to read the small screen while he texted in tense silence. Everyone else had withdrawn as far from the group as they could get and still be in the same room, although their attention stayed fixed on Hageman and his phone, all but Jimmy Morehead, who sat in the creaky chair behind the tall reception desk, his face too pale and eyes glassy. Ana knew that look; he’d be having Puppet dreams tonight. The office door at the end of the hall was shut, but in this awful stillness, it was easy to hear Shelly and Sheriff Zabrinsky talking on the other side. There was no trace of the good-natured, small-town peace officer in the sheriff’s muffled voice now; today, he was a lawman. And Shelly sounded nervous.

Strike that. Shelly sounded scared.

They must have found Slater. It was her first thought, immediately amplified and worsened by the idea that they could have also found Mason and Jack…and Trigger-Man and Dentist and whoever the hell else had been out at Freddy’s that day, but one thing was for sure, whatever this was about, there was a body in it and odds were extremely good that Ana could be tied to it. All it took was one fingerprint, one drop of blood, one hair…and a sheriff who was willing to ignore all other evidence for a chance to put the last surviving Blaylock away for life. Those odds were pretty damn good, too.

Ana stepped warily into the building and closed the door behind her. “What’s wrong?” she asked, but what she meant was, ‘Who died?’

They told her, all of them talking over each other, throwing words at her like confetti and forming about as clear a picture, but one thing they all said was Big Paulie’s name. Before Ana could make sense of the rest of it, the office door opened and there was Zabrinsky, looking at her like she was already wearing cuffs. When he called her name, Ana went, more confused than apprehensive, because she’d been so sure someone had to be dead, the way they were all acting, but Big Paulie wasn’t dead. She’d just seen him yesterday and he’d not only been alive, but an asshole, so he couldn’t be dead. Assholes lived forever.

“Take a seat,” said the sheriff, indicating the one in front of Shelly’s desk, while Shelly looked on, sallow in the morning light. “I’d like to keep this friendly, if we can, but if you’d prefer to have your lawyer, we can do this at the station.”

“What would I need a lawyer for?” Ana asked.

The sheriff nodded like this was an answer. “Why don’t you go ahead and take that seat then.”

“Yeah, sure. What’s going on?” she asked, thumbing back at the closed door. “The guys said something about Big Paulie?”

“Smart girl like you ought to know how this works,” the sheriff said, turning to a fresh page in his little black notebook and readying his policeman’s stub of a pencil. “I ask the questions. You answer them. Got that? Good. So. Yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

“You left here with the other boys and went to the old mall. You did some work. Shift ended at four and they all came back here to clock out. And they say, all of them, that you stayed behind.”

“Yeah, taking inventory and checking locks,” said Ana. She looked at Shelly, because all she
could think was that the site had been vandalized, not that there was anything out there but the equipment trailer and some dozers. If those had been worked over, that was a serious chunk of change and she felt for him, but he’d better not be getting ready to shake her down for it.

Shelly’s face behind the beard was both pale and flushed, but not angry. Not even a little, and this only one day after the thing with Paulie.

She looked again at the sheriff. He had his poker-face on while he wrote his notes, but his eyes were smudged and there was a distinctly haggard look to the man, as if he were hung-over or had the flu. He’d turned his radio all the way down without turning it off; she could hear only a jumble of whispers and the muted beeps and clicks as other radios spoke to one another, far too much chatter for a sleepy Mammon morning. His uniform was very clean, the creases sharply defined, as if he’d just put it on, but there was a small smudge of blood on his shoes. Someone else might mistake it for the red mud that was everywhere after a hard rain in Mammon, but not Ana. She’d seen too much blood on too many shoes.

“What did he do?” Ana asked, because a new picture was developing around these clues: a big man’s hand still loosely gripping a gun, lying in a puddle of cold blood on a bedspread. And if there was a note, her name would be on it, maybe underlined so everyone would know why he had no choice but to pull the trigger.

“So you did your inventory and checked your locks,” the sheriff said, ignoring her. “And came back here to clock out at…five-seventeen. Then what?”

“Then we had a talk,” said Ana, nodding at Shelly, who rubbed his face. “Maybe an hour and a half, two hours. Working out the details of the job.”

“And after that talk, you accompanied Mr. Shelton home?”

Ana huffed hard and looked at Shelly. “No,” she said. “I guess I’m not surprised if that’s what he remembers. He wasn’t in any condition to drive, if you catch my drift.” She prodded under the edge of the desk with her boot and kicked out the bottle of Jim Bean. “I gave your Moms on Wheels people a call,” she continued as Shelly, flushing, picked up the bottle and put it in the trash. “They took him home.”

“Catch their names?”

Ana shrugged. “No, but ‘Mom’ was on the short side, kind of heavy, short hair, brown and wavy. The fella she had with her with about a foot taller, brown hair cut short on the sides, clean-shaven, pretty built. They had a red minivan, looked like a Dodge. I didn’t catch the plates, but there was one of those I heart My Honor Student stickers on the back.”

“Sounds like Lena Dulally and her boy, John. I’ll give them a call. So…you put Mr. Shelton in a car and…?”

“I locked up and left.”

“Time?”

“Whenever that was,” she said, gesturing toward Shelly. “A few minutes to check all the doors, that’s it.”

Zabrinsky wrote in silence for a few seconds, then glanced at Shelly. “You can go now.”

Shelly harrumphed weakly at the indignation of being ousted from his own office, but retreated,
giving Ana the side-eye the whole way.

Even before the door was shut, the sheriff had settled himself in Shelly’s chair. “Indulge me,” he drawled, pencil at the ready. “Just to avoid confusion later. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say may be taken down and used against you at a later date. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, and we all know you can, but just to be clear, an attorney can be provided free of charge. Do you understand your rights?”

“Yeah,” said Ana, all her internal warning bells jangling away. “What the hell did he do?”

“Well now, why don’t you let me ask the questions? And let’s start with the fun one, just to get it out of the way. Where did you go last night, after you left here?”

“Gallifrey’s, to settle the company tab and ask around after Faust.”

“At Gallifrey’s?”

“Seemed like a good starting point for asking questions.”

The sheriff snorted, nodded, and kept writing. “And how’s he doing?”

“Out of surgery and recovering at a place called Tranquility Care Center, in St. George.”

“Good to know, I guess. And from there, you…?”

“Went to Tranquility Care Center in St. George,” she said. He stared at her for a long time, pencil motionless, before saying, “Why?”

“I was worried about him. He’s an old man, he had a hard fall, and I was there when it happened. Also, he gave me his keys to lock up his house when the ambulance took him away and I thought I better return them sooner rather than later.”

“Mm-hm. And you got there when?”

“Around eight.” Anticipating his next question, she said, “And I left around eight this morning.”

Zabrinsky raised his eyebrows. “You were there all night?”

“Yeah.”

The sheriff absorbed that without change of expression. “Why?”

Annoyed, Ana snapped, “Because he was hurt. Because he was alone and he asked me to stay. Because I had one fucking moment of human empathy and nowhere else to be, and more than that is none of your fucking business. There were people coming in and out of that room every half hour all night long. You talk to them. I’ve got nothing more to say to you about that.”

“All right, all right, don’t get your girdle in a twist.” He wrote, finally, just a few words and then snapped the notebook shut. “That’ll do me from you, then. Nothing personal, Miss Blaylock. He made a point of calling you some choice words and I have to take that seriously when something like this happens. It doesn’t mean I think you had anything to do with it, but in this job, what I think and what I have to ask don’t always intersect. However, just for my peace of mind, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go too far until we get this all sorted out.”
“I understand, it’s Miss Stark, and what exactly is the ‘it’ you don’t think I had anything to do with? What are we sorting out? What happened?”

He gave her a scornful stare that gradually shifted into a merely skeptical one. “You really haven’t heard?”

“Come on, man. Who the hell ever talks to me?”

He thought that over and must have agreed, because his next words were, “Paul Trammel and his wife are dead.”

Her first thought after what felt like a very long time was the rather morbid observation that Paulie was the one guy in Mammon whose death she was not even a little bit connected to (this was not exactly true), and yet, if not for her happenstance alibi, she’d be well on her way for getting railroaded for it right now (this probably was). She came dangerously close to laughing out loud, but managed to suppress it and simply say, “Given that you just asked me where I was last night, I’m going to assume it wasn’t a pair of heart attacks.”

“No comment,” he said. “And I’d advise you to adopt the same attitude. Small towns like to talk, but I’m sure I don’t need to tell a clever little lady like you how dangerous gossip can be to an open investigation.”

Ana nodded with a proper show of gravity and followed him out to the front room, where he repeated this admonition to everyone (although he only looked at Hageman, hiding his phone in his cupped hands). Then Shelly did the stand-up thing by announcing that work for the day was cancelled, ‘out of respect,’ and launched himself into an unrehearsed and rambling sort of eulogy that lasted just long enough for the sheriff’s car to leave the parking lot. Then he, like everyone, including Ana herself, looked at Hageman, who tapped at his phone and said, “Coroner just got done with Nancy. Might be a while before they start in on Paulie. They want to make sure they got all the pieces.”

Ana caught Jimmy’s somewhat glazed eye. “Who’s he talking to?”

Jimmy did not respond, but Hageman said, “My sister, Evie. Her husband’s cousin’s fiancé works in the county coroner’s office.”

Ana found a seat close to him and sat down.

The full story trickled out of Hageman, text by text, over the course of two hours. When his sister’s cousin’s fiancé ran out of confidential secrets to spill, Shelly decided respects had been sufficiently paid and offered up a time and a half to anyone willing to work out what remained of their shift. Ana volunteered at once and a handful of others followed suit. She spent the rest of the day sweating down at the dealership site, although she was only present in the most physical sense; her mind was elsewhere in Mammon, in a house she’d never seen, watching a murder that just…just could not have happened the way they said it had.

After clocking out, she went immediately to Gallifrey’s, where she took a table in the center of the room and pretended to drink coffee while listening to the rumor mill grind around her. She picked up a lot of missing pieces over the next two hours, and while they did not fill in any holes in the crime scene itself, they did make a much, much bigger picture around it.

Ana was not the only person at Gallifrey’s eavesdropping on gossip, but she’d run up the smallest check, so she was the one Lucy politely rousted when tables filled up and a crowd began to form in the lobby. Ana didn’t argue. She put down two bucks for the coffee and twenty for the trouble, and
drove home. It was difficult not to turn in when she passed Freddy’s. She hated the thought of being alone in Aunt Easter’s haunted house tonight, but she didn’t want to be around people either. Especially not Bonnie. He’d take one look at her and know something was wrong and what was she supposed to tell him? Even if she wanted to explain, she couldn’t. The whole thing was inexplicable and never mind what the coroner or the sheriff said; Ana was very good at seeing the way things fit together and this, didn’t.

All the more reason not to go to Freddy’s. There was enough death and darkness there without her dragging in more. So she went home.

She worked, because work was the best way to keep from thinking. She tore down walls and built them back again. She installed cabinets. She replaced plumbing. She mudded and scraped and cleaned and sweat, all day long and into the night, and when her body gave out and her brain still wouldn’t stop, she gave in and started drinking.
Another day dawned, dragged on and on and finally died. Bonnie passed the time, idly marking each show set as the hours passed and sometimes even humming along with the stupid songs he never had to sing again when their time came, but mostly lost in his guitar, imagining music as his fingers played just above the strings. He brought himself out of it at six to begin the excruciating process of waiting for Ana, but again, she didn’t come.

Tonight, that bothered him. He could understand her being tired enough to forget her promise to Chica yesterday, but he really would have thought she’d remember today. Ana forgot things easy, sure, but she also got reminded of things just as easily. The first time she saw a book, she’d have remembered. And she’d have definitely gone to get them, even if she’d been all the way home, because the one thing Ana took seriously was a promise. And that meant she maybe hadn’t just forgotten. Something had happened.

Something bad? He wasn’t sure. He’d be lying if he said the thought of her spinning out of control on the stormy road and crashing into a rocky outcrop hadn’t crossed his mind, but he didn’t really believe it. So if she hadn’t forgotten and she wasn’t hurt, what did that leave? Maybe the road had washed out. It didn’t look bad here, but there was a lot of road between here and town. He didn’t really believe that either, but it was plausible (and a much more comfortable thought than the one involving her burning truck flat-nosed into a boulder, maybe with her beating on the window, trying to get out as the cab filled up with smoke…), almost as plausible as it was totally unnecessary.

After all, Ana’s life had a lot of normal everyday threads and they could snarl up in a normal everyday manner at a moment’s notice. If she had to make a choice between picking up some reading material for Chica or dealing with more trouble at the house or the job or the people in town, she’d just do what she had to do and trust Chica to understand when she finally did come through. Bonnie knew it. More to the point, Chica knew it. No one was upset (well, Freddy was clearly upset, but he was doing his best to hide it), it was just hard to wait it out, and the hours between six and nine were the worst, because no matter how often he told himself not to get his hopes up or how convincingly he told himself he hadn’t, when that nine o’clock hour came around and there was no getting around the fact that she wasn’t coming, it stabbed into him like the goddamn Scoop and ripped his insides out.

But hey, there was always tomorrow.

So today, as yesterday, Bonnie’s hope started dying when the sun went down, and about an hour later, he’d stopped popping his ears up each time the thunder growled, making him think for one heart-wrenching moment it might be a truck’s engine. Within a short time, he wasn’t just fidgeting with his guitar, but really into it again, his head so deep in the music he pretended to play that he never heard the loading dock door open, or if he did, he processed it as an extra-hard gust of wind and thought no more about it. It wasn’t until light in the kitchen caught his eye that he realized someone was there and even so, he wasn’t immediately alarmed. It was probably just Freddy, making his rounds. Loud weather made Freddy nervous. Couldn’t hear vehicles approach. Or doors open.

But the light bobbing around the kitchen was a diffused bluish glow, not the twinned pale beams
that came from animatronic eyes; a flashlight or maybe a phone’s screen. And even with the rain, Bonnie could hear footsteps—wet, squishy ones, squeaking a little on the tiles. Not animatronic feet, but rubber-soled shoes.

There was a human in the building.

How in the hell it had gotten in was a good question and one whose answer was just going to have to wait. Slowly, Bonnie put his guitar aside and shifted around on the stage, keeping his eyes locked on the open doorway to the kitchen. If his leg was working—big ‘if’ these days—then he had time enough to duck out into the West Hall, but he was going to make some noise doing it. The rain on the roof was pretty loud, but not loud enough to cover the rattle-thump-bang of his escape. Maybe it would be better to slump here and play doll, at least until he knew what he was dealing with. Right now, it looked like one light, which usually meant only one human. If he was just coming to do the Billy Blaylock thing, Bonnie would let him; they always ran off pretty quick when their silly ritual was done. Safer to let them run than to try to chase them.

But when the light appeared in the doorway at last, the silhouette behind it was familiar and Bonnie stupidly sat up and switched his eyes on, which would have given the invader a good running start if it had been anyone but Ana.

But it was. It really was.

“You okay?” she asked.

There was something off about the question, something in the way she asked or something in the way she stood, but something.

“Yeah, sure.” Bonnie scooted back into more of a sitting position and less of a sprawl. “Didn’t mean to scare you, I was just—” He acknowledged the inherent creepiness of his next words with an exaggerated wince. “—sitting alone in the dark, doing nothing, but hey, enough about how pathetic I am. You’re here! That’s awesome! I didn’t even hear your truck pull in.”

“Didn’t bring it,” said Ana, still in the doorway. “I walked.”

“Ah hell. Someone take your truck again?”

“No, I left it at home.”

Bonnie stopped fighting with his leg and just stared at her for a few seconds. He didn’t know where Ana lived but he knew there were no houses within sight of the restaurant, or at least no lights at night. There was nothing but desert and mountains and sky as far as he could see in any direction.

“Why?” he asked finally.

Ana shrugged. “I don’t drink and drive.”

Bonnie would have raised his eyebrows if he still had them. As it was, all he could do was push the pins they were supposed to be attached to higher on the inside of his head casing. “Are you drunk?” he asked stupidly, because of course she was, and he was an idiot for not recognizing it right away.

“A little. Kind of not enough, if you get me. It’s been…” Ana moved from one side of the doorway to the other, exposing her other arm which, until this point, had been out of sight behind the wall. She had her duffel bag slung over her shoulder and her hand tucked down inside. He could see the
muscles of her arm flexing as she fidgeted with something in there. “It’s been a really bad day, Bon.”

“You want to talk about it?”

She was quiet, which probably meant she did, but she wasn’t quite ready.

“Okay,” he said, trying without much success to keep his ears up and not broadcast his growing concern. She was skittish, reminding him alarmingly of the way she’d been that one night, the bad night, when she’d gone from totally normal to a little off to running crazy in the damn playground in no time at all. “Um… You want to come all the way in, baby, or are you going to just stand there in the doorway all night?”

She actually seemed to think about it, but judging from the way she kept looking back over her shoulder, she was also thinking about leaving.

“What’s wrong?” Bonnie asked. He tried to get up, but his leg only twitched an inch or so before his damn knee locked up on him again. It had been working so well since Ana had tinkered with it, but the last few falls had really done a number on it. “Baby, come over here. Talk to me.”

“I dunno,” she said, which was a weird answer to either of those invitations. “I shouldn’t be here. Been a bad day, but I don’t need to be spreading it around. I just…I wanted to see you. Is that all right?”

“What, are you kidding? Of course it’s all right.”

She accepted this like it was a punishment, shoulders slumped, eyes on the floor.

Bonnie thought a moment, then gestured toward her duffel bag. “What have you got in there?”

“Everything,” she said with a puff of drunken pride. “Like a snail m’man. Carry my home with me. Because you never know. You never know.”

“Can I see?”

Ana hesitated, then withdrew her hidden hand from the inner sanctum of her duffel bag to show him a bottle. It was a big bottle with not a lot left in it, but even more significant to Bonnie’s way of thinking was that it wasn’t her usual brand. Might have been on sale, might have been the first thing she saw on the shelf or the only thing the barkeeper offered (Bonnie’s notion of how alcohol was sold came mostly from the prototype posters of the Sarsparilla Saloon), but he couldn’t help but think she’d chosen it deliberately, that of all the bottles available to her, she’d chosen one she didn’t really like. She wasn’t drinking for fun tonight. She didn’t want to enjoy it.

“Was that full when you started?” Bonnie asked, eying the level of liquid as it sloshed in the tinted glass.

“Oh no,” Ana assured him, although she also found something extremely interesting on the wall to look at instead of him. “No, no no no. No.”

“Uh huh. Say it a few more times, I’m almost convinced. Hey,” he said, holding out his hand. “Come here, baby. Give me some of that?”

She perked up and came right over, not entirely steady on her feet. She gave him the bottle without hesitation, but her ready smile became a scowl when he quickly poured it all away inside him.
“Dude, I was not done drinking,” she told him, then glanced back at the kitchen. He could all but see the many bottles of assorted pills, pot and booze that made up her stash appear in a thought-bubble over her head.

“Come sit with me,” he coaxed, but it was no use.

“Hold this,” she ordered, handing him her duffel bag, and off she went.

Bonnie sat back down, listening to glass clink as she got herself another bottle.

“You want anything?” she called. “I hate to drink alone.”

“Looks like you can soldier through it when you have to.”

“Spare me the temperance lecture. Drinking is the very fucking least of my vices. You want a beer or not?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m not an alcoholic,” she insisted, coming back to the dining room with a beer in each hand. She gave him one, opened the other, and drank half with an expression of almost frightening determination. She stopped for breath, visibly weaving. “I just wanted to switch off for a while. Stop thinking about it, because the thinking, man…the thinking is not doing good things for me.”

“Yeah, I get that. I’m just saying maybe downing most of a bottle of—” He looked at it. “—gin and chasing it with beer isn’t the best way to feel better.”

“Hey, first of all, I told you that wasn’t full when I started. I found it when I was cleaning and it was half-gone then. I barely even had any at all. Gin tastes like eating a pine tree’s ass. Second, I don’t drink to feel better. I’m not an alcoholic,” she said again, with emphasis, and drank the other half of her beer. She threw the empty bottle at Swampy, but missed. It exploded on the wall above him, showering glass as far as the tray return window. “I drink to feel nothing.”

Like she was right there in the room with them, he heard Chica telling him that when you were used to feeling bad, feeling nothing was feeling better.

“That’s…not good, baby girl,” he told her, setting his unopened beer on the stage next to his guitar.

“No, I know. And it wasn’t working, either. That’s why I decided to come see you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” She came a little closer. “You’re good,” she told him, running her hand up his newly-shellacked chest and down it again. “I had to see you. I’m sorry. I know, I know…we’re not…but it’s been such a bad day, you have no idea, and you…You’re the only thing that makes me feel better.” She looked at the phone in her hand, shut it off, then reached into her duffel bag and brought her tablet out. She held it out with an odd, strained smile, as if she expected him to slap her with it. “Want to watch a movie with me?”

“Yeah, sure. Anytime.” Bonnie tried to get up, but before he could even begin to make his bad leg respond, Ana was climbing up on the stage beside him. He put his arm around her more or less by habit, took it back, and then sort of hovered it awkwardly over her. “Sorry, I’m not sure what to do here.”

“Do you know what you want to do?” she asked, just like she’d asked before and looked at him
with those same eyes—a little lost, a little sad, but so beautiful and blue.

He was too quiet, too long, and maybe that was a good thing because the things he wanted to say in that moment would go on hurting long after she sobered up.

For now, she rolled her amazing eyes and sighed at him. “I never used to have to ask you to put your arm around me. Gimme.” Taking his hand, Ana pulled his arm down around her shoulders and snuggled in against his side. “Unless it makes you uncomfortable.”

There must be words for how this felt, but that sure wasn’t one of them. “No, I’m good.”

“It’s just that it’s a small screen.” She turned the tablet on, as if to demonstrate. “We need to be close if we’re both going to see.”

They’d watched movies together on her tablet before and Bonnie knew for a fact that they could both see the screen just fine without snuggling, but hey, if she was offering—

“In fact, it might be best if I sat in your lap,” she continued and looked at him from the corner of her amazing eyes as she did things to the tablet.

Bonnie’s ears tilted forward. “Um,” he said suavely and laughed a little. “Sure, why not?”

“Or we could skip the movie and have sex.”

“Whoa! Dear Playbunny…Wait, are you serious?”

“Just as friends,” she said quickly. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I just…I need to stop thinking about things for a while. I need to feel good or at least…you know, at least not feel like this. And you’re good, right? You’re so good. Maybe we could find someplace quiet and figure things out. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Oh. Wow. Ana…no. You’re drunk and even if you weren’t,” he said, speaking right over the top of her protests, “well, sorry, but it means something to me. It means something and if I’m the only one, then…no. That’s not right.”

“Never mind,” she said, hunching over her tablet and tapping things faster. “It was just a thought. Now I made it weird.” She shook her head, scrolling down through titles and thumbnails too fast for him to read them, then suddenly thrust her tablet back in her bag. “I should go. Sorry.”

“Wait.” Bonnie caught her arm before she could get away and pulled her stiffly back to him. “Hey, we may not have those benefits, but I am your friend. Come on, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, pulled away from him and then either slipped in the puddle that had poured itself out of her wet clothes or simply fell, but however it happened, she went down. Bonnie leapt up and made a wild grab and for once in his whole miserable fucking life, that went right and instead of having his bad knee fold on him so that he fell on top of her and crushed her fucking dead on the floor, he caught her. His showtime protocol kicked in and without thinking, he spun her up into the air and down again right up close against his chest.

She grabbed at him, her hand splayed over his battery, staring up into his face with her eyes so round and perfect…for one second…two…and then she shoved herself back, bent over and puked on his feet.

“You drank a lot more of that stuff than you said you did,” Bonnie observed, steadying her with
one hand while holding her braid with the other.

“Ugh. Oh. Oh man, I’m so sorry. Oh God, it got right in there, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it sure did. I, uh…I kind of want to hurl now too and I’m not sure how that would even work, so I’m, uh…I’m going to go hose off. You want to sit down or…?”

Ana shook her head, some of the color already beginning to come back to her cheeks. “I’m going to get some dry clothes on. Be right back.”

“Uh huh. Promise me you’re not going to sneak away.”

“Cross my heart and hope to…hope to…” She interrupted herself with a gurgling burp, a warning that gave Bonnie just enough time to get out of the splash zone before she threw up again. “…die,” she groaned when she was done. She staggered off to her room, one arm hugging her stomach and the back of her other hand pressed to her mouth.

Shaking his head, Bonnie made a wide circle around the mess and limped off to the kitchen. His foot casings had broken away a while ago, but his feet were second only to his hands in terms of number of parts and complexity of fittings, and there were plenty of gaps for gunk to get in and not come easily out again. He squelched at every step. Gross.

Bonnie gave himself a quick spritz at the sink, then went into the store room for some cleaner. The room was empty, which surprised him a little, although he supposed it shouldn’t. Eavesdropping was rude and even if Freddy couldn’t swear he never did it, he was rarely caught in the act. It was probably unfair to say that he was keeping his distance just to avoid cleaning up a little secondhand booze, but it wasn’t necessarily untrue.

Bonnie poured a liberal amount of cleaner over each foot, ran a brush over his bones, and sprayed himself with the hose from the knees down. He finished up with a few spurts of WD-40, like cologne after a shower, and a shot of Febreze for good measure. Smelled like Cashmere Forest, according to the can. Bonnie couldn’t imagine that smelled too good, considering cashmere was a kind of goat (which Bonnie knew because it was the name of the goat who ran the town bank in Gallup Gulch), but what did he know? Maybe goats smelled good, at least the cashmere kind.

While he pondered the smell of goats in particular and the theory of odor in general, Bonnie filled a bucket and took it and the mop out to the dining room to clean up. Ana returned just as he was finishing, her mumbled apology becoming wide-eyed dismay as she saw what he was doing.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry! You should have left it for me, it was my mess!”

“You’ve cleaned up plenty of ours,” said Bonnie, giving the tiles a last swipe. “Besides, it’s no big deal. All those years pumping soda, pizza and cake into hyper kids, you think this is the first time I’ve mopped up a little vom? Hell, this is almost nostalgic for me. Okay, I’m gonna dump this and then we’re going to talk. You need anything? Bottle of water? Something to eat?”

“Ugh. Water, I guess. Thanks.”

Bonnie went, collected two bottles of water and a couple of Easy Bake cookies. He wasn’t sure if that would help with her stomach or not, but he could remember when Marion was pregnant, how nibbling on crackers was the only thing to calm the misery of never-ending sickness. This wasn’t the same thing and cookies weren’t crackers, but it was what he had, so hopefully it was good enough.

He returned to the dining room to discover that Ana had found his beer, but she hadn’t opened it,
and she put it down again to take the water he offered. She accepted the cookies and took the
tiniest bite of the smallest one. Nibbling, just like Marion used to. And for an unpleasant second
there, the resemblance between the two of them—Marion and Ana—was so strong. Wrong hair,
wrong eyes, wrong everything, but still he found himself remembering Foxy’s stupid insistence
from the other night that Marion was actually ‘Aunt Easter’…and wondering.

Then she shifted and just as suddenly, she didn’t look anything like Marion. He guessed he was
forgetting what Marion looked like, or maybe being sick and slumped over made everyone look
the same.

“You going to be okay?” Bonnie asked, moving back a step, just in case.

“I shouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t say that, baby. What’s wrong?”

She only shook her head, avoiding his eyes. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll listen. You know me, all ears.” He wagged them, which won him a pale
imitation of a smile. Encouraged, he sat on the edge of the stage beside her and bumped her arm
with his. “You felt better after puking up that other stuff, right? So come on, out with it. You’ll feel
better.”

She sat.

He waited.

She glanced at him.

He forced himself not to fidget and not to speak, letting his silence do his nudging for him.

“There’s this guy at work,” Ana began haltingly.

“Same guy from the other day or a different one?”

“Same guy. So you know we got into it a bit. And by ‘we’, I mean ‘he’, and by ‘got into it’, I mean
‘called me a whore’, and by ‘a bit’, I mean ‘a lot’. After I got called out, he stayed there alone and
threw a snit. When Shelly and the crew got back, the front office was trashed. And here’s where
things start to get confused. It’s literally all anyone is talking about, but damned if I can find two
people who can agree on exactly what went down. But the sheriff told me some of it and I guess I
can trust what he’s got to say, and Hageman’s sister’s cousin’s girlfriend typed up the coroner’s
notes, so I guess we can trust that angle too, and when it comes right down to it, the rest is all
flavor text.”

“You’re losing me, baby girl. Why don’t we forget about who did the talking and just focus on
what they were saying? The guy left the office and…and you said ‘coroner’, so now he’s dead? Is
that what you’re saying?”

She nodded.

“Okay,” said Bonnie after a puzzled moment. “Call me an asshole, but so what? He was a jerk.
Why do you care?”

“I don’t care that he died, I care how he died.”
Bonnie couldn’t see how that made any difference unless she’d been the one to do it, and clearly she hadn’t, but he went along with it. “Don’t keep me in suspense, baby girl. How did he die?”

“He got his head bashed in. All the way in.” She looked at him, her eyes troubled and sunk in shadows. “I heard the words ‘bone pudding’ today. All my years of living with Rider, and I have never heard a thing like that before. Someone broke Big Paulie’s head down into bone pudding.”

“That’s…” Pretty impressive was probably the wrong response. Bonnie thought for a moment and substituted, “…pretty bad. Do they know who did it?”

“Well, the sheriff made an effort to pin it on me—”

“The hell you say!”

“Yeah, well, fortunately, I had an alibi, which is a goddamn miracle in itself, but I’m clear, so now everyone’s saying the guy’s wife must have done it.”

“Oh. Good.” Bonnie studied her while she nibbled her cookie and at last said, “Why don’t you believe it?”

“I’m trying to, Bon, but I can’t help it. I’ve always been able to see how pieces go together and I’m telling you, these pieces don’t fit. From what I hear, his wife had asthma, rheumatoid arthritis and a heart condition. Physical exertion was not her thing.”

“Was?”

Ana made a face. “Yeah, she’s dead, too. Heart attack.”

Bonnie tipped an ear toward her. “What, you don’t believe that either?”

“Oh, I believe she had a heart attack, it’s just…I never met his wife,” she told him, frowning out into the empty room at Swampy. “I wouldn’t know her if I passed her on the street. But Big Paulie? Is big. Was big. His mom’s maiden name was Gallifrey, you know. He might not be bigger than Tiny Tim, but he’s plenty big enough. Over six feet tall, three through the chest, just a solid, solid man made of meat. He’d been working with his hands all his life and he was strong. Yeah, he was sixty, but the kind of sixty that comes from working construction his whole life. I never met her, but I’m willing to bet his wife was the kind of sixty that comes from keeping house, raising kids and playing piano on Sundays. That’s strong too, I guess, but it’s a different kind of strong than the kind it would take to put a man like Big Paulie down. I don’t care how angry you are, physics is still a thing.”

“They think she did it with her bare hands?”

Ana squirmed, shook her head. “No. Hageman’s sister’s cousin’s girlfriend says a frying pan was involved.”

“Involved?’ That’s a funny way of putting it.”

“Isn’t it? From what I hear, he was beat so bad, it’s impossible to say at what point during the whole thing he actually died, so while they know the pan was involved from the condition it was in, they can’t say it’s what killed him, just that it might have been how she put him down. There was also a refrigerator involved. She apparently pulled it out from the wall and used it to block the door to the garage. Then she started grabbing all the heavy jars and cans out of the cupboard to hit him with and when she ran out of those, she pulled the shelf out of the cupboard and hit him with that. Then she pretty much went through the entire kitchen looking for weapons. I’m talking dinner
plates, knives, some forks, some spoons, the faucet from the sink, the sink itself...basically, if it was remotely sharp, heavy or just within reach, it was ‘involved’ in killing Big Paulie.”

“The sink?”

“Oh yeah. According to ‘Them,’ after the faucet was broken off and rammed down his throat, Paulie was repeatedly hammered head-first into the sink, until the sink broke loose. Then she went to work on the counter until it broke, too. There were bone splinters and teeth and hair and stuff—”

Ana paused to nibble the last of her first cookie and start in on the second. “—wedged into the wood from the top of the counter all the way to the floor.”

“Whoa.”

“Damn right, whoa. Like, I would need a sledgehammer to break a counter apart and this little old church lady used her husband’s head. By the time she was done, there was no head, just a big ol’ pile of...bone pudding. Rumor has it, they carried him out in a body bag, two buckets and a dozen Ziploc baggies.” She started to take a sip of water, then lowered her bottle and said, “But here’s a funny thing. The wife had a mark on her face like she’d been hit hard and some light bruising consistent with falling into the wall, but that was it. No scars, no old bruises...her clothes weren’t even all that rumpled. That may not mean much, because God knows there’s plenty of ways to go at someone without leaving marks, but it’s...it’s just a little funny. Also, she had no defensive wounds and no skin or hair or anything like that under her fingernails. No sign of any kind there was an actual, like, back-and-forth fight. Remember that.”

“Okay?”

“And apart from some normal working-man wear and tear, Big Paulie had no defensive wounds either! There was nothing under his fingernails but some wood splinters and flecks of paint that he probably got redecorating Shelly’s.”

“Meaning no sign that he fought back either,” Bonnie guessed.

“Right! So...So what the actual fuck went down on Monday night? We know Paulie’s wife picks him up at the station last night at around eight. Their home security system says they got home about ten minutes later and locked up again. Then what? Maybe she said something about what he’d done at Shelly’s. Maybe he was just pissed that dinner was cold. So he gives her a slap and for whatever reason, that’s the trigger that makes her decide to pick up that pan and hit her husband. At that point, either she drops him or she didn’t, and either way, what happens next does not add up. Because if he’s still standing, he would knock her the hell out. And it’d be her grisly murder everyone would be talking about today, maybe, but it sure wouldn’t be his. What follows only makes the itty bitty shred of sense it makes if she puts him down in one hit, got me?”

“I don’t know,” he said, trying his very best to sound uncertain. “People don’t always stop hitting just because the other guy is dead. Sometimes they keep going, you know? For...For a long time.”

“Yeah, and if it was just Paulie I could maybe see that, but it’s the fridge, Bonnie!”

“Huh?”

“If he’s down, why would she bother pushing the fridge over?” Ana asked, pointing her water bottle at him on certain words for emphasis. “Standard fridge weighs three hundred pounds empty. These people are Mormons, okay? That fridge was stocked. But this little old church lady grabbed it and threw it on its side in front of the garage and presumably did it faster than Paulie could run. I don’t know the house, but the average kitchen runs eight to fifteen feet across and that’s what,
three to five running strides? She muscled that fridge out from the wall and threw it down before Paulie could take, at most, five steps? Nuh-uh, man. That pony don’t trot.”

“Maybe she did that part later, to…to make it look like a burglary or something.”

“No. We’ll get to that in a minute,” she added ominously, “but no. They know she did the fridge first because of how the blood splattered. But Paulie’s still not down, apparently, because she then empties the pantry cupboard throwing shit at him, then beats him unconscious with the shelf, then picks him up and throws him across the room, where she proceeds to take everything out of the dish drainer and either break it over him or stab it into him before piledriving his face into the edge of the counter until the fucking sink falls out! Are you seeing this, Bon?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, and he was, but it sure wasn’t a sixty-year-old lady doing the beating. “Yeah, go on.”

“Well, when she’s finally satisfied that her husband is dead, she apparently floats out of the room. We know that because the only footprints in the ocean of blood on that floor were the cat’s. She gets completely cleaned up, disposes of the bloody stuff where no one can find it, then comes back to reflect on things, and when she fully realizes what she’s just done, she has a heart attack. She falls into the wall hard enough to do some damage to it and is dead by the time she hits the floor. And call me paranoid, I just have trouble seeing it play out like that! But…”

Bonnie gave her a minute, but the mystery of who killed the asshole at Ana’s work was looking less and less mysterious to him, and he just couldn’t wait her out. “But?” he prompted.

Ana scowled and drank some more water. At length, she shook her head. “I don’t know, Bon. I admit, this complete garbage-pile of a theory is the closest thing that fits all the other facts.”

“For example? Come on, baby girl, don’t stop now. What facts?”

“No burglary, for one. Burglars don’t make much of a mess, as a rule—and I’ve never heard of one tossing an appliance around—but when they do, it’s because they can’t find anything good enough to steal. These two were moving out of state in just a few weeks. They were right in the middle of making all kinds of expensive arrangements. There was an envelope with fifteen thousand dollars in cash on the kitchen table, plus the wife’s jewelry packed in a box labeled ‘good jewelry’, plus the computer, the TV, and all Paulie’s tools right there in the living room! This was a hell of a haul, yet nothing was taken! All the windows intact, all the doors locked and the security system still armed. If it was a home invader, the only way in was down the chimney or through the cat-door. And everyone in the office says no way anyone bigger than a toddler could squeeze through the cat-door.” She was quiet a moment, nibbling and sipping, then remarked, “They can’t find anyone to take the cat. Probably going to put it down. Apparently, it had been snacking on Paulie, but that’s just cats for you. A dog’ll starve to death lying next to its owner’s body, but a cat will chow down on your face even with a bowlful of kibble in the room.”

“Stay with me, baby. If the door was locked and there was no sign anyone else had been in the house, what’s the big mystery?” Bonnie asked, keeping his ears up to hopefully disguise the fact that he did not believe what he was about to say. “Maybe, just maybe, it actually happened the way they say it did. Maybe she did it.”

“Bonnie, were you even listening to me? His wife was sixty and frail! Paulie was huge!”

“People can surprise you when they’re cornered. Hell, you’re not that big, but I saw you go at six guys and kick the living shit out of them.”
“I got lucky.”

“Yeah, you did,” he said seriously. “I want you to never forget that, but my point is, it does happen. Maybe she got lucky too. And maybe it was overdue, if he was in the habit of taking out his frustrations on other people.”

“Maybe,” Ana said, still frowning. “I just don’t see how it could have happened. Bone pudding, Bonnie. How can one person do that?”

Oh, Bonnie had a pretty good idea, all right, but he kept it himself.

“I guess it’s tragic and all that,” said Bonnie, groping for something distracting yet supportive to say. “But you didn’t like the guy and you didn’t even know the wife, so why are you so upset?”

“Yeah, I know, okay? I get it. He’s such an asshole. Was,” Ana amended, rubbing her face. “Was an asshole. That didn’t change just because he died. But there were things I didn’t know.”

“Like the fact that he beat his wife?”

Ana acknowledged that with half a shrug and half a nod. “Like the fact that everyone’s surprised about that, maybe. They could be faking it, I guess, but when it was me, shit, everyone knew. No one’s trading glances over this. No one’s talking about how she should have left years ago or reminding each other about heavy makeup or long sleeves she wore. Everyone knew about everything else going on behind those walls except that. You know what they knew?” she asked suddenly. “They knew Big Paulie was broke.”

“You just said they had all that stuff. Jewelry and cash?”

“Yeah, because they were moving. Everything they had in the world was in labelled boxes in their living room. In fact, that fifteen grand that didn’t get stolen is a little mystery too, since they were overdrawn at the bank and in so much debt that Paulie’s paychecks were being garnished.”

Bonnie could not help picturing a maraschino cherry and some sugar sprinkles decorating a paycheck, but this was not the time to ask for clarification.

“He told me he owned that house free and clear,” Ana was saying, “but that was when there were twenty other families living on that back road. Then one day about ten years ago, someone noticed half those houses were standing empty. And I don’t know. Maybe the culverts were always backing up out there or the potholes were growing and it was time to resurface. I’m dead sure money exchanged hands somewhere in town hall. And the Tudor Lane townhouses were going up over where the Primrose apartments used to be, so it was a simple thing for the local real estate magnate to effectively relocate everyone. Great deal, huh? The residents could sell their old rundown places as is, buy new bigger ones with top of the line appliances already installed just a few streets away, and still come out twenty to fifty grand ahead. Hell of an opportunity. Everyone jumped at it. Everyone but Big Paulie. That was the family homestead and he wasn’t selling. Pretty soon, he’s the only one still living on that stretch of road and the town is getting kind of pissed at having to keep it open and in working order for one man. Electricity, water, phone lines, sewer, cable, internet, postal service—all for one guy. Then one day, the offer to buy his house goes away and he gets hit with an order to vacate.”

“What, like with your house?” Bonnie asked when she stopped to take a breath. “They condemned it?”

Ana shook her head. “Not even,” she said around a mouthful of cookie. “The city never tried to say
that the house was in bad condition, they just took away his claim to it.”

“Can they do that?”

“Imminent domain. All townships reserve the right to seize private property for the greater good of the public. It usually only happens when they need to extend a road or build an overpass or whatever. And they have to pay a fair price. And the other guy can fight it. Which Paulie did. For ten years.”

“You’re starting to sound like you feel sorry for this guy.”

She squirmed again. “I know what it’s like to lose everything. I’ve done it lots of times. It’s never exactly easy, but I can start over. Paulie… man, Paulie was sixty! This was all he had, all he knew! His family name is on the wall of founders at the heritage museum and, thanks to a series of lawyers who swore he had a cast-iron case, he’s about to leave the town where five generations of his people were born. He lost everything, his retirement fund, his savings, his company… He and Shelly used to be partners, did you know that?”

“Uh, no.” Bonnie flicked one ear. “No, I don’t hear a lot of gossip anymore.”

“Well, they were. It used to be T & S Contractors and that T stood for Trammel. But he had to sell those shares and then stand back and watch as Shelly changed the name and the signs and the company shirts and wiped every last trace of Trammel off the company he’d helped build. And when that money was gone, he took out a mortgage on that house he owned free and clear, and then he took out another one. And then he lost his last appeal. His lawyers disappeared. The bank foreclosed. In four weeks, he moves in with his kid and everyone says it’s because the kid needs help with childcare, but the reality that everyone knows is that in four weeks and one day, he and his wife are homeless.”

“So far, everything you’re telling me just proves that he and his wife were stressed out, and stress can make people snap.”

“Oh, you haven’t heard the best part,” she assured him. “The dealership job that he was in charge of? Well, it’s owned by a guy named Eustace Green, but selling cars is just his day job. The rest of the time, he’s a town commissioner.” She waited, looking at him like that meant something, then sighed and said, “That means he’s one of the guys responsible for the imminent domain thing that took his house away.”

“Oh.”

“Damn right, oh. Paulie’s last job before getting run out of town is building a bigger, better workplace for the guy most responsible for destroying Paulie’s life. So, understandably, he has been dicking over that job from day one. I don’t mean just doing shit work and racking up costs, which he was, but also walking off with materials and who knows what else.”

“Hence the envelope of cash sitting on his kitchen table,” Bonnie guessed.

“Allegedly, but yeah, most probably. And Shelly’s been stingy as fuck for the last few months, so everybody on his crew was kind of looking the other way or even helping themselves right along with him, all except Morehead.” Ana snorted with an affectionate sort of disdain as she took another swig of water. “Morehead’s so honest, it’s painful. When he finally figured out what was going on over there, he told Shelly. Shelly went out to the site and saw some stuff for himself, and sent Paulie back to the office. So that’s what happened Monday morning. Four weeks before he loses his house and gets run out of town to go live in his kid’s basement, he’s looking at being fired.
and arrested and maybe going to prison.”

“So he took it all out on you and you suddenly think that’s okay?”

“No,” said Ana, but she wouldn’t look at him. “I’m just saying, there’s some justification there.”

“For calling you names and shit-talking you all over town? Uh, no, there isn’t, and even if there was, what’s his excuse for doing it for the past three or four months? Seriously, how are you remotely okay with this?”

“He. Lost. Everything.” Ana looked at him, but her gaze soon wavered and she dropped her head back on his shoulder. “It was eating him up. He had a house and he lost it. I strolled into town and just scooped one up. He tried to fight the city and couldn’t. I fought and won. He lost his job. I got one. Twice.” She thought a moment, then added, “It’s worse than that, I got his job. Literally. Everyone, even Big Paulie, knew that as soon as he was gone, I’d be on the work-site crew. That was bad enough, but then Shelly put me in charge of it. Right in front of him. Do you get it yet? Paulie had nothing left in the goddamn world but his pride and Shelly took it away in front of everyone. In front of me. He took it away and he gave it to me. And he shouldn’t have done that, Bon,” she said, so seriously, so ashamed. “Everybody says Paulie is…was…a great guy. He didn’t deserve that.”

Bonnie had to take a moment there to really think about what he was going to say next, because what wanted to come out of him was black and wordless.

“No,” he said finally, with just a hint of static at the low end of his speaker. “I’m sorry, baby, but if he blows his life savings, he deserves to be broke. If he can screw around at work and steal and whatever else he was doing, then he deserves to get fired. And if he can say what he said to you and justify it with ‘because you were born,’ then he’s not a great guy.”

“I’ve called Freddy some awful things.”

“That’s different,” Bonnie said firmly. “You didn’t know Freddy had feelings. This asshole knew you did and lit into you anyway. That was his choice. They were all his choices. You weren’t the one who turned his life to shit. You don’t have to feel bad for being the one to walk in when he was on his way out. You don’t even have to feel bad that the asshole is dead.”

“I made it worse,” she insisted. “I make everything worse. He spent the last six months losing everything he had and watching me just snap shit up like it was nothing, and he spent the last night of his life being angry and unhappy, all because of me.”

“Yeah, well, that’s on him, baby girl. It doesn’t really matter what you do. I mean, you can try to be the best you every day. Take the high road, turn the other cheek and—” He gestured with half a laugh at the stage around them. “—put on a show, but ultimately, you’ve got no control over what other people think or feel about you. Some people don’t care who you are. Some people just want someone else to push around. And I don’t care how big the guy is, anyone who has to put someone else down to feel better about themselves is pretty goddamn small.”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” she muttered.

“I understand, baby. I do.” He understood so well that it took a little time before he could blink the black out of his eyes and keep talking. “But I’ll tell you something. This guy…whatever he was and however it happened, he’s dead. Whether you understand it or not, whether you feel bad or not, it makes no difference to him now. It makes no difference to anyone, really. I mean, he was going to be gone anyway in just a few weeks, right?”
“Gone, yeah, but not dead! I never wanted him dead!”

“Dead is gone,” Bonnie said with a shrug. “I’m not saying you should dance on his grave or anything, but you don’t have to feel bad just because he’s gone. And if you want to feel, like, relief or whatever just because you don’t have to deal with his shit anymore, that doesn’t make you a bad person. So forget him. Okay?”

She looked at him for a long time before nodding.

“Come on.” He picked up the tablet and put it back in her hands. “Find us something to watch on this thing. Let’s cheer you up.”

She nodded again listlessly, then boosted herself up to press an unexpected, sad-eyed kiss hard against his mouth.

“I’m not complaining, but, uh, what was that for?” he asked as she slumped down at his side again.

“Cheering me up,” she told him, pulling his arm around her like a blanket. “You’re so good. You’re the only good thing I ever almost got. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” He looked at the tablet’s screen as she began to scroll through movies, trying to ignore the phantom sensation of her warm and soft against his skin. “Yeah, I know.”
Foxy was not having a good night.

Which was not to say he was having a bad night. Good nights in general were few and far between in this place, or in any of the restaurants they’d called home over the years. Most nights were neither good nor bad, they just were, and that was fine. That was the kind of night Foxy should be having right now, but he’d made the mistake of answering when Chica poked her pretty head into the Cove and called his name earlier that evening, so instead of spending another comfortable night sitting on the deck of his ship in the dark doing nothing, Foxy had to spend it in the arcade, pretending to have fun.

To make matters worse, the camera came on shortly after the match began and it must have been a dull night down below, because it didn’t switch off again. Apparently, the Purple Man had nothing better to do than to watch Foxy get his plastic ass beat at table tennis.

Knowing he had an audience did not improve Foxy’s mood or his co-ordination, which he could only assume made for a more amusing show for them down below. The camera stayed with him, blinking to mark each miss, every foul, and otherwise shining its bleeding light directly in Foxy’s eyes. Chica offered several times to move on to skeeball or ring toss or even scratch a grid into the floor and play checkers with old treasure tokens, but Foxy refused. Truth be told, Foxy would rather have the camera’s light in his eyes to blame for his poor score than no excuse at all.

His one consolation was that he didn’t have to suffer alone. Freddy had wandered haplessly through on one of his patrols. If Foxy had been the one asking him to stay and play, he’d have received a grunt and a glare and the sight of Fred’s cracked backside limping away, but Chica had them big pink eyes and the lilt of endless optimism in her voice, and Freddy let himself be snagged just as Foxy had.

They played doubles against Chica’s single self and she still stomped them. Her many enthusiastic calls of “Good shot!” and “Ooo! Almost got me!” were all the more aggravating for knowing she sincerely meant it.

After an hour of ping-pong punishment in the camera’s unblinking spotlight, Freddy started making excuses and fading toward the exit, but again Chica turned on the charm and suggested a different game. No ring toss or checkers this time, oh no, not for Freddy. She suggested a card game, because Chica might look all sweetness and innocence, but she sure wasn’t dumb.

Freddy did some grumbling, but ultimately proved unable to resist the siren call of a game he was guaranteed to win, seeing as he was the only one present with two functional hands, and therefore, the one who’d be dealing. So Game Night sailed on, dragging Foxy along with it like an anchor.

Eventually, Freddy had won enough hands to assuage the pride he’d wounded losing at table tennis and he again began to make noises about resuming his patrol. Chica offered to walk with him. Freddy initially demurred, but she kept trying and before Foxy could sneak out and escape to the safety of his cabin, Chica had managed to talk Freddy into another ‘family outing.’ Off they went to tell Bonnie the good news, with Chica behind them to make sure they couldn’t make a run for it, cheerfully nattering on about how great it was to finally be able to do things together.
“We could play Hide and Seek,” suggested Foxy. “I’ll be It.”

“Nice try,” said Chica with a huffy sniff. “You only want to be It so you can sneak off and do nothing while we hide all night.”

“Is that true?” Freddy asked, glancing at him.

“Maybe.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Freddy said sternly, then grunted and added, “If anyone gets to be It and sneak off, it’s me.”

“Freddy!” Chica wailed.

From the not-too-distant dining room came Bonnie’s voice, pitched just loud enough to carry to them: “Guys, keep it down.”

“Oh, are we interrupting yer musical flow, maestro?” Foxy asked loudly. “Oi, it’s Family Fun Night! Time for another of Chica’s nature walks! Exercise yer rusty pins, mate! Exploration and adventure and all that feel-good shit.”

“Come on, Bonnie,” said Freddy, limping around the corner of the stage wall. “We’re going for a walk. And if I can’t get out of it, neither can…What is she doing here?”

She?

There was only one she.

Foxy darted around the corner and there on the stage was Bonnie, almost exactly where he’d been the last time Foxy had seen him, except that instead of a guitar, he was holding Ana’s tablet in the crook of one arm. Oh, and Ana herself in the other, deep asleep.

Although she’d probably started out sitting at Bonnie’s side, once she’d fallen asleep, she’d wiggled herself around in that slippery way she had until she’d made herself child-small in the cradle of his arms. Her skin was flushed, glowing in the light from her tablet; an animatronic’s heart ran hot, too hot for human comfort in the summertime, but Ana held on regardless. Not the heat, not the smell, not even the rough bald feel of old Bon’s casing could put her off. She slept with her back to the room and her face pressed to his chest, one arm limply slung around his neck and the other curled like a kitten’s paw under her own chin. Her brows were pinched in restless sleep, full of dark dreams.

The sight stabbed in, hooking up memory. She’d slept like that with him once. Just the one night and a few short hours after dawn, sleeping off a bad trip in the last quiet moments before Mason and his whole happy crew turned up to hunt her down. He wondered if she remembered that. She remembered waking up on the floor of the Cove and she must have some memory of being tied up in his cabin for safe-keeping, because she’d tried to throw it in his laughing face once, but did she remember sleeping with him just like this? Her hand on his chest like she was feeling at his heartbeat, like he had a heart to feel. Sleeping in his arms, so still…so trusting…

“You seriously going to stand there and act like you weren’t listening in?” Bonnie was saying.

“I wasn’t,” said Freddy, leaning over to brush Ana’s hair back from her flushed cheek. “I didn’t even know she was here.”

“Sure, you didn’t. A mouse farts in this place and you know it.”
“I’ve been in the arcade.” Freddy shot Chica an undeservedly hard stare. “I told you I needed to keep watch. I told you anything could be happening.”

“Oh stop. It’s not like I chained you to the wall. Besides, it’s only Ana.” Chica waddled a little closer, head cocked in concern. “Is she okay? She looks a little sick.”

“She’s drunk,” Freddy declared, frowning. “Drunker than I’ve ever seen her and I have seen this child drink.”

“Something to celebrate, maybe,” said Foxy, watching the fog of Ana’s breath grow and recede on the bare surface of Bonnie’s casing. His own chest itched; he scratched it. “Ye get back together?”

“No,” said Bonnie and made a visible effort to keep his ears from flattening, with only partial success. “She had a bad day. She wanted to relax.”

On the tablet’s little screen, a blonde woman let out a gagging scream and a gurgle.

Bonnie looked at it and set it aside, careful not to jostle her. “So Ana relaxes in weird ways. I don’t care what she wants to do, as long as it makes her feel better.”

Freddy grunted. “Did she tell you?”

Bonnie’s left ear twitched. “Tell me what?”

“Whatever ‘it’ was. Whatever brought her here this late and this—” Freddy reached into the shadows of the stage behind the bunched curtain and unerringly came up with a beer bottle and a disapproving frown. “—upset.”

“That’s mine,” Bonnie snapped, grabbing it back and giving it a hard shake in front of Freddy’s face. “And I haven’t even opened it!”

“Gonna drink it someday,” Ana mumbled, scowling without opening her eyes. “So quit shaking it.”

Her words were slurred, hard letters softened or erased entirely in a most particular manner that did not come from sleep. Freddy heard it and gave Bonnie a hard stare.

“Yeah, she’s been drinking,” Bonnie muttered, thumping the bottle down on the padded stage beside him, out of Freddy’s reach. “But she only had one beer since she got here and she didn’t keep it down. I don’t know why she’s still so drunk.”

Before Freddy could answer, the camera over the stage snapped on. The cone of light it cast swept right over Ana at first as the camera looked the rest of them over, then came abruptly back to her and zoomed in.

Ana made a sleepy sound of protest when the light hit her, wiggling around to press herself more fully against Bonnie’s chest. “Turn your eyes off,” she moaned. “Too bright!”

Bonnie put a shielding hand over her face. It was the best they could do, short of lifting Chica up for another lesson in summer safety, and wouldn’t that be a fun thing to try and explain when it woke Ana all the way up? The Purple Man wanted a good, long look and there was nothing any of them could do—

The camera shut itself off.
Foxy looked up. They all looked up.

The camera over the stage stayed dark. The one in the East Hall came on, close enough to listen in, but not shining in her face.

“Thanks,” Ana murmured, curling herself up smaller as she sank back into sleep.

Foxy sent Freddy an uneasy glance. Although the Purple Man seemed content to play the part of an automated security system most of the time, his interest in Ana had always been obvious, and no mystery there. Even if it weren’t for the bloody tie that bound them, she was still a beautiful woman unaware of danger. He couldn’t touch her, so he made up for it by leering at her whenever he had the chance. Annoying, but expected. So now, when she was passed out drunk in easy viewing reach, something as simple as not staring at her was odd enough to rouse suspicion, and Foxy could see Freddy had noticed.

Technically, Ana broke the silence first, snoring, but Chica was the first to speak: “Our walk is cancelled, isn’t it?”

Freddy nodded, dividing his stare between the dark camera over the stage and the lit one out in the hall.

“Yeah, um, speaking of walks…” Bonnie shifted, gathering Ana up like an armload of warm raw pizza dough, and managed to stand without either dropping her or waking her—two minor miracles. “I’m putting her to bed,” he announced, heading for the Party Room. “But stick around. I want to talk to you guys. Chica, can you get the doors for me?”

Chica could and did, and soon Foxy was alone with Freddy, which, seeing as Freddy was still brooding at the camera, was as good as being entirely alone. Funny. Here Foxy had been pining for quiet all night, and now that he had it, it was digging in under his skin like needles.

“What’s crawled up Bon’s tailpipe now, do ye reckon?” he asked, when the silence got too heavy to hold.

“Someone Ana works with has been giving her trouble,” Freddy growled, moving over to peer into the spotlight in the East Hall. The camera there promptly shut off and didn’t come on again anywhere obvious.

“What kind o’ trouble?”

“Bad enough that she told me about it.” Freddy grunted, now heading for the West Hall door. “Not bad enough to do anything about it. Not then, anyway, but it would seem he has since stepped up his game…He’s in the Party Room. He’s watching her.”

“Ye surprised?” Foxy asked, overwhelmingly unconcerned. “Pretty girl, more’n half-insensible. Just his type.”

Freddy grunted.

“What do ye mean, ‘stepped up’?” Foxy asked, watching him from the corner of his so-casual eye. “Push n’ shove? Sticks n’ stones? Pitching a bloke in the quarry under cover o’ darkness?”

“One can only hope, but I doubt it. She’s afraid she’ll lose her job. Then again, she’s lost it before. Once she sobers up, she’ll take it in stride, but Bonnie will probably run hot the rest of the night, so no matter what he says when he comes back, you mind your manners and don’t make a bad situation worse.”
Foxy placed his good hand over the spot where humans kept their hearts, his eyes innocent-wide. “Ye wound me, man!”

“Don’t. It’s not funny.” Freddy shut the door and came back to the stage to pick up the bottle—Bon’s bottle. He grunted and carried it away to the kitchen, calling back, “Bonnie goes black too easily these days. With Ana out of the room, he won’t try as hard to control himself. He’s right on the edge already. Don’t push him.”

Foxy nodded like he was listening, although he couldn’t rightly see Ana being so tore up by losing her grass-cutting privileges as to come all the way out here to cry in her beer over it. Or cry on Bon’s shoulder. Not that she needed much of a reason to snuggle up on Bonnie in the past, but that was before the two of them had split, if they even had. Foxy had never been with a woman long enough to split from one, but even he knew that when one turns up after midnight to ‘watch a movie’ in a bloke’s lap, she was demonstrating a certain willingness to reconcile, if only for the night.

And what had he done about it, the long-eared git? Nothing, that’s what. Hell, if she’d boldly asked him for a screw, old Bon would have gone politely off to fetch one from her toolbox. Idiot.

“Foxy.”

“Mm?”

Freddy appeared sternly in the kitchen doorway. “I said don’t push him.”

“I heard ye. I’ll be on me best behavior, I promise.” Foxy walked over to the stage and picked up Ana’s tablet, still spitting colors and noise. He’d asked her that night, the night she may or may not remember, what might have been if only she’d met him before Bonnie. Well, doubtless there’d be many differences, but one thing was for damn sure: she wouldn’t have spent the night watching movies if she’d come knocking on Foxy’s cabin door.

The camera over the stage came on again. A second later, the West Hall door scraped open and Bonnie limped in with Chica close behind him. Bon’s eyes went first to the camera, then to the tablet in Foxy’s hand. His ears, already low, snapped down flat.

“Don’t get yer knickers in a knot,” Foxy said before the bitching could begin. “I were just looking.”

“Well, don’t,” Bonnie snapped. “You’ll scratch the screen.”

“I ain’t even touching the screen, ye big blouse. What are ye watching?”

“What’s it to you?”

“What’s it to you?” Foxy asked politely and heard the heavy scrape of Freddy rubbing his muzzle and grumbling without words.

“Ana likes horror movies,” Bonnie muttered. “They’re all she ever watches. And these ones aren’t that bad.”
Chica winced at the screen again, actually covering one eye and peeking through her fingers. “They’re not?”

“Trust me, these are practically cartoons compared to the ones she usually watches. She said the one before this one, The Follower or whatever she called it, actually won all kinds of awards for… what?” he asked himself, looking first at the tablet and then up at the ceiling. “‘Setting a new standard for cerebral horror.’”

“What the hell does that mean?” Foxy asked with a laugh. “Splitting a bloke’s head with a book rather’n an axe?”

“No, dumbass, it means not relying on jumpscares and gore to hold the audience’s interest.”

“Like ye knew that,” Foxy scoffed.

“I did! I mean I do!”

Foxy settled himself against the wall, shaking his head. “Ye do after Ana told ye, ye mean.”

“Can you two give it a rest for one night?” Freddy demanded.

Someone on the tablet screamed.

“Awards,” Chica echoed, closing one eye in an exaggerated wince. “This won awards. For being cerebral.”

“Not this one, the other one. I don’t remember what this one’s called. She was asleep by then and it started up automatically and I couldn’t turn it off—” Bonnie fixed Foxy with an accusing stare. “—without scratching the screen.”

Chica took the hint and found the broken feather she’d used as a nib the last time one had been needed and kept because of course she kept it. Never knew when you’d need a broken plastic fuzzy feather. A thousand and one uses, that.

“It’s called Drag Me To Hell,” Chica read, then shook her head and tapped at the screen until it went dark. “Sounds cerebral all right. Are they any good?”

Bonnie snorted. “No. The first one was boring and that one’s just gross. She says they’re full of symbolism and shit, but I must be too stupid to see it. I never thought I’d hear myself say this, but give me jumpscares and gore.”

“Leaving aside Ana’s questionable taste in video entertainment,” Freddy said loudly, taking the tablet out of Chica’s hands and setting it firmly on the stage out of everyone’s reach, face-down. “What is she doing here? What happened?”

“You remember the other day when she came home early?” Bonnie’s eyes let in a little more black. “That guy at her work who was leaning on her?”

Chica punched a fist into her cracked palm. “I knew it! What did he do this time?”

“He died.”

Chica’s growing indignation fizzled into confusion while Foxy and Freddy exchanged a glance. “He did?”

“Yeah. The same night after they had their little blow-up, somebody smeared him over most of his
kitchen. And you’re being awfully quiet,” Bonnie added, managing somehow to address both Foxy and Freddy with one sidelong glare. “Something you’d like to say?”

The camera, silently watching all this play out, swiveled around to ‘look’ at Freddy.

Freddy ignored it, calmly returning Bonnie’s accusing stare. “What do you expect me to add? If she was planning to do something, she didn’t tell me. On the contrary, she specifically told me he wasn’t worth doing anything about.” Freddy paused, his ears tipping forward even as they angled wider apart, registering equal parts amusement and interest. “But you don’t want to know what I know. You want to know if I did it.”

The camera swiveled back around to look at Bonnie.

Chica immediately adopted her mediator’s posture and tone, saying, “Oh, I’m sure that’s not what he—”

“Did you?” Bonnie asked.

Freddy shook his head. “I’d be lying if I said the thought didn’t occur to me, but no, I didn’t.”

“You sure?”

One of Freddy’s eyebrows scraped slightly upward. “You mean did I kill a man and just forget?”

“Hey, the last time some asshat was giving her a hard time at work, you mentioned getting a name, checking a phone book and sending Foxy out for a stroll.”

The camera turned back to Freddy, who merely folded his arms.

“Did ye really?” Foxy asked, giving Freddy a crooked smile before turning his eyes and a careless shrug back on Bonnie. “I never even heard o’ the man before tonight. Hell, I still ain’t heard a name, so I don’t even know who to be gaffing. No, mate, it weren’t me.”

Bonnie just kept looking at them, his eyes moving back and forth from Foxy to Freddy, as if waiting for one of them to crack and confess, and the longer he waited, the angrier he got.

“What is this about?” Freddy asked. “Does Ana think we did it? Is that why she’s here?”

Bonnie backed up at once, ears jutting forward like horns, hands in fists. “No, nothing like that! Jesus, Freddy! When are you going to quit?”

“Bonnie, I can see that you’re very upset and I want to help if I can, but I’m telling you one time, just once, to calm yourself down or I will put you in the freezer.” Freddy gave that a moment to sink in (the camera whined, its lens focusing on Bonnie’s face), then quietly said, “I’m not going to hurt her. You should know that by now.”

Every inch of Bonnie’s body said Do I? but after a long, strained moment, his eyes dropped and then his ears.

“My concern,” Freddy went on, emphasizing the second word, “is that she’s not supposed to think we’re even capable of killing, not after all the work we’ve gone through to convince her otherwise. If she has evidence that we are, you need to tell me, now, before she ambushes me with it.”

“No,” said Bonnie, staring at the floor. His ears flattened as his eyes rolled. “I don’t mean no I won’t, I mean no, there isn’t. I don’t think the thought even occurred to her.”
“Then why is she here?” Freddy asked. “Based on the incident the other day, I can hardly believe she’s in mourning.”

“Yeah, you’d think that, huh?” Bonnie shot back, then took a few seconds to cool before saying, “She’s not. She just thought it was weird, how he died. And the more she said, the more I started thinking it was weird too. It’s not impossible for a human to have done it,” he added with a grudging sort of scowl. “It’s just that when she laid it all out like that, it sounded so damned unlikely. I mean…” Bonnie’s ears flattened, came up, flattened again, came up halfway. “You really didn’t do it?” he asked, his tone wavering, like his ears, between a question and an accusation.

Freddy glanced at Foxy. “Tell me the truth and that’s an order. Did you?”

Foxy shivered, throwing off the twitches his programmed obedience itched out of him, and shook his head. “Ain’t got me hook wet since Mason and his crew came knocking.”

“Chica?” Freddy put a stabilizing hand on her arm before dropping the magic words: “Tell me the truth, that’s an order.”

Chica’s spasms were much more violent, but she came out of it, like Foxy, shaking her head.

“And you’re just going to have to take my word for it,” concluded Freddy, still holding Chica while she cleared her error log and regained her balance. “But for what that’s worth, I give you my word it wasn’t me. All right?”

Bonnie stared at him, his ears twitching up and down with indecision before finally going flat. “Look, I don’t care that you did it,” he said in what he probably thought was a placating tone while Freddy groaned and clapped his hands to his muzzle. “I just want to know how! How’d you get in and out? How’d you even get all the way there and back? You’re always here!”

“Yes,” said Freddy, spreading his arms wide open. “I’m always here, Bonnie! It wasn’t me, I was here!”

“Then you sent Foxy! He’s never around!”

“I just told ye,” Foxy began mildly.

“Then you lied!” Bonnie burst out. “You lie all the goddamn time! It was you! Just admit it! I’m not mad, I just want to know how the hell you did it!”

Foxy ‘thumbed’ his hook in Freddy’s direction. “Did ye not hear him order me to tell the truth?”

Mere facts weren’t about to interfere with Bon’s logic. “He must have ordered you to lie earlier, in case someone asked.”

Foxy couldn’t help it; he laughed. “Yer giving me too much credit and him not enough, mate. If’n he told me to lie under orders to tell the truth, me neural net would’ve fried. Programming and paradox don’t mix.”

Bonnie’s hot, stubborn glare held for a second or two before dying to puzzled coals. “I don’t…” His ears trembled and folded slowly back. His stiff shoulders fell. “It wasn’t you?” he said, first as a question and then with broken resignation. “It wasn’t you.”

Silence, except for the draw and wheeze of their fans and the low whine of the camera as it adjusted its focus. Foxy tried to wait it out, but curiosity got the better of him. Ignoring Freddy’s
A censuring stare, he attracted Bonnie’s attention with a friendly shoulder-punch and said, “Don’t play coy, man, tell us how the bloke died!”

“What’s it matter?” Bonnie dropped onto the stage, slumped over his knees, and stared glumly at the ground as the camera moved to put him in a sympathetic spotlight. “I guess his wife really killed him. And I’m an asshole. Sorry, guys.”

Freddy dispensed forgiveness with an impatient wave. “You must have had a good reason to be this sure it was one of us. I want to hear it.”

Bonnie shook his head, but it was a little too late for that and after a bit more stalling, he gave up. “You got to hear Ana tell it to get the full effect, but according to her, this guy went home and gave his wife a slap, at which point the wife hulks out. Tipped the fridge over, stabbed him with spoons, you name it. She beats this man—this big man,” Bonnie stressed, “with everything she can get her hands on, up to and actually including the kitchen sink, but there’s not a drop on her. She died from a nice, clean heart attack in the next room.”

“The kind what comes from killing yer husband?” Foxy suggested.

Bonny glared at him. “Or the kind that comes from seeing something inhuman kill him in front of you. Ana heard there was some damage done to the wall when she fell into it. Well, I’ve seen a lot of humans stumble or even run into walls, but the only time the wall ever took damage was when the human got thrown.”

Chica hesitantly raised her hand. “Ana heard?” she echoed. “So…did she hear it from her boss’s cousin’s hairdresser’s boyfriend or from an actual reliable source?”

Bonnie rolled his eyes, nodding. “Sure, okay, there’s a few degrees of separation, but Ana seemed to think it was the real deal. She also said the cops pretty much consider it a closed case, but you know how it is.” Bonnie glared up at the camera. “The cops in this town close a lot of cases, but they don’t solve a lot of murders.”

The camera did not react, but Foxy couldn’t help imagining a certain smug shine in that dark glass eye.

“I mean, if the guy had just been stabbed or shot or hit with a frying pan, that would be one thing, but this guy was destroyed. Everything that could possibly be considered a weapon was used and I wasn’t kidding about that sink. Ana says the counter was broken apart by this guy’s head being driven through it.”

“Coo,” said Foxy, impressed in spite of himself.

“Coo is the word for it, all right. So yeah, I have trouble seeing how any human could be capable of something like that, but it occurred to me that I could do it pretty goddamn easy.”

“But would you?” Chica asked doubtfully.

“You’re goddamn right I would! If you knew half the shit this asshole has been saying—”

“No, I mean, would you kill him with a sink? Or a refrigerator. Or a spoon. I mean, I’ve seen you throw people around before, but your usual killing move is to crush the ribcage or break the spine.”

“Oh for—That’s not the point, Chica!”

“I think it is the point,” she said. “Listen, if it were me, I would have broken his neck. Or
decapitated him. I don’t have much feeling in my hands anymore. It’s hard to break a neck without tearing the whole head off,” she said in an apologetic aside. “And Foxy would have used his sword or his hook.”

Foxy obligingly made a gutting motion.

“Freddy goes for the face,” Bonnie argued.

“Only once,” said Chica.

“Once is all it takes,” Freddy remarked, and demonstrated after a fashion by slamming his empty hands together. “I don’t need murder weapons. I am one. Chica’s right. The sheer amount of overkill here more or less proves it was a human.”

Bonnie shook his head in frustration. “You’re right and I know you’re right, but I can’t stop thinking whoever did this was way stronger than a human.”

“Whoever did this didn’t have to be strong, Bonnie. Just angry. And we can’t get that angry,” Freddy went on calmly. “We’d go black well before we did half the damage you’ve described, and once we did that, there wouldn’t be any doubt who’d have done it, because we wouldn’t have just beaten the man, we’d have bitten him.”

Bonnie’s ears went up fast and drooped down slow. “Yeah,” he said, looking at the floor with a frown. “Yeah, I guess we would.”

“Feel better?” Chica asked, ready as always to be sympathetic.

Bonnie raised his head and looked at her. “Better?” He blinked, uttered a short laugh, and sat all the way up straight. “Chica, you don’t seriously think I was pissed because I thought one of you killed that guy? You know, the guy that called Ana a bastard and a whore and got her sent home from work and has been trying to get her fired? That guy?”

“Um…when you put it that way…”

“Yeah.” Bonnie laughed again, even as his eyes narrowed (pupils growing big and black) and his ears lay down flat. “Yeah, but no. I was pissed because you went without me. The part where he was dead and you killed him by bashing his lying face in? Yeah, I was fine with that.”

“Bonnie, you don’t mean that.”

“Oh.” Bonnie’s eyes opened up a little blacker. “Oh wow. Chica, I love you, but do not fucking tell me what I mean.”

Chica nodded, fingertips tapping, but didn’t back down. “I’m sorry, I should have found another way to say that, but please don’t. We don’t always have a choice and when we do…” Chica’s voice faltered. She looked at Freddy, who folded his arms and gazed unapologetically back at her. “…we don’t always make the right one,” she finished, quietly but with conviction. “I know it’s easy to say, oh, that he was a bad person, but that’s not all they are. That’s never all they are.”

Bonnie didn’t argue. He just looked at her—a hard, flat stare with eyes that were too narrow and pupils that were far too big—and whatever he was thinking, it sure didn’t look to be an internal monologue on the sanctity of human life.

Chica turned to Foxy, as if for help. It was hard not to laugh at her. Oh, he understood what she was saying and she was probably right, not that Foxy concerned himself overmuch with what this
one or that one deserved. He could remember killing plenty of people who by no means ‘deserved’
to go out on the point of a hook and he had no doubt there were more he couldn’t remember. Foxy
had never seen a scrap of evidence to support the existence of a Great Accountant keeping the book
of each person’s life balanced, but if there were, the four of them were already deep in the red.
Another killing more or less made no difference. Chica might like to say otherwise, but facts were
facts and the fact was, they’d been made to kill. Programmed with ways and means, not to mention
rules. It was a game. Games were meant to be played for fun, so why not enjoy it when you could?

He said none of this, but Chica saw it in him all the same. “They’re not all bad people,” she
insisted, as much to him as to Bonnie. “They’re just people who do bad things…and good things,
things we never see. They have flaws, but they also have families who love them. They made a
mark on the world and they will leave a hole. Bonnie.” Chica put a hand on his shoulder and again
when he shrugged it off. “Taking a life should never be easy,” she said softly. “It should never feel
good. I’m sure Ana would tell you the same thing.”

Chica might as well have been reciting her favorite cupcake recipes for all the impression her
words were making, but at that last bit, Bonnie’s ears hit the back of his head. “Ha,” he said with
toxic humor. “You know what? You’re probably right. Hell, she sat there and told me all the ways
he’s been harassing her and how him being dead didn’t suddenly make him a saint, and in the very
next breath, she started making excuses for him.”

“Oh Bonnie.” Understanding flooded Chica’s eyes. “Is that what’s really bothering you?”

“You’re goddamn right it bothers me! Sorry,” Bonnie snapped at Freddy before he could be told to
lower his voice. “I’m sorry, but he did everything he could to ruin her life and she’s sitting there
telling me she can see his point. And you want me to be sorry he’s dead? I’m not! I’m glad! I am
savagely fucking thrilled! The only thing I’m sorry about is I wasn’t there to see it!”

A touch of feedback came through Bon’s speaker on the last words. He didn’t seem to hear it, but
Foxy sure did.

So did Freddy. He stepped forward, shielding Chica with his own broad body, and said, “That’s
enough. You need to calm down.”

“I am calm!” Bonnie snarled, but shut his eyes and when he opened them again, the lenses had
contracted to their normal size. “Okay, I’m not calm, but you didn’t hear her. He treated her like
garbage and she felt sorry for him!”

Freddy acknowledged this with a grumble, but said, “I don’t think we’re qualified to judge others
for how they cope with death.”

Chica edged out from behind him to add, “There’s such enormous social pressure to show
sympathy for any kind of loss that we can hardly blame Ana for expressing it. I suspect her true
feelings are…complicated. But the fact that Ana can forgive those who mistreat her is a good
thing.”

“She didn’t forgive him,” Bonnie said. “She agreed with him. You see the difference?”

“Aye. Difference being, she were drunk,” Foxy said bluntly. “Ye ain’t been around enough
drunken ijits or ye’d know a spell o’ self-loathing is just part o’ the process, somewhere betwixt
dancing on tables and puking on yer shoes.”

Bonnie let out a sour sort of laugh. “You got that part right. But she believed it. Maybe the drinking
made her see it or maybe it just helped her say it, but she already believed it. She had a whole list
of reasons why this guy was right to hate her, and if you ask me, she’s been carrying that list around for a while.” He glanced at Freddy, then turned all the way around to face him. “If it wasn’t you, it should have been. It should have been me. It should have been someone who cared about her enough to stop the shit-talk before it got to the point where she believed it.”

Freddy frowned, but he didn’t argue.

“Well, it’s stopped now,” Foxy observed. “Don’t do her any good to dwell on it and it sure don’t do ye any better.”

“Stopped, huh? You haven’t seen her postcard collection, have you?” Bonnie stomped over to the stage and pulled Ana’s duffel bag to him. After rummaging through its compartments for a few seconds, he came up with a fan of colorful cards and threw them at Foxy.

He caught one and let the rest flutter to the stage floor at his feet. Canyon shot on the facing side, nothing special; on the letter side was written some kind of code, Amos 2:7, appended by the charming sentiment, WHORE’S BURN IN HELL.

“That is not the proper use of an apostrophe,” Chica said, quickly adding, “Which is so not the point right now. Sorry.”

“Got to give the dead man his due,” Foxy remarked. “He said what he said to her face. Not like this cowardly carbuncle.”

“Carbuncles,” said Bonnie, stresses the S.

Foxy looked at him, picked up another postcard. Different picture, different code…different handwriting. Hmm. Another postcard, another author.

And heaven help him, Foxy had to laugh. He could see three…five…at least six different sets of handwriting here, so…what? Were they in a club? Holding meetings? And this was the best idea they came up with for how to bully the girl? “Coo, I feel sorry for the first bloke she catches slipping one o’ these under her windshield wiper,” he said with a grin. “She’ll pound her boot so far up’n his arse, he’ll spit shoelaces.”

“Yeah and until then, he’ll go on writing them. And so will everyone else who’s in on it!”

“Aye, well…what ye going to do?” Foxy gave his handful of postcards a toss and let them flutter down like the insignificant scraps of paper that they were. “This town be full of ignorant arse-heads. Can’t kill ‘em all.”

Bonnie scowled. “Why not?”

“Because I said so,” said Freddy, folding his arms.

“Because it’s wrong,” Chica added.

“Because ye don’t know who they are,” said Foxy reasonably. “What are ye going to do? Go door to door? Kill everyone just to get the few what’s writing nasty notes?”

“I don’t think I have a problem with that.”

“Cold-blooded bunny that ye are,” Foxy said scornfully.

“Maybe I am,” said Bonnie and the words came in clear, untouched by static. The camera on the
stage wall hummed, zooming in close, but Bonnie’s eyes stayed green. He wasn’t going black, not even on the edge of it. He was killing mad, but he was in his own mind. “Maybe it only took fifty fucking years for me to figure out that the only people that matter are the ones that matter to you. And maybe the next time she drops a name when somebody calls her a whore, I’ll take a goddamn walk myself, with or without your permission. I’ve killed better people for worse reasons.”

It was then, with this cheerful thought still hanging in the air, that the West Hall door scraped open. There stood Ana, weaving on her feet and holding onto the door with both hands, wearing naught but a t-shirt with a skull on the chest, a pair of panties riding high on the hip, and the stamp of her father’s features all over her face. Foxy looked sharply at Freddy, pneumatics wheezing and joints creaking as muscles he didn’t have tensed, waiting for the thunderbolt of delayed recognition…

But, “Ana, for heaven’s sake, put some clothes on,” was all Freddy said, already picking up postcards.

Bonnie raked a hand over the top of his head a few times as if physically pushing the anger back under his skin, and when it was all hid away again, he turned around, smiling, and said, “Go back to bed, baby. You’ve got work in the morning.”

Ana shook her tousled head. “There’s a monster in my room,” she whispered, her voice scarcely audible, breathy as a child’s.

Freddy blinked and turned all the way around to face her. “What? What monster?”

The question seemed a bit too complicated for Ana’s fuzzy sensors to follow. She stumbled further into the room, pointing vaguely at the gift shop. “There’s a monster in my closet. Look. It’s still there.”

Bonnie caught her before she could fall, holding her rather stiff-like at arm’s end while she gripped his wrists and swayed on her pegs. “You were dreaming, baby. You’re walking in your sleep.”

Ana turned her wide, wounded eyes up at him. “No, I’m not. I’m awake! The monster woke me up.”

“Okay. What was it doing?” Bonnie asked.

“It tucked me in.”

Bonnie nodded, managing a wan sort of smile for her that he carried mostly in his ears. “That was me, baby girl. You’re dreaming.”

Ana shook her head, still doll-eyed and shivering. “No, I’m not! The monster came when you went away. It was waiting. In the closet.” She pointed again at the gift shop, wailing, “Don’t you see it?”

Foxy looked, but all he could see in the cleaned-out shop was blobs of white plaster where she’d patched holes in the walls, seeming to float in the darkness. “Ye ain’t going to squeeze reason out o’ her, mate,” he said. “She’s three sheets and sailing.”

“Take her back to her room,” said Freddy. “And make sure she stays there.”

“Someone should sit with her,” Bonnie said, holding Ana steady as she hung off his arm. “But it probably shouldn’t be me. Not yet.”

Freddy looked him over, then dropped the postcards in Ana’s open duffel bag and went to collect
her. Bonnie gave her up without a fight and Freddy had only to pull Ana’s arm around his neck and
tuck a hand under her legs and she just fell up and into his arms. He lifted her with a grumble,
wanting everyone to know he had other things to do with his night, but set her gently against his
shoulder and held her close as a promise until her little struggles waned. “Hush now. Be calm. I
have you.”

“Aye, ye have her, and ye might want to have a chum bucket handy if ye mean to keep a hold of
her,” Foxy remarked. “She looks a mite green around the gills yet.”

“We’ll be all right,” Freddy said and gave Bonnie a frowning, sidelong stare, silently asking Will
you?

At Chica’s first step toward him, Bonnie said, “Not in the mood,” but she toddled over anyway and
sat herself beside him, legs sticking stiffly out in an ungainly sprawl.

“We don’t have to talk,” she said as Bonnie’s ears flattened. “I just don’t think you should be alone
right now.”

Bonnie shook his head, fingers twitching moodily over the strings of his guitar, but he didn’t tell
her to push on.

A little quiet fell, filling up the space without settling. Neither of them looked at him, but Foxy felt
their awareness of him anyway—the wrench in their gears, the anchor under their oars.

“Reckon I’ll take a walk,” Foxy announced, strolling toward the South Hall. “Someone ought to
keep a weather eye out while Fred’s otherwise occupied. Lock up when I go, but leave an ear open
for me, aye?”

Chica shot him a grateful glance as Bonnie shrugged a careless sort of agreement, and even before
he had the playground door shut behind him, he could hear Chica’s soft voice. Bonnie wasn’t
talking yet, but he would. Chica was damned good at drawing out what ailed a man, no matter how
many layers of sulk he’d buried it under.

Good on her. Good on both of ‘em.

He’d rather be alone anyway.

Foxy crossed the playground under a moonless sky, picked his way over the fallen fence, and
headed out across the parking lot. There were stars enough to see by, at least until he came to the
sparse treeline. There, he switched his eyes on and dropped his patch, dimming the light he made
as he walked the uneven trail down to the bottom of the bluff and around to the little heap of red
earth and stone that marked the place where Mangle lay.

He sat.

The night breathed around him, full of life. And death, aye, that too. Stones stood where they had
stood uncounted ages. Plants grew, pushing their way screaming out of the hard, hostile soil.
Insects called. Animals fed, fought and fucked. The wind blew and up above the covering clouds,
the universe spun, and none of it took any notice of him. He was a flea on the skin of the world,
unseen, unfelt.

Foxy scratched at his chest. The sound was harsh and dull, both at once, different from all the
shrilling and scraping and chatter of the desert. Different from all the natural sounds.

“Ye awake?” he asked.
A little static and mechanical groaning muttered from under the ground.

“Hello, me pretty girl. Been a time since I visited, eh? Ye miss me?”

No answer.

Foxy sang awhile. She made some noise now and then; he chose to believe she was trying to sing along. At the sky’s first lightening, he picked himself up and went back to the restaurant. And when he knocked, he had no doubt Freddy would let him in, once more on patrol. Chica would be in the arcade, beating her own high score at solitaire table tennis. Bonnie would be in the Party Room, tucked up behind the curtain with his sleeping girl and holding her hand to keep monsters at bay. Things had a way of sorting themselves out when he wasn’t there. Always had.

At the bottom of the bluff, the night breathed on without him just the same as when he’d been there. For a while.

Static sounded in rhythmic pulses. Foxy would have recognized *The Ballad of the Flying Fox*, if he had been there to hear it. Anyone else would have thought it was an insect, if they’d noticed it at all. It was not a loud sound, buried as it was in this grave.

This shallow grave.

One of the stones on the small, loosely-packed heap that both marked and weighted the place where Mangle lay suddenly moved, disturbed by some imperceptible vibration. A smaller one fell, tap-tap-rattling away to the ground.

A moment of stillness, but not silence. Metal scraped on wood; something heavy turned and scratched. Then the whole pile shifted as the ground heaved, straining up a quarter of an inch at a time until it appeared to reach its limit. It trembled there as static spat and snarled, and then, with a great muffled crack, the cairn fell apart. The stones settled, somewhat lower than before.

Mangle sang softly to herself for a few minutes, then slipped again into the black. Her body lashed mindlessly at its confinement—metal claws tearing at the boards, metal jaws devouring old wood and nails and sand and stone—until, as suddenly as the rage overtook her, it was gone.

Static crackled, hummed, then managed a soft, distorted word: “Foxy?”

The only answer was the chirping of a cricket. It was answer enough.

“I’m bleeding,” said Mangle. Her hand scratched up the side of the crate and into the space between two broken boards. She pried a small stone free of the packed earth, rolled it questingly between her finger-bones, then forced it into her empty left socket. “Bleeding out my eyes,” she whispered, feeling at the fit. “Out…both…my eyes.”

Her head lowered and came to rest, pillowed on the battered parrot attached to her shoulder. It twitched under her weight, trying to flap wings it no longer had, but the grinding of its little gears no longer disturbed Mangle. Her shattered mind slipped out of the darkness of her earthly prison, but not as deep as the black. She drifted in thoughts like static, interrupted occasionally by half-formed ghosts of memory: the sound of music and laughter, the smell of pizza, the hot little thrill in her chest when he kissed her for the first time…the taste of blood in her mouth when he kissed her for the last time.

Foxanne moaned. Mangle bit. Her teeth closed on a jutting bit of board and pulled it free. A little shower of sand and pebbles fell over her as she chewed it to splinters, and then there was light, thin as a golden thread draped across her face, glinting on the points of her teeth. She didn’t see it (her
right eye’s lens was cracked and blind; her other eye was stone), but perhaps she had one working
temperature sensor left that felt it, because when the blood-dream faded, she dreamed next of the
warmth of the sun on her skin. Good dreams, as they so rarely were. She clung to them and for so
long as the sun shone, Mangle was quiet and Foxanne was at peace.
Ana dreamed of many things that night: the heat and pissy stink of the closet, her mother’s twisted triumphant face receding in dark water, her bloody fingers closing around a cheap painted doubloon with Foxy’s smiling/snarling face stamped on the side. At the end, there was only her, running room to room in this nightmare house, only to look up and see the moon had numbers and she was trapped inside a giant grandfather’s clock. The pendulum swung, sharp as Poe’s blade, counting out all the time she had left. She looked back and saw him lurching out of the shadows, Springtrap Bonnie, rat-eaten ears swaying ridiculously with each lumbering stride. The light from the moon-face of the clock showed her all his peeling layers, from molding gold satin to rusted metal to tattered purple cotton to dried yellowed bone.

There was nowhere left to run. She could only stand and watch him come, step by shuddering step. She could hear the creaking of his joints, the laboring wheeze of his cooling system, the…the violins of Coldplay’s *Viva la Vida*?

No amount of terror could wake her, but confusion did it easily, pulling her slowly up through tarry inertia and depositing her none-too-gently in her own body. She could still hear the footsteps, only now she knew them for the muffled throb inside her own skull. She could still see the light, because the security camera was on and shining ten thousand microbeams of death through the fibers of the curtain. And she could still hear Coldplay, which meant either that she’d died and gone to the Hell of Overplayed Pop Songs or that her phone’s alarm had gone off. She hadn’t reset it to accommodate her new work hours, so if that was case, it was five a.m. in the freaking m.

The temptation to shut off the alarm and go back to sleep was strong, but she knew she couldn’t. She didn’t have to go to work for another four hours, but it might take that long to hike back up Coldslip to get her truck and she’d need a shower when she got there, so she’d better get her ass in gear and the first step of that was to shut off the fucking alarm.

Ana let her arm drop off the bed so she could feel around the floor for her phone. When that failed to turn up anything, she managed to raise her head and look around. There was plenty of light coming through the curtain and even though it stained everything that deep purple hue, it was enough to see every inch of the party stage and her day pack was not there. Yet her phone was, clearly, and since she couldn’t see the light of its screen glowing anywhere, it was probably on the other side of the curtain somewhere and she’d better go get it, because the volume was going to dial up every thirty seconds until she shut the damn alarm off.

Pushing back the sheet that was her only covering in the sweltering Mammon summer, Ana dragged herself into a sitting position and took stock of herself. She couldn’t remember much of last night after turning on the movie, but she was pretty sure this was not the t-shirt she’d been wearing. Also, she had been wearing pants.

After further investigation, she saw yesterday’s clothes draped over the open door of the giant prop wardrobe that disguised the door to the Parts Room on the party stage. That meant she’d either gotten so blackout drunk that she’d changed half her clothes before passing out and falling across the stage into bed or that one of the animatronics had tucked her in. She tried to remember if it had been Bonnie or Chica (since Freddy would have folded her clothes and she couldn’t see Foxy doing it at all), but the only face that swam in out of the blur was the Puppet’s and she knew that was just
one of the nightmares.

Ana peeled out of her sweaty tee and shuffled over to the dresser. She put on the first things her fingers touched, then made her way to the stage steps and swept the curtain back, her eyes shut against the blinding white of the camera’s light. She felt her way down, holding her head on with one hand, and when she reached the floor, she managed to squeeze her eyelids apart and look for her phone.

It wasn’t hard to find. It was in Freddy’s right hand.

They looked at each other for a little while, but since Ana really did not want to reach max volume on those fucking violins, it was a very little while. She pushed herself forward, holding his gaze just like she didn’t care that her eyes were probably bloodshot as hell. He had no business giving her the DARE-Bear Stare anyway. She was a grown-ass woman with the right to get drunk whenever she wanted. It wasn’t like she’d really blacked out, she’d just fallen asleep (probably), and she hadn’t trashed the place (hopefully) or done anything stupid like that (oh please, God, let her have been a quiet, well-behaved drunk for the first time in her life).

The camera whined with the whine of a thousand hangovers as Ana journeyed across the Party Room. She half-expected Freddy to play the won’t-let-go game with her phone when she finally reached him, but he handed it over just as soon as she was within reach. And then he made one of those magician’s flourishes and up between his first and second finger popped a folded square of paper.

The camera looked at it. So did Ana. She looked up at Freddy. The DARE-Bear Stare never wavered.

Pocketing her phone, Ana took the paper and laboriously unfolded it, clenching her jaws to suppress a wince at the ungodly flapping noise it made. She put her back to the camera so that its light fell on the paper and not into her eyes and read.

*Good Morning, Ana* (it began),

_I have written this note because I am aware that you will be feeling delicate this morning and I am equally aware that my voice, even at its lowest setting, sounds like two sousaphones trying to fight their way out of a kettle drum. I do not wish to make what is bound to be a difficult morning any more unpleasant than it has to be. That does not mean we are not going to talk about last night, and if you roll your eyes at that, I will be happy to get into it with you, in detail, out loud, right now._

Ana, who had indeed been about to roll them, blinked the impulse away and glanced up at Freddy.

His eyes narrowed. That was all.

_For now, I am content to tell you, in writing, that I expect to see you tonight and you had best come prepared to do a lot of listening. I want to see you nod now._

Great. An intervention. She was going to spend her entire weekend listening to Freddy freaking Fazbear tell her all the ways her drinking was affecting his life.

Freddy’s huge hand moved into view and tapped at the last line.

Ana closed her eyes so rolling them couldn’t get her into trouble, opened them and nodded once.

Freddy nodded back at her and folded his arms, gesturing at her with a flick of one hand to keep reading.
As practice for all the agreeing you’re going to do later tonight, I want you to drink at least one bottle of water before you leave. You may have coffee afterwards if you want it, and I’d like to see you eat something, but I won’t insist upon it if you don’t think you can. Nod.

Ana shrugged and nodded. She’d have done that much anyway, but go ahead and let the bear think he was bossing her around. Food was a bit dicier, but she could remember Bonnie giving her a couple Easy Bake ginger cookies last night and if there were any left, she might manage to choke one down. That would help soak up some of this sour stomach and the sugar would fuel the hike up the mountain. She couldn’t remember if she had anything to eat at the house or not, but if all else failed, she’d stop on the way to the dealership site and get something greasy from the gas station’s disgusting deli counter while she was picking up the coconut water and Monster Rehabs that was her usual hangover cure.

‘I have a usual hangover cure,’ Ana thought. ‘I deserve a Fazbear Intervention.’

It was supposed to be a joke. It didn’t feel like one.

Assuming you haven’t rolled your eyes, that’s all I’m going to say for now. I’ll say the rest of it when I see you tonight. Be safe on the road, especially when you are walking.

He’d signed it, not with the baloony cursive signature that was on all the posters he’d allegedly ‘signed’, but with a simple F accompanied by a stamp of his smiling face from the inkpad in the office.

Ana refolded the paper and put it in her pocket with her phone. Freddy opened the door for her and out she went to greet this godforsaken day.

The security camera followed her into the hall and went ahead of her into the dining room, lighting up the show stage where Bonnie sat playing his guitar. Her day pack was next to him. He picked it up before she even asked and showed her the tablet inside before zipping it up—she could feel the sound inside her goddamn sinuses—and holding it out. She went to get it and even though the camera was aimed right the hell at him and she had a hell of a long walk on a hot desert road ahead of her, she sat down beside him. Closing her eyes against the camera’s painful stare, she let the weight of the world push her into Bonnie until her aching head came to rest on his shoulder.

“Sorry about last night,” she whispered, because she had to say it. That was the one thing that could not wait.

He nodded, servos whining like mosquitoes in her skull, and did his best to match her whisper, not very successfully. “You okay?”

“Hangover. I deserve it. I’ll live. But listen…listen…” Intensely aware of Freddy looming just off to one side, Ana carefully said, “I’m sorry for what I did…but I’m not sorry I came. You were just what I needed. Thanks for being here.”

“I kind of have to be here. I can’t leave.” His arm twitched and eased around her. “But for once, I’m glad I was. You coming back tonight?”

She nodded, managing a dry smile. “I have an appointment for Freddy to yell at me.”

Freddy vented his cooling system.

“I can’t stay, but I’ll be back this weekend and we can catch a movie then,” she concluded and gave her pack, and the tablet within it, a pat. “Hopefully a better movie. How did It Follows end?”
“As far as I know, it’s still following.”

“Yeah, I figured. Sorry I fell asleep on you.”

“Hey, don’t be sorry. If I could have, I would have too.”

Her hangover faded enough to allow a small, soundless laugh. “I guess I don’t have to ask what you thought of it.”

Bonnie shrugged. “I’m not cerebral enough, I guess. What’d you think of it?”

“I only saw the first bit, so maybe I’m missing something…but that was a physical entity, right? Like, that was the whole deal, that it doesn’t walk through walls or teleport, it has to physically come after you?”

“Right, but it’s a demon, so I don’t think it can be killed.”

“Yeah, okay, but you don’t have to kill it,” said Ana. “Just stop it.”

“Wasn’t that the point? That even if you have sex with someone else, it’ll eventually get them and come back for you?” Bonnie must have caught a reaction from Freddy, because he glanced over and added, “Yeah, that was literally the movie. And it won awards.” To Ana, he asked, “How do you stop something that can’t die? Just lock it in the basement?”

Freddy grunted sharply.

“No,” said Ana. “That’s how you get sequels, Bon. Some doped-up dumbass always opens the door. So what you do is, you dig a hole, put an open oil drum at the bottom, cover it over with a towel or some shit, then stand there and be bait until the stupid thing walks over the top of it and falls in. You drop the lid on the oil drum, clamp it down, drill a few holes in the lid, and fill the thing with concrete. That shit will set up even underwater and it only gets stronger with age. At this point, you can bury it or you can drop it in a lake or whatever you want to do with it, and as long as no one sees you and gets curious about what you’re dumping, odds are good that thing is going to stay lost.”

“But the demon isn’t going to die.”

“It isn’t going to get out, either. By the time the barrel rusts out, that concrete will be set so hard, Superman with a jackhammer couldn’t break it apart. And even if he could, everyone alive when that demon was last moseying around will be dead. It’s got nobody to follow. It can sit down there until the end of time thinking about all the teenagers having sweaty teenaged sex without him. Problem fucking solved.”

The camera made a small noise, adjusting its focus.

Bonnie looked at it, then looked at Ana and said, “What if it doesn’t fit in an oil drum?”

Freddy grunted again, his most severe knock-it-off grunt.

“Everybody fits in an oil drum,” said Ana, climbing to her feet and dragging her pack onto her shoulder. “I could fit two people in an oil drum. Hell, I could fit you in an oil drum, if I’ve got the time and a few power tools handy.”

“Nice example,” said Bonnie with a crooked smile.
“Sorry. But I bet I could. I got to get walking,” she said as the camera focused in on her some more. “See you tonight.”

“Yeah. See you.”

Freddy said nothing. She thought she felt the DARE-Bear Stare burning on her back as she went, but when she peeked back through the tray return window as she crossed the kitchen, she saw him staring up at the camera instead.

∗ ∗ ∗

Foxy passed the day in his cabin, but he started getting that restless itch around the start of the five o’clock set, so he took himself a walk. First to the arcade, where he expertly interrogated Chica on the subject of Ana while pretending to get his plastic tail handed to him in a game of skee-ball. Once he learned that Freddy had ordered, ha, Ana to come back and meekly receive a stern talking-to, Foxy wriggled out of a rematch and escaped to the dining room. There, he found Bonnie practicing his playing with his ears turned in opposite directions so he could listen to the front doors and the loading dock at the same time.

Foxy sat on the other end of the stage under the camera and made himself comfortable making Bonnie uncomfortable.

An hour passed.

Freddy’s regular patrols grew more and more irregular until he walked into the gym and didn’t come out again. Chica peeked in at him a few times, then went to the kitchen and over-decorated the leftover sweets in the cooler. Bonnie played his guitar and ignored Foxy.

Another hour passed.

Damn near at the strike of seven, if there were a striking clock anywhere in this building, Freddy slammed out of the gym and headed for the loading dock.

“Must mean she’s here,” Foxy remarked, watching him go.

Bonnie nodded, still playing, making no move to get up. Giving them privacy, like the sympathetic and respectful gentleman that he was. No bloody wonder he hadn’t got the girl.

Well, damned if Foxy would sit out here and miss the show. He went to the kitchen, found a leaning spot in the doorway and waited.

Bang went the loading dock door in the store room, and then came Freddy’s voice, speaking calmly and too politely, the way he did when he was in a right fine fume: “Hello. It’s good of you to finally join us.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know I’m late,” Ana said in a kind of sighing annoyance, which was not the way to respond to Freddy when he had his ears at that angle. “I had to make a trip to a real town to get your phone and I was not expecting it to take this long. The jackwit at the Walmart wanted everything but a pint of blood and my firstborn child before he’d give it to me. Here. I put my contact info in it already and got you a case and a screen protector. And a nib, which everyone else in the world calls a stylus, by the way. Manual’s in the box. If you need any help with the settings or whatever, let me know.”
Freddy grunted, not yet appeased, but acknowledging that it had been a good start. “Let me carry that.”

“I got it,” said Ana, still sounding testy. In a few moments, she appeared, carrying a largish cardboard box which she set with a heavy thump on the first patch of counter wide enough to hold it. She unhitched her pack and let it drop, nudging it out of the narrow aisle between the prep area and the oven. Catching Chica’s attention, she gestured to the box as she massaged her shoulder, saying, “Your books. I don’t know what you’re into, so I just tried to get a variety. Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” Chica peeked into the top of the box as she lifted it. “Wow, you got a lot! Did…Did you get your Chinese food?”

Ana shook her head, helping herself to a bottle of water from the cooler. “There was a line and I was tired. I’ll scrape something up when I get home. Okay, bear.” She popped the lid off her drink, had a swig, and propped herself up against the freezer door. “Let me have it.”

Freddy had apparently gotten lost in his new toy on the way to the kitchen, but now he appeared in the store room doorway, snapping his wrist compartment shut and frowning. “Are you sure that’s how you want to start?”

“I don’t care how you start. Let’s just get it over with so I can go. It’s garbage day tomorrow and I still need to fill up the trailer.”

Fred’s ears moved back to that angle. “Ana, I want you to listen to me, not just nod along to whatever I say until I stop talking.”

“How’s it feel to want?” Ana asked blithely.

Freddy opened his mouth, then looked at Chica.

Chica gathered up her box of books and quietly toddled out.

Freddy looked at Foxy.

Foxy stayed where he was.

“Bear, I have had a long day at work, sweating out a hangover in the hot-ass Mammon sun, and I am tired,” said Ana. “I’m sorry if I’m not taking my come-uppance with the proper attitude of humility and contrition, but let’s be real here, that’s not going to happen, so if that’s how you thought this was going to end, you are shit out of luck. Say what you’re going to say and let’s get on with it.”

“I don’t appreciate the attitude, Ana.”

“Oh, you think this is the attitude? Well, now you got to the count of three to start the lecture or I’m leaving without one.”

“I am not going to talk to you until you can give me a more constructive—”

“One.”

Freddy stared at her while Foxy rubbed the grin off his muzzle before anyone saw it.

“Two,” said Ana.

“Do you want to talk about this like an adult?” asked Freddy with deceptive calm. “Or do you want
“Three,” said Ana. And with that, she hopped down from the counter and headed for the store room. “Good talk, bear. See you later.”

Freddy came around the other side of the oven and got to the doorway ahead of her, blocking it with the bulk of his body.

“And you think I’m the one acting like a child,” scoffed Ana.

“You are.”

“Why? Because I won’t play your stupid game? I told you, get mad. You want to yell at me? Yell at me. Hell, throw a punch. Whatever you think I deserve, lay it out, big bear, but do it and let me go home. I’m tired, I have a splitting headache, and I still got shit to do!”

“I’m not going to hit you,” he growled. “I’m not going to yell. I’m not angry with you.”

Ana huffed and stepped back so that she could give his ears an exaggerated looking-over. “Yeah, you are. Let it out, bear. It’s not healthy to bottle up your emotions. Right, Chica?” she called loudly.

From the dining room came the sound of a box of books being dropped by an eavesdropping animatronic, then hurriedly picked up again.

“Believe it or not, I am actually aware that I fucked up last night,” said Ana. “You want an apology for that?”

“Ana—”

“You’re owed one,” she interrupted. “Sorry, that sounded like a bitchy rhetorical question, but it wasn’t. I wasn’t kidding about how tired I am and everything I say is coming with a side of salt, but seriously, I am sorry I showed up drunk on your doorstep last night. I didn’t plan to.”

Freddy took a deep breath and vented it, hard. “Ana—”

“So I’m sorry about that, but do not ask me to promise it’ll never happen again. Sober-Me is a clusterfuck of bad judgement at the best of times and we both know it. Drunk-Me makes that bitch look like a paragon of reason.”

Freddy vented his cooling system again and said, “Are you going to let me talk?”

Ana pinked up some, threw a flustered glance at Foxy, and backed off with a go-ahead wave, pacing restlessly around the oven.

“Will you sit down?” Freddy asked, watching her.

“I’m fine, just say it.”

Freddy looked at Foxy. “Do I need to order you out?”

“What, you don’t want an audience?” Ana asked with a short laugh. “Who are you putting on the act for, then?”

The March began to play—long, distorted notes that belied the lack of emotion on Freddy’s face. “This is not an act.”
“Sure it is. You’re acting like you’re not mad—” She flung out both hands, pointing simultaneously at the set of his ears and the center of his chest, reverberating with music. “—when you obviously are. And you’re acting like if you put on a good enough show, you’re going to squeeze more sorry out of me than I already gave you when, frankly, I’d rather you be mad than lie to me.”

“Ana, I’m not mad at you,” Freddy said. “I’m only…disappointed that you—”

Freddy broke off there, distracted by Foxy’s anticipatory wince, and into this short pause, Ana exploded.

“Are you shitting me, bear?!?” she demanded and slammed down her half-gone bottle of water hard enough to send a geyser up to damn near the ceiling. “’I’m not mad, I’m disappointed?’ For real? It’s not enough that I’ve got to stand here and listen to you talk down to me like you give a damn, but at least come up with some original material! If that’s all the effort you’re going to put into this, I am walking on you!”

Freddy’s ears had set at practically the first word and the March began to play faster, but otherwise, he just stood there and took it. However, when Ana attempted to make good on her threat at the end, he put out one arm to block the door. “We’re not done talking,” he said, while she gazed introspectively at the fresh splinters peeling up around the new crater cupping Freddy’s fist. “I’ll let you know when you’re dismissed.”

The spidery sound of Bonnie’s fingers playing on his unplugged strings stopped, but the high-pitched whine of the camera filled the void it left. Shadows leapt and spun crazily as it switched from hall to store room to dining room, trying to find an angle that would allow him to see the scene in the kitchen. Neither Freddy nor Ana paid him the slightest attention.

At last, Ana finished calculating her chances of winning either a stare-down or a fist-fight and backed off. Freddy pulled his fist out of the door’s frame, flexed the fingers a bit (as much to make sure they all still worked as for intimidating purposes, thought Foxy), and lowered his arm. The Toreador March slowed and steadied and finally stopped.

“I am disappointed,” Freddy said and watched as Ana threw out her arms with a scoffing sound and paced around the oven. “But before I tell you why, I want to hear you guess.”

“Oh Ana, how art thou a fuck-up?” Ana intoned sarcastically. “Let me count the ways. One is for your raging alcoholism. Two is for bringing it uninvited into someone else’s house. Three is for getting drunk-slutty with the guy you broke up with.”

Foxy glanced back at Bonnie, waiting to see surprise lift those ears as he realized the girl who’d spent the night crying on his shoulder had actually been looking for more than a movie and a hug. He didn’t see it, and not even Bon was dumb enough to mistake her meaning now, which meant he had actually realized it last night and just hadn’t done anything about it. Long-eared git.

“Four is for making you babysit my drunk ass all night. How many do you want, bear? Five? Five is a nice number. Okay, five is for being able to pretty much guarantee I’m going to do it all again at some point. That do it for you? You hear what you want to hear?”

“No,” said Freddy.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you could come up with a million more things for the list, but that’s all you’re getting from me. Come on, what are you trying to do here?” she demanded, coming back to thrust her defiant little chin up at Freddy (and God, that was David’s own angry gesture, and hadn’t
they all seen it a hundred times? How could Freddy not recognize it?). “I already know I fucked up. The whole reason I went home in the first place was because I knew better than to bring it here.”

“That.” Freddy pointed at her, and as if he’d been using that hand to hold on to his temper, spilled out a few more notes of the Toreador March. “That’s it, right there.”

Ana blinked at him, some of her anger skewing sideways into chagrin. “I said I was sorry! I know I shouldn’t have come here—”

Half a bar of the March blasted out of Freddy, cut off by a blat of static. “I’m disappointed because you didn’t come here,” he said. “Because you should have come here first instead of going home to ‘medicate’.”

Ana huffed a little, dropping her eyes. “Yeah, I should have. I got better booze here. I fucking hate gin.”

“Is this where I’m supposed to get siderailed into talking about how you drink too much?” Freddy asked tersely. “I don’t approve of recreational intoxication, but you’re an adult and despite the phenomenal lapse of judgment that led you to drink that much and then walk here on an unlit road where you know people drive recklessly, I still trust you to know your limits. If you have concerns on that subject and you’d like to talk about them later, we certainly can, but right now, we’re still talking about how you chose to isolate yourself before you started drinking.” Freddy paused, then leaned a little closer and growled, “Although, since you bring it up, why were you drinking something if you didn’t like it?”

“The goal was not to have a good time, bear. The goal was to black out.”

After so many years on restricted speech protocols, Freddy’s silences could say a lot. This one said that was the wrong answer.

“Would you please explain?” Freddy asked, very quietly.

“What do you need clarified?”

“You intended to black out.”

“Yeah.”

“You started drinking with the express purpose of passing out.”

“Yeah.”

“Alone.”

Ana muttered something Foxy’s mics couldn’t make out.

“I don’t care how it feels,” Freddy snapped. “You were alone! Do you have any idea how easily you could have—” He stopped there as the Toreador March started up and this time, he just let it play. He stepped out of the kitchen doorway, tinkling away, and pointed. “Go to your room.”

Ana looked at him for a moment, the very edge of an extremely unwise smile ticcing at the corner of her mouth, before shrugging. “Okay.” She turned toward the counter where she’d left her pack.

“Leave that. I’m not sending you to your room to play around on the internet. I want you—”

“To think about what I’ve done? Jeez, bear, did you get all your disciplinary protocols from Leave
it to Beaver?"

Freddy’s hand flexed. “Not all of them. Go to your room, Ana. Not one more word.”

She looked at her pack, looked at Freddy…and put up her hands in angry surrender. “I’m only doing this because I love you,” she said tightly and stormed out.

“So am I!” he snapped as she pushed past him. He took his hat off, rubbed his brow and muttered, “So am I.”

Bonnie said something softly as Ana passed the stage, but Foxy didn’t turn his ears to catch it. The camera switched off in the store room, but Foxy didn’t look to see where it came on next. He watched Freddy’s eyes—blue and black, black and blue—waiting to see where they’d settle. Freddy vented a few breaths, then put his shoulders back, took off his hat and placed it on the nearest counter, and all the while, the Toreador March played.

“I’m going to take a moment,” Freddy said, briskly unknotting his tie. He folded it over and set it next to his hat. “Chica, would you get the door for me, please?”

Chica came at once and wordlessly opened the freezer.

“I’ll knock when I’m ready to come out,” Freddy said and walked inside.

Chica shut the door and made sure it latched securely.

Seventeen long seconds later, that latch shuddered as a fist hit the other side, making a first in a good number of years: Freddy had gone black.

“Sheesh,” breathed Bonnie, coming up behind him, and for a while, the three of them just listened. The freezer was supposedly soundproofed and maybe it was, against human noise, but it couldn’t silence an animatronic. The metallic screech and roar of a bear in the black wasn’t much out here, but they could all hear it.

“He probably won’t be too long,” Chica said, flinching a little with each suppressed shiver of the door. “But just in case…Bonnie, maybe you should wait in the West Hall.”

Bonnie’s head turned toward her, although his eyes didn’t follow right away. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I’ve been in the black for hours before. I am not going to keep her in her room all night just waiting for Freddy to calm down so he can finish chewing her out.”

“No, if she wants to come out, of course let her out. She’s not a child,” Chica said, giving the freezer a pained glance as Freddy raged. “Just try to make her understand why she shouldn’t leave. They need to come to some kind of healthy conclusion before she goes home.”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe he can ground her,” Bonnie suggested. “Send her to bed without dinner or something.”

“I know, I know,” Chica sighed. “I’ll try to talk to him, but it would help a lot if the first thing he heard from her was an apology or at least an acknowledgment of the danger she put herself in, preferably without more sarcasm.”

“Hey, she knows she did something stupid. Maybe Freddy shouldn’t be rubbing her nose in it and then expecting her to thank him for it!”

“She knows she did something stupid,” Chica agreed, sad-eyed. “Does she know she did something
suicidal? Because if she doesn’t, then that’s bad enough, but if she does and that is still the attitude she has about it, than that’s a lot worse. Either way, she’s not going to want to listen to what he has to say, but she still needs to hear it.”

The freezer door thumped and shuddered.

Foxy shrugged himself off the wall and started walking.

“Where are you going?” Bonnie asked as he brushed by.

“Back to me cabin,” said Foxy. “Ain’t much of a show tonight.”

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry we couldn’t entertain you!”

“Eh, a few more rehearsals, maybe work in a song…try again tomorrow, mate. Ye were just off yer game tonight.”

“Fuck you.”

Foxy waved without looking around and walked on.

Down the twisting hall he went, past the animatronic pig waving from the chipped signpost, and onward to the Cove. He could hear hornpipes already, disharmoniously mingled with the generic electronica coming from the arcade and the instrumental version of the Fazbear theme song playing in the theater. In another half-hour or so, the restaurant would ‘close’ and the cheerful music piped through the hidden speakers would shut off. Even better, the few lights Ana hadn’t taken down when she’d torn off the roof would go dark. Foxy had nothing against light, had even missed it some after all those years shut up without it, but he’d grown used to the dark and had a feeling it had maybe grown used to him, too.

In his cabin, dark and quiet (well, dark anyway; wooden walls couldn’t do much to dampen the sound of those shanties blasting through the auditorium speakers, let alone the cackling of those bloody crows), Foxy settled himself on his narrow bunk and went back to his usual evening routine of nothing.

It was difficult to shake off his thoughts, even more difficult to sort out exactly what those thoughts actually were. Worried about Freddy, he supposed. The last time he’d seen the bear go black had been…had been…well, hell, it had been the night that girl had broke in and gone after old Bon with the bat. Foxy hadn’t seen that; Fred had come to get him as soon as she and her boyfriend had busted through the loading dock, but they hadn’t wasted any time exploring or trophy hunting. No, they went straight for the kill. In the short time it had taken Foxy to run down the hall, it was already done. Seeing Bon on his back onstage, still trying to tell jokes while the girl gleefully went at him, laughing as she swung and swung and swung…it was the first time in a long time Foxy had felt anger connected with Bon that hadn’t been directed at him, but he hadn’t even properly gotten his fire stoked before Fred’s roar damn near broke his mics. No time to be angry after that, he’d had to quick grab Chica and Bon and get them the hell away before Freddy saw them. In the black, it didn’t matter who was friend and who was enemy; in the black, everything was the same.

The invaders had run, giving Foxy precious seconds to put Chica on his shoulder and gaff Bonnie through his conveniently exposed jawbone (had he been the one to pull it loose? Foxy didn’t think the spring had snapped that night, although he supposed the rough handling sure hadn’t done it any favors) and drag him from the room at a run. He didn’t dare look back, but the sounds followed him: scream, crunch, gurgle, splat, and through all of it, Fred roaring.
He’d been a good three hours coming out of it that day. Three hours hiding down in the maze, chasing after Chica and Bonnie because they kept trying to path back to the stage, knowing at any time, his own showtime protocols could reset and force him back to his own stage, abandoning the others to their fate. Three hours listening to the screech and bellow as Fred stalked through the halls, just waiting for him to wander into the Treasure Cave, because he could, at any bloody moment. Even in the black, there were rules, but Freddy wasn’t bound by them. He could go anywhere.

Fred had come out of it that day, as they all came out of it whenever they went black…although Mangle was living proof that ‘always had’ didn’t mean ‘always would’.

It was a bad thought to get lost in and get lost he did. The Parts Room had been built as strong as the freezer, but it was not soundproofed. He’d always been able to hear Foxanne coming and going on her restless nights. All the same, Foxy never knew Ana was there until the door hidden on the back wall scraped open.

It startled him, which was annoying, although not so much that he let out a yelp or somesuch. So she didn’t know he was there either as she picked her way out of the mess backstage and into his cabin. He listened to her fumble and swear across the tiny room, bumping every damn thing there was to bump at least twice, and when she put her hand on the latch of his cabin door, he switched on his eyes.

That startled her, which appeared to annoy her more than she already was, but she didn’t let out a yelp neither.

She tried to stare him down, having not yet learned that most particular lesson that animatronics didn’t, strictly speaking, have to blink. When that failed to score her any points, she released the latch and faced him straight on. “You going to tell on me to the bear?” she demanded.

“They made me a fox, luv, not a rat.”

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? Ye came to me room, not t’other way around. Which raises the question…” He winked his eyepatch at her. “What do ye want?”

She was not amused and all at once, he wasn’t much in the mood for telling jokes.

“Come here,” Foxy ordered, shifting around on the small bunk to get his feet on the floor. “Sit on me lap.”

“Ha!”

“Eh, worth a shot. Sit on the table then,” he said, waving his hook at it.

“Why should I?”

“Because if’n ye don’t, I’ll put ye where I bloody well wants ye,” he replied amiably. “And do what I bloody well feels like doing once I does, like as not, so if’n ye wants merely to sit and chat, this here’s yer one chance.”

Ana looked at the cabin door.

Foxy snorted through his speaker. “Ye better be faster than I am, luv. And ye ain’t. Sit. Or don’t,” he said with a shrug. “Yer choice.”
She swung herself sullenly around and stomped all of one step to the table. There, she tried to slap the prop bottle out of her way, not realizing that it, like the map and the spyglass and the little heap of coins also cluttering up the tabletop, was solidly affixed to keep little fingers from making off with souvenirs. Foxy waited for the swearing and hand waving to stop, then opened up the cupboard above his bunk and brought out a real bottle, one of those fancy ones she'd bought for him along with the pirating outfit he hadn’t yet bothered himself to wear. He scraped the wax off, hooked out the cork and had a swig, then offered the bottle.

“No thanks,” she said, tight-jawed. “I’m driving.”

“Suit yerself. Bon’s waiting for ye in the West Hall, so ye should sneak out t’other side o’ the Cove and up the back way to the emergency exit by the arcade. I know yer thinking ye’ll bump into Freddy on the way, but never ye fear, lass. He’s in the freezer.”

After a moment, she thought to scoff, but she frowned first and the frown never entirely left her eyes. “What, he get so horny to give someone a time-out that he gave it to himself?”

“One in eight million three hundred forty two thousand, roughly calculated,” Foxy said and had another drink.

He waited.

“What’s that?” Ana asked finally.

“The odds of instantly frying out yer neural net when ye go black. Or to put another way, the odds ye’ll never come out of it. Gambling odds for a fair goodish gamble. ‘Course, that was in the beginning-like, with proper maintenance and all systems green. Things wear down. Systems slow and programs get buggy. Still, them’s good odds. If’n ye had a one in eight million chance of…oh, say…chooking on yer sick in a drunken stupor some night, why, I reckon ye’d jump at it and never think twice.” He had another drink and took a little time afterward to study the picture on the bottle. “What do ye reckon the actual odds o’ that are?”

Ana had a mind made for numbers. She thought about it, whether she wanted to or not.

She scowled. “You do know that I never actually got that drunk last night, right? Like, I was sober enough to walk all the way down the mountain without falling and I remember practically everything I did and said. I don’t even know why the hell Freddy’s making this big of a deal out of it, but damned if I’ll take it from you.”

“Ye want to?”

Ana’s anger skidded sideways again. She peered at him and hesitantly said, “Want to…what? Take it from you?”

“Coo, anytime, luv, but no. Want to know why Fred’s got his wires in a knot over last night?”

Ana’s shoulder twitched. “Because he thinks I’m too stupid to take of myself.”

He reached out and gave her a light tap to the noggin with the rounded side of his hook. “Don’t take it so personal. It ain’t so much that he thinks ye can’t. It ain’t ye at all, it’s him. We all gots our way of getting through all this—” Foxy indicated the tiny room around them with a wave of his bottle. “—and Fred’s way is family. No matter how bad it gets or how long we sits, so long as he’s got us all together and safe as he can make us, he’s okay.” He corked the bottle and put it up in the cupboard again. “He ain’t okay tonight. Venture a guess why?”
It felt like a good stab when he said it, but she parried it with an angry shrug.

“That’s not on me,” she said. “I don’t control how he feels.”

“Nor do I, but I know how he thinks, and I know that one in eight million ain’t the same as saying never, no matter how long the odds, so I does what I can to ease his mind. Because I know family be everything to him, even if it ain’t much more’n a word to me.”

He could tell that one cut, but it didn’t hit the bone. And he supposed it didn’t have to. Ana and Freddy were eggs, the pair of them—hard shells, gooey middles. Ana might flounce out of here and drive herself home in a huff, but she’d come skulking back tomorrow or the next day to scuff her toes and mumble her sorries, and Freddy would raise the paw that had punched the life out of a hundred people, many of whom had done no real crime, and pat her on her wee head in perfect forgiveness. He could send her on her way right now, knowing everything would be all right.

But on the other hand, there was an opportunity here. The fact that she hadn’t already whipped out a photograph of her little lost cousin, now that she knew they had all surely met him, meant she had some idea of the purple stain in David’s blood. And her own, maybe. Hard to know. Ana played it chary-close, but it was only a matter of time before she asked some telling questions. Better Foxy answer them now, because she’d ask her lovesick, long-eared eunuch and, rules or no rules, Bonnie would muck that up. If he lied, if found a loophole big enough to drop a clue, even if he said nothing at all. Bonnie was bloody useless at secret-keeping. At most things, really, but secret-keeping especially.

Foxy thought about it, not weighing risks so much as sussing out how best to start off, then said, “Ye lost someone once, ye’ve said.”

Ana did not answer, but her chin went up and there was David again, like a shadow under her skin.

“So did we,” Foxy said, looking at her—at both of them together in her. “I recollect telling ye there’s only ever been one other what Fred’s called family, eh? Knew him all his life, we did. Longer. Knew him when he weren’t but a bump on his mum’s belly and a gleam in his daddy’s eye. And we loved him anyway, in spite o’ them.”

The heat went out of Ana’s glare slowly and did not spark back. Her lips parted…closed. She waited, doing all she could to hide her thoughts, but they slipped out through the cracks in her armor and betrayed her just the same. “What…What do you mean, ‘in spite of them’?”

He had to go carefully now. Foxy was a damned fine liar, all false modesty aside, but this one had to be more than damned fine. She had to leave here so convinced, so crippled by belief, that she wouldn’t even want to look for proof, that she’d be afraid to find it. It had to haunt her. It had to hurt. And if she was going to swallow that line, he needed a shiny, shiny hook.

Trust. And how did a deceitful man go about gaining trust? By pretending to be vulnerable.

“Freddy wouldn’t want me to tell ye,” Foxy said, letting her see just enough reluctance for her to know she could convince him. “It’s over, for him. He wants it to stay buried.”

She leaned forward, just a hair, perhaps unaware she’d even done it. “Did he order you not to say anything?”

“No,” Foxy said slowly, giving her a frown. “Ordered Bon, though, and I were right in the room, so I surely can’t claim there were any doubt he meant it.”

“But he didn’t give you the order,” she insisted, going right for that tasty bait and biting hard.
“No, but—”

“Then I want to hear it. Please.”

He let her simmer, pretending to think about it.

“There’s things I can’t talk about,” he said at length, beginning with the truth, as all the best lies did. “Absolute programming, ye ken. Rules to make me keep certain secrets. I won’t try to get around ‘em, but if ye’ve lived in this town, I reckon ye can guess what they are.”

“This is what you wanted to tell me,” she said, brows pinching slowly together. “That day on the dock. But you never did.”

Nettled, he shot back, “Ye never asked, did ye? How many times ye been back and how many times ye even tried to see me?”

The pendulum of her mood swung back to irritation. “I figure if you’re in your room, you don’t want company. If you want to talk to me, come and get me. I’m not the one hiding!”

“Oi, if I wants a lecture about me unhealthy anti-social tendencies, I’ll talk to Chica. They didn’t make me a party animal, they made me a pirate. Pirates like to be left alone!”

“Well then, don’t bitch when I leave you alone.”

“Ye want to hear this story or not?” he snapped.

She huffed to let him know she was adding a point to her scorecard, but squared her shoulders, bracing herself, before she nodded. So. She had an idea what she was about to hear and it made her wary, not curious. And yet, if she knew the truth already, what in hell was she doing here, alone in his cabin, killing close?

“So there’s things we can’t talk about,” he said again.

Ana nodded, accepting this without frustration.

“The man behind it all—” An alert blipped on in the corner of Foxy’s vision, bringing a tremor up his spine to rattle in his ears. He cleared it and shifted the focus to another subject. It was all about loopholes. “—met a woman. Marion Blaylock.”

The name was a growl. He hadn’t intended it to be. He’d wanted to keep this part dry, but the growl worked for him, maybe just because of its raw, unrehearsed sound. And Ana did not question it, which was a telling thing all its own. She’d been waiting for that name, aye, and the growl.

“So there’s things we can’t talk about,” he said again.

Ana nodded, accepting this without frustration.

“She loved him, if ye can use that word. Love like a sickness or a poison. She done things for him. Eh? Things. And she had his son. David. Sorry about that, luv,” he said, feigning a very slight remorse as Ana drew in a small, sharp breath. “Ye had a cousin called the same, I know. Common enough name. I must have known a hundred Davids in me time. Sorry I don’t remember your’n better, but I’ve wracked my circuits and the only Stark I can think of apart from yerself was a lad named Joey, and that were at High Street. Maybe a year or two at Mulholland a’fore he considered himself too old for shanties and singalongs. I don’t suppose ye knew him?”

Ana stared at him a moment, then roused herself and shook her head, more as one dispensing a thought than answering a question. “No,” she said in an odd, low voice. “No, I’ve heard of him, but I never knew him.”
“He had sisters, as I recall. Suppose he was yer uncle, eh?”

“No,” she said at once. “No, he’s…he’s no relation at all.”

Foxy filed away that reaction for another day and went on with the tale. “David grew up among us. As much as we hated the bitch and dog, we loved that pup. And Fred loved him best. Ye see, the man who made us…Freddy saw him as more a father than a—” Foxy flexed his arm broadly, filling the cramped cabin with the sound of gears and pumps. “—robotics engineer. And in the beginning, he loved us, aye, and he loved Freddy best. When that all stopped, Fred took it hard. If’n ye ask me, all that family rot o’ his started there, losing his ‘father’…but gaining a son. Freddy raised that boy, all he could, every minute he were here, and every time he had to give him up, it hurt him. There were things happening at that house, ye see.”

Still no questions in Ana’s eyes, only the shimmer of pain. She knew all this. He had to cut deeper.

“The man died. We thought it might get better then, eh? Like an infection, finally allowed to drain, but…she went on loving him. Talking to him, like he’d never left. And doing things to make him happy…the sorts of things what made him happy. Bad enough things at Freddy’s, but worse things at home, to the boy she brought into the world, the boy she should have been nothing more’n a mother to. And he loved her yet, ye ken, because that’s how it is with kids sometimes. They keep the good stuff close and bury the bad down deep in the dark places inside o’ themselves where they never has to see it.”

Ana looked away, her breath shallow and too loud in the small space. Bleeding on the inside, where she didn’t think it showed.

“And that was how it was for years,” Foxy went on, twisting that knife. “David would come here every day, hiding behind a laughing face and clinging to every hour that kept him from going home with her…alone with her. And every night, he’d have to go and Freddy would have to let him go, knowing that bitch were doing things to his boy. Hurting him. His soul, if not his flesh. His boy. His family. Until finally…”

Oh carefully now. So far, it had easy, but now the lies had to come, fitting over the truth like skin over bones, holding the shape and just…just filling it out some.

“Didn’t happen in front of us,” said Foxy. “But the right whisper must have reached the right ear, because they took him away from her. And if ye asked Fred, I know he’d say he were glad of it. Turned out for the best, but at the time? It broke him. That were his boy, more’n those what had bred him into being, and Fred couldn’t protect him, couldn’t save him, couldn’t even say goodbye. And who did he have left, eh? Marion. Marion bloody Blaylock.”

Ana’s lips moved. She coughed a little, gripped at her throat, and said, “What happened?”

“Don’t know, do I? We got some rumor of him from time to time, but we never saw him again. His new folks took him out o’ Mammon. Might as well have taken him off the edge of the Earth. And Circle Drive closed after…well, ye know.”

“Reardon.”

“Aye. The doors closed, at any rate. Our creator kept thinking we’d reopen, so we stayed on at the building. And Marion stayed. Night guard, eh? Keep the riffraff out. Even after there weren’t no more hope of opening and she were fired, she kept sneaking in. Doing her job, whether or not they paid her. Like she thought if she just rolled on like normal long enough, normal would roll on back on her. And she talked to us, ye ken. Told us all about it. Like we were friends. So I know, ye see,
how Marion tried to get her boy back. I heard about every lawyer, every day at court, every
scheme. When that didn’t work out, why, she just dreamed a better ending, saying how this and
that would happen and she’d get him back and it would be just like before. Better. Because now
he’d be older.” The last word ended on another uncontrived growl. “And he’d look just like his
father.”

Ana stared at the window set in the bunk wall behind him. Through the cloudy pane of glass, the
light of the octopus brightened and dimmed—blue and green and pink. And purple.

“So that kept her going awhile, happy as she ever was. Loving a gone boy ain’t much different than
loving a dead man. She always did like to live half in her own head,” he said derisively. “But after
a few years, I reckon reality started sinking in. She stopped talking about how she was going to get
him back and started saying more how he didn’t want to come back. Loved his new mum more’n
her. Loved his new dad. Didn’t want to see her. Didn’t want her letters. Didn’t want her last name.
We saw less and less of her over the next year or so, and every time we saw her, she looked…not
bad, I has to say,” he admitted, rubbing his muzzle as he thought back to the way Marion had
looked in those first years after David’s death. “Not the way ye think of ‘bad’. She were still
dressed up fair, still clean and smiling, but that weren’t her. It was like…like she was an
animatronic herself, human skin over wires, going through the motions of living. Ye ken?”

Ana nodded stiltedly. “Did she…Do you know what happened to her?”

“Oh aye. She got herself a new bloke.”

Ana looked at him, finally surprised. “A boyfriend?”

“Sugar-cookie sort o’ word for that sack o’ shite, but aye, ye could call him so. Sure, and I can’t
say worse than him who came before, but bad enough. He’d come with her from time to time when
she went to ‘work’, so we saw plenty of the son of a bitch. We saw him beat on her, bad-mouth her,
get her drinking and drugging, but no matter what he did, she lapped it up and loved him all the
more. He gave her something to be, even if it was just the filth on his sheets,” he said, watching
Ana stare away at the window again. “That weren’t long a’fore they took us out o’ Circle Drive
and I reckon it were only a few months later that they installed us here. When we opened, there
was Marion with her old job back again, and I tell ye, lass, I hardly recognized her. Whatever it had
been, six months, seven, since the last time we’d seen her, and as bad as she’d looked then, now
she looked like her own corpse pulled from the river and left to dry in the desert. She took her old
job back and managed to hold it the whole week, despite some complaints from the paying guests.
After the closing, she and he broke in together one last time. Couldn’t get the safe open and the
arcade paid ‘em out nothing but Fazcoins, ha! Ain’t seem ‘em since. Hopefully, they lit out o’ town
and came to a bad end on t’other side of the world.”

Ana closed her eyes and kept them shut.

“Chica says we should feel sorry for her.” Foxy shrugged, pretending to study the array of plastic
baubles on the table. “Chica’s a better one than I am. I’d put me hook in her, if I had the power. I’d
gut her just for what she’s done to Freddy, let alone to her own son. And Fred, oh…If ye ever want
to see him go black in a blink, ye just say the name o’ Marion Blaylock and stand back. She hurt
his boy and she broke his family up, and that wound goes straight through to the heart of him. It’s
bleeding yet. Now I know it ain’t easy to be hovered over the way he does—Lord, don’t I know!—
but he can’t help it. When he looks at ye…” Foxy looked at her, his eyes whirring softly as they
moved from point to point along the features of her face. “…he sees David.”

Ana nodded once, her eyes still shut fast.
“He just wants to do better by ye. Not pen ye in, not grind ye down, just…take care of ye. Keep his family safe and close. Aye?”

Ana nodded again, silent.

Foxy gave his thigh a slap and stood up. “Time ye were on yer way, and seeing as I’m feeling gentlemanly tonight, I’ll open the door for ye.” He gestured, back wall to cabin door. “Which one do ye want, luv?”

Ana cocked a thumb back at the Parts Room, then ran that hand through her hair, disguising a quick pass across her eyes. When she opened them, they were dry.

Foxy punched in the access code and stood aside as the door slid open. “Fair winds and following seas to ye, then.”

A final nod and Ana pushed herself onto her feet. She stepped past him and up onto the mess of props, animal carcasses and regurgitated trash that was Mangle’s nest. Foxy leaned up against the jamb, letting his eyes be a lamp for her on this uncertain footing until she’d reached the Party Room door. Once she’d picked out the code and opened it, there was new light—a purple glow that proved the camera was on and pointed at the curtain that closed off Ana’s bedroom onstage. So that was good; he thought she was there. And so did Bon, whose low worried voice could be just be heard cajoling at an empty room from the West Hall.

Ana listened for a moment, then turned her head just enough to show Foxy the blade of her cheek, not enough to let him see even the glint on her eye. She tried twice to speak and then just moved on, out of the Parts Room and into her room onstage. She closed her door.

Foxy closed his and stood a while, sifting through the ashes of whatever he was feeling and killing off the guilt. He had nothing to feel guilty about, did he? He wished he could have told her the lie he’d drawn up for the Purple Man, with rainbows and glittery hearts all around, but at least this way, she was sure never to speak the name of Blaylock in a moment of unguarded chatter. Maybe it would even be peace of a sort. Maybe she’d stop thinking of David as a ghost and find a way to see him as a living man, and it might ease her some.

Hell, as bad as the lie had been, it was still a happier ending than the truth.

Happy endings all around, in fact. In an hour or two, surely no more than that, Fred would come out to have his final word and he’d find Ana proper remorseful, if a bit too quiet. Bon would get all the credit for talking her around, Foxy had no doubt, and Ana would say nothing to disabuse him of the notion, and that was fine. Let Bon have his movies with her; there was nothing that brought two people together like a secret shared, and the darker, the better.

That thought stirred up another meager spark of guilt. Foxy crushed it out and settled himself again in his bunk. He shut his eyes off, filling up the dark with the sound of his hook scratching back and forth across his casing, and waited for someone to come and tell him everything was all right now, no thanks to him.
Chapter 23

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ana managed to sit through Freddy’s lecture and although she barely heard him, she must have nodded in the right places. Either that or he mistook her shell-shocked silence for a new appreciation of the dangers of alcohol poisoning. In any case, he didn’t ask her for promises or give her ultimatums or get all huggy-feely on her, just told her that whatever she was dealing with, she didn’t have to deal with it alone. He paused then, like that was her cue, but what the hell was she supposed to tell him? All of her worst suspicions had been confirmed. All her best memories were a lie. She had nothing left to ask him, nothing left to say. She had nothing. Nothing.

Freddy did some twitching at the fingers and ears, but he didn’t keep her. He asked if she was going to spend the night and when she mutely shook her head, he simply told her to drive safely and let her go. Bonnie was waiting for her in the hall and he deserved better than a brush-off, but he met her with her day pack in his hands, so he knew he was getting one.

She drove up Coldslip Mountain to the castle of her childhood. The front door was unlocked. The air inside was muggy and stank of old sour food, old sour sweat, and old sour dreams. When she turned on the light, she saw a mess, as it was always a mess, no matter how much she cleaned. She shut the light off and climbed the stairs in the dark. When she reached the second floor, she turned and there was Plushtrap, sitting on his chair under the window at the far end of the hall, next to the attic stairs.

They looked at each other for a long time in silence.

“Who are you?” Ana asked.

Plushtrap heard, but did not answer. Dingy stuffing bled through the tears in his satin skin. His glass eyes gleamed. His metal teeth grinned.

“Come here,” said Ana.

Plushtrap mockingly did not move.

“Come here,” she said again, beckoning. “It’s okay. You can live here, I don’t care. You don’t have to hide it. Just...come here. We’ll watch a movie. I’ll let you pick. You can sleep in my room with me, if you want. You don’t have to be alone, just...stop trying to scare me. I’m not scared. I’m not scared, I’m...tired. I’m too tired for this. Come here.”

Plushtrap did nothing. Elsewhere in the house, boards creaked, drafts whispered, pipes knocked, but Plushtrap lied and did nothing.

Ana turned away and went to David’s room. She sat on his little-boy bed with the superhero sheets and Foxy’s sword hanging from the post of the headboard and looked at the toys strewn across the floor. For the first time, she thought about cleaning it and the thought was surprisingly painless. David was alive. Faust had told her so, and she hadn’t thought he’d lied, but she hadn’t really believed it. Now she did. Now she had to. David had been taken away after all, not by his father, Erik Metzger, who’d been dead by then anyway, but by CPS, who had found him a father who presumably didn’t kill people and a mother who didn’t take naked pictures of her son for the father’s private enjoyment. He’d grown up somewhere far away. He’d maybe gotten married,
maybe had kids, maybe forgot all about Ana and maybe not, but wherever he was, he was alive.

Aunt Easter might be alive out there somewhere too, and maybe she’d even gotten some rehab and some self-respect and had made herself at least a shadow of the person Ana had once thought she was. Maybe not. But at least she wasn’t a question mark anymore, whatever else she was. And Ana was never going to find her crumpled and forgotten behind one of the boxes in the basement, not here and not at Freddy’s.

She thought she would sit awake all night, thinking about that, but what else was there to think about, really? It was over. There were no more mysteries left to solve. Ana lay down on David’s musty sheets and slept, and it was a good sleep, restful and dreamless and so deep, she never heard the door creak open.

The man in the purple uniform stood for a short while in the doorway of this forbidden place, watching her, but it was late and he was tired, too. He crept over to the bed, bent and pressed a Mama-kiss on Ana’s cheek, shyly whispering, “I love you.”

Ana, still sleeping, stirred and mumbled, “Love you too. G’night.”

The man smiled and kissed her again, a Daddy-kiss, right on the lips. Ana rolled over (grimacing without waking at the taste of his breath) and the man in the purple uniform left her and went yawning downstairs and through the clock to his own bed, taking Plushtrap with him.

* * *

In the morning, when Ana found David’s bedroom door slightly ajar, she assumed she hadn’t closed it all the way. When she saw the chair empty at the end of the hall…well, Plushtrap could go wherever he wanted to go.

She went to work and the work was good, demanding all her time and concentration, wringing the emotion out of her with her sweat and leaving room for reason and perspective to grow. By the end of the day, she had arrived at a kind of acceptance, newborn and trembling, and just beginning to find its legs. However, when she returned to Aunt Easter’s house, she found herself unable to go inside, no matter how long she stood out in the drive cursing herself for getting worked up and stupid over something that was long over. She went to the garage instead, digging through her day pack until she found the photograph of Circle Drive she’d taken from Freddy’s.

She looked at it for a long time, illogically convinced that Aunt Easter had taken this picture. And perhaps she had. It was an actual photograph, not a newspaper clipping. Ana had a very dim memory of exploring her aunt’s darkroom with David, seeing photos clipped to a string like laundry on a cartoon clothesline. It had seemed like such a magical process to her child-mind, to realize that pictures did not just happen but had to be made, that they had a special room just for the making of them and made a smell all their own. And not just the pictures. The door she had come through, the hinges that swung the door open, the lock she had picked, the bit of wire she’d used to pick it—someone had made all of it. The stone tiles in the foyer had been rocks once, cut and smoothed and laid down; the wooden boards in some of the other rooms had been trees; the carpet had been sheep once, maybe, or plants or whatever carpet came from, but it came from something! And in the wake of that epiphany, Ana’s Other-vision, which until then had just been the knack that let little Ana be better at Legos and other building toys than David, seemed to turn on like an invisible light, overlaying all the world and everything in it with a single question—*How was that made?*—that later evolved to *How would I make that?* and later still to *How would I make that better?* But it all started in the darkroom and nothing was ever the same again. From that
moment on, Ana was a builder.

Ana pinned the photograph to the wall and went to look at what she had for lumber. She was not the artsy-crafty kind and most of her tools were still at Freddy’s, but she had her old combo-stand to make the big cuts with and a few hand-tools to finesse the outline. All it took was time.

Ana sank gratefully into her work and did not come out of it again until after midnight. She was not completely happy with the result of her effort, but fuck it. It wasn’t supposed to look perfect. The details would all be painted on anyway.

God, she was not looking forward to painting. She was not a fucking artist.

After a soak in Aunt Easter’s sex-tub to ease her aching muscles, she put herself to bed on the floor of the master bedroom and watched the shadows dance over the purple walls until she fell asleep.

She dreamed of Erik Metzger, first alive and smiling as he bent over her, and then dead and blowing his rotting breath into her mouth as he kissed her. He told her he loved her, as he always did in this dream, and as she always did, she told him she loved him, too.

She woke up far too early the next morning, a Friday, and after trying and failing to fall asleep again, she gave in and got up. She made coffee and drank it on the back deck, watching the sun come up. She did some more work on the project in the garage. She drank the rest of the coffee and cleaned the coffee maker. She took a long shower. She paced restlessly through the house waiting for it to be time to go to work and ended up in the ruined kitchen staring at the counters where she and David used to ‘help’ Aunt Easter bake cupcakes, then went back to the garage and got her sledgehammer.

She took out the counters. She took out the appliances. She took out the fixtures. She took out the molding walls and broken floors. She took it all out, until there was nothing left, until it was barely recognizable as anything that had ever been a kitchen at all. She swept up the debris of that life and put it in the dump trailer with the rest of the trash. She took another shower and went to work.

It was a good day.

Shortly before quitting time, her phone buzzed. It was someone from Tranquility, telling her Mr. Faust would be meeting with the dietician tomorrow at three o’clock, and reiterating that family was strongly encouraged to be there to ‘support healthy decisions’. Ana supposed that meant the wife and grandson were also receiving an invitation, but whatever. She’d sort of promised, so she said she’d be there, and since work was essentially done and the crew was cleaning up and clearing out, she spent the last few minutes of her day browsing online for a local florist or something. She found a few, but none of the offered arrangements interested her. Mr. Faust didn’t really strike her as the flowers-and-balloons kind of guy.

She thought about it off and on as she finished out the day, but didn’t dredge up any better ideas by the end of her shift. Oh well. There was no law saying she had to bring him anything at all. She was taking time out of her weekend to go visit the guy; that should be enough.

Ana gave Freddy a call, then another call when the first one went through to voice mail. He answered that time with a harried-sounding, “Why is it vibrating? I don’t like the vibrations! I can feel that all the way up inside my skull!…Hello?”

“It’s me,” she said, waving Jimmy goodbye as the lot emptied. “I got something to do at home and I don’t know how long it’ll take, but I probably won’t be there for another hour or two.” She hesitated, then said, “I guess I should have started off by asking if it’s okay if I come over.”
“Of course it’s okay,” he said, somewhat crossly or perhaps he was only distracted. She heard a door open and then the sound of wind blowing across the phone’s mic; he was on patrol. “You are always welcome here. Drive safely and I’ll see you in an hour or two.”

Ana ended the call and went to the hardware store three streets down. She probably should have gone all the way to Hurricane and made a real shopping trip of it. She knew she didn’t have much food left at Freddy’s, just a few stale Easy-Bake snacks and some cans of pop-and-eat soup, but she didn’t feel much like eating anyway. Hank’s Hardware didn’t have everything she wanted, but it had what she needed (albeit for a vastly inflated price), and soon she was headed out of town toward Coldslip.

She passed a small group of preteens on Cawthon, biking back to town after a hard day’s play at the quarry. They all had toy rifles strapped to their backs and fresh splatters of paint on their clothes. One of them brandished his weapon at her, whooping, as she drove by. Another one attempted to pop a wheelie, but lost control on the sandy asphalt and ended up pitching himself off onto the shoulder. Ana braked, but his friends were already picking him up and they all waved at her to go on, so she did.

It felt like ditching work, driving along Old Quarry Road when the sun was still high in the sky. Ahead of her, past Edge of Nowhere, she could see the quarry as stink lines shimmering in the air over a black hole ringed with rock. There was a car parked out there; the kids hadn’t just left to go wash up and set the table for supper, but had been chased off by bigger kids. When it got cooler, even more kids would show up to drink and smoke and screw around here, where their parents and grandparents and maybe even their great-grandparents had partied before them. No wonder Freddy sounded so irritable on the phone.

Once at Aunt Easter’s house, Ana went directly to the garage and stayed there until she couldn’t fuck her project up any more and had to call it done. She let it dry while she cleaned up (hosing off in the yard rather than go inside and shower; she knew she was being stupid and childish, but no amount of name-calling could move her into her aunt’s haunted house), slapped a coat of sealant on it (too soon, but hell, if it peeled up, so much the better), and loaded it into the back of her truck. Then she was on the road again and headed for Freddy’s.

The car was still at the quarry and had been joined by two others. The kids themselves were not as obvious, but there was a thin plume of smoke rising out of the shady rock formations to indicate where they were. A fire meant they were staying for a while. Ana tried to think positively about that; if they were settled in with a fire, they were slightly less likely to come to Freddy’s and poke around.

All the same, she made sure to drive the long away around the building where her approach would not be visible to anyone watching from the quarry, and parked on the far side of the lot where she could not be seen by either road or the quarry or anyone at all, except God. And Freddy, apparently, because no sooner had she reached the loading dock than the door banged up and the bear himself stomped out onto the dock, growling, “You do realize that the entire point of calling to let someone know when you will arrive is to then actually arrive at that time?”

“It can’t be that late,” said Ana, checking her watch. Nine o’clock. Well, shit.

“An hour or two, you told me,” Freddy was saying, opening his abdominal casing and pulling out a familiar item. “Not an hour or two and then four more.”

“Those are my binoculars,” Ana said. “I thought Trigger and those other assholes stole those the first time they showed up here. Have you had them this whole time?”
He ignored her, putting the binoculars to his wide-set eyes and adjusting them. “Now I understand that you lose track of time when you’re working, but in the future, I would appreciate another call when you’re on your way so that I’m not left wondering every time I hear an engine if it’s you—” He broke off as someone out at the quarry let out a shriek and then a peal of laughter, and continued in a low, troubled tone. “—and if it’s not.”

“Sorry. Wouldn’t want anyone breaking in. They might steal stuff that belonged to someone else,” she said pointedly.

Freddy grunted, still scanning the distant rock formations through her binoculars.

“And while I’m passing out apologies,” sighed Ana, “I’m sorry about the other night, too. I don’t remember if I ever actually said that in between bitching you out and leaving.”

“You did, yes,” Freddy said, returning the binoculars to his inner compartment and closing his abdomen. “If you want to talk about it some more, we can do that…inside,” he concluded after a short pause as his restless gaze finally came to her. “Are you all right?”

“Sure,” said Ana, and smiled to prove it.

Freddy’s troubled frown deepened.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “Nothing new, anyway. It’s just been a hard week. I’m trying to put it behind me and I thought…” She glanced at the truck, seeing nothing but the sun dazzling off the covered bed’s tinted windows, and was suddenly intensely grateful she didn’t have to look at the thing she’d spent two days working on. The urge to leave right now, take it off into the desert and burn it, welled up in her like tears…but she’d done enough crying over a past she couldn’t change and a woman…she’d never really known.

Freddy listened to all the ways her incomplete sentence did not end and finally, quietly, said, “Is there anything I can do?”

Ana shook her head, then passed up her day pack. “You can put this in my room for me. I need to get to work while I’ve still got daylight. It’s later than I thought it was.”

Freddy grunted and turned around, carrying her pack in the crook of one arm like a baby. He took one step and stopped. His ears came up. “Daylight.” He looked back at her. “Why do you need daylight?”

“I just want to do one more thing on the roof. It’ll take me fifteen minutes—”

“What is that in Ana-time, an hour and a half?” Freddy vented his cooling system hard, scowling in the direction of the quarry, then turned concerned eyes back on Ana. “I can see you’re upset. I know you want to work. I’m willing to let you. But not on the roof,” he went on while Ana pondered the words ‘let you’ in silence. “Not anywhere where you can be seen.”

“They can’t see me go up if I stay on this end of the building and they shouldn’t be able to hear me. I’m not going to use a drill or a saw or anything.”

“Fifteen minutes, no tools…what exactly are you repairing?”

“Nothing. It’s…Call it a finishing touch.”

Freddy’s ears twitched as, down at the quarry, someone started shooting at bottles or rocks or each other for all anyone knew. “Well, whatever it is, it sounds like it can wait. If you insist on working
tonight, I will overlook the schedule this once and you can have your pick of any one of the dozens of essential projects awaiting your attention, inside. And don’t roll your eyes at me! We had an agreement, Ana.”

There was nothing particularly sinister about his words, spoken with exasperation more than heat and not even enough of that to get under her skin, and yet they hit her like a slap anyway. She’d heard them before, a long time ago. ‘Disappeared,’ she thought dazedly. ‘Last night, my cousin disappeared.’ And then that voice, buzzing like corpse-flies through the phone in her mother’s hand: We had an agreement, Melanie.

She didn’t flinch and she was sure she didn’t make a sound, but she must have done something. At once, the irritation went out of Freddy’s ears and his eyebrows, already low on his brow, pinched inward in concern. “Ana?”

“Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Yeah, sorry. Something…Sorry. What were you saying?”

Another volley of laughter speckled with gunfire rose up in the distance. This time, Freddy didn’t look around.

“I’m saying no,” he said softly. “I have to say no. I hope you can understand that, but whether you do or not, I have to say no. Please don’t make that any harder for me.”

“Okay, listen. If you say no one more time, then I’ll agree,” said Ana, showing him her hands. “Because we’re not fighting. We’re not. But all I want to do is this one thing. It’s a stupid thing, I know it, but I want to do it. It’ll take me fifteen minutes, tops, and after that, if you want, I will spend the rest of the night doing whatever you want.”

Freddy’s plastic eyebrows rose slightly, then came slowly down in a sharp V. “Whatever…I want?”

She opened her mouth, thought better of the smartass insinuation she was about to make, and said instead, simply, “Anything.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Cross my heart,” said Ana, doing just that, “and hope to—”

“Don’t.” Freddy shifted his glare beyond her to the wide open world and the setting sun. He grumbled to himself, hefting her day pack as if his final judgement were based in part on weight. He thought.

Just like the scene needed that extra nugget of suspense, the security camera on the wall came on. It panned over until it ‘saw’ Freddy, paused, then kept panning and found Ana. It stopped again, and even though Ana didn’t move or speak, it stayed on her, an unwelcome witness as she waited for Freddy’s decision.

Freddy looked at her, at the open dock door, even at the camera, and back at Ana. He scowled, and even before he said anything, Ana said, “Thank you.”

“Fifteen minutes,” he told her and raised his arms so she could squeeze past him in the cramped space. “The clock starts now!”

The camera followed her as she ran to the Quiet Room, waited in the hall while she grabbed an adjustable wrench and a fistful of nuts and bolts, then followed her back to the store room, shining its light directly into her eyes the whole way. It was against the rules to take the cameras down, and
Ana was trying so hard to follow the rules, but with Freddy now in the kitchen, she indulged herself in a moral lapse and ‘accidentally’ bashed into the fucking thing with the ladder as she pulled it out.

“What was that?” Freddy called.

“Nothing,” Ana replied and hit it again, this time knocking it clean off the wall.

“Do you need help?”

“No, I think that did it,” she said with satisfaction, nudging at the camera with the toe of her boot before kicking it under the shelves.

“Eleven minutes, fourteen seconds, Ana.”

Plenty of time.

Once she’d wrangled the plywood sheets out of the truck, up the ladder and onto the roof, it was a simple thing to assemble them into the finished piece. The mounting brackets were still here and solid enough, and with new nuts and bolts, the thing would stand for another decade at least.

Freddy was literally counting down the seconds as she returned to the ground. He hit zero as she was putting the ladder away and came stomping into the store room soon after with a chilled bottle of water in one hand. His eyes went immediately to the wall above the loading dock door where the camera used to be. He studied it while she drank.

“You mad?” Ana asked, pouring the last swallow of water over her head and letting the blessed coolness trickle down her sweaty face.

Freddy grunted. “I didn’t see it. As far as I’m concerned, you didn’t do it.”

“It was an accident.”

“You didn’t do it, Ana,” he said, now in a warning tone.

“Right, but hypothetically, if I had, it would have been an accident.”

He grunted his that’s-better grunt.

“There’s going to be a lot more accidents around here when I start renovating for real,” she added, moving past him to the kitchen doorway and tossing her empty bottle over the pizza oven into the sink. “Those things get on my fucking nerves. Come on, I want to show you what I did.”

Freddy’s gaze wandered past her and out to the quarry, narrowing. “I’ll take your word for it that you installed a picture-perfect drainspout,” he said and closed the loading dock. Ana was able to catch a glimpse of movement off in the desert—a flash of late sun off a newly-washed car joining the others at the quarry—before the door banged down. He locked it and set the clamps. “I need to keep moving.”

“Yeah, I know. But…they just got there. They might come up here later, but they’ll be busy for a while down there. It won’t take long.”

“Another fifteen minutes?”

“Not even two. Come on, Boss Bear,” she said lightly, giving him a smile. “I can’t call this job done until you sign off on it.”
Freddy thought about it and while he was thinking, Foxy suddenly spoke up from the shadowed mouth of the back hall that led to the employee’s lounge: “Coo, ye’ve got him wrapped around yer little finger, don’t ye? And tied in a bloody bow!”

Ana jerked hard and looked around, choking on the startled cry that her mother’s fists had trained her never to let out. After a few seconds and a few stabilizing breaths, she managed to cough up, “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Pirate Cove,” Foxy replied mildly, stepping out of the hall. He looked up at the place where the camera used to be, then reached up and plucked the mounting bit off, along with a good portion of the wall it had been attached to. “I’ll go ogle yer fittings, luv, if Fred don’t want to,” he offered, examining it. “I’d never pass up the chance to have a peek at yer drainspout.”

“Mind your manners,” Freddy snapped, then looked at Ana and sighed. “Two minutes?”

“Or less.”

“All right, but I had better be able to see it from the ground, because there is no earthly way you are getting me up that ladder and I will not ride the Scoop.”

“The what?”

Freddy gestured toward Faust’s pneumatic arm, saying, “No, of course it isn’t,” when Foxy opened his mouth. “It’s just a tool, like her tablet or her phone. They’re everywhere now.”

“No ladders necessary,” said Ana. “It’s out front, just off the lobby. Lead the way, bear.”

Freddy led, Foxy followed, and once they’d picked up Bonnie from the show stage and Chica from the Reading Room, they were all out in the parking lot, the four of them staring up at the building while Ana watched Freddy, waiting for recognition.

And waiting.

And waiting.

“Well?” she prompted.

Chica tapped her fingers uncertainly. “What…a beautiful sunset?”

“Hey, I’m wicked good at what I do, but I didn’t hang the sun, sister. Guess again.”

“I hate guessing games,” Freddy muttered, rubbing at his muzzle. He glanced at the road behind them, found it still empty, and shook his head. “I don’t know, Ana. What am I supposed to be… wait.” He frowned, not at the roof, but at the sign over the lobby doors.

Despite the peeling paint and splintered boards, the words FREDDY FAZBEAR’S PIZZERIA could still be made out, with the four animatronics rendered as cartoon characters posed overhead. Chica holding a pizza, Foxy waving his hook, Bonnie with his guitar, and the big bear himself holding his top hat high over the first letter of his first name.

Freddy raised one hand in stuttering inches until he was pointing. “Didn’t that fall off when the roof caved in?”

The other three looked at him.

Ana grinned.
“Isn’t…” Freddy turned around in a full circle, twitching at the ears, until he spied a chunk of plywood further out in the lot. He pointed at it next. “Isn’t that a piece of it? Isn’t…Isn’t that—that piece?!” he asked incredulously, pointing back at the sign.

“Um, yeah, it is. I need to pick that up before someone else notices,” said Ana, shading her eyes to scan the surrounding desert and finding more fragments of the old sign still lying where they’d scattered. “I thought I got all that shit weeks ago. Something always gets left behind.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” murmured Foxy. When she looked at him, he tossed his chin toward the sign. “Me eye ain’t right. It’s all squinty.”

“You’re a pirate. Pirates squint.”

“Now ye show me where it says that in the handbook!”

Reaching into her pocket for the photograph she’d borrowed, Ana held it up and glanced between the two with a critical eye. “You’re totally squinting!”

“I ain’t neither. I be leering. Look at me. This here’s a squint…and this here’s a leer. Ye ken the difference?”

“Do I have cleavage?” Chica asked, peering at her end of the sign.

“What? No, that’s a crack in the board. I could fill it if you want.”

“No, don’t do that.” Chica looked down at her featureless chest and up at the sign. “It’s a new look, but I kind of like it. No one would ever think that was a baby chicken. What do you think, Bonnie?”

Bonnie’s ears pushed forward into the wind as he blinked at her. “About your cleavage?”

“No, silly, about the sign!”

“I don’t know…Tell you the truth, I’d forgotten that thing even existed. That’s the pizzeria at Circle Drive,” he added, leaning over to inspect the photograph while Foxy grumbled on about Ana’s inability to tell the difference between sexual charisma and astigmatism. “So…you went out there and stole the sign?”

“What? No, I made that. Yeah,” she said as he looked at her in surprise. “A few hours ago, that was three sheets of plywood in my garage.”

“But it looks like crap!”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘distressed,’” said Ana as Chica gave Bonnie a smack to the shoulder. “That means it’s supposed to look like crap, thank you very much. It’s the first time I ever put a finish like that on something. I wasn’t sure I could pull it off.” She glanced at Freddy, fighting at the childish part of her not to fish for compliments, and asked anyway, “Do you like it?”

He did not answer right away and when he did, his answer was, “This was what you absolutely had to do tonight?”

“Well…” Ana looked at the sign. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

She honestly couldn’t tell if he was annoyed with her or not. He didn’t seem to be…but he didn’t
seem to be anything at all. His inflexible plastic features could be astoundingly expressive when he wanted them to be; when he didn’t, he was as emotive as a brick.

“I got lots of other stuff I could be doing,” she admitted, running her eyes along the painted animatronics. “This just seemed like the most important thing.”

“Why?” he asked again. “You didn’t knock it down, the wind did.”

“I know, but…” She trailed off, intensely aware of the other three there, then went ahead and said it: “But I think it hurt… I hurt your feelings that one time… when I said it wasn’t your house anymore because it didn’t have your name on it. Because I’m a bitch sometimes with the emotional maturity of a fucking toddler.”

Freddy did not jump in with any objections. He did not say anything.

Sensing the shift in mood, Chica tried to move the others toward the door, but Bonnie only took one step and Foxy just brushed her off and stood his ground, watching like this was a show she’d put on just to entertain him.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Ana through clenched jaws. “And yeah, I know exactly how little that means at this point. There’s only so many times I can say I’m sorry, especially when it seems like every damn time I come here, including tonight, I have to start off by apologizing for the way I behaved when I left the last time.”

“Ana,” said Freddy.

“I mean it this time. I can’t take it back, but I can… maybe… make up for it a little? I don’t know. I know you look cross-eyed, but I swear, that wasn’t me, that was just how the paint peeled up.” Ana looked at the sign and grimaced. “Okay, maybe it was a little bit me, but cut me some slack, bear! I never said I was an artist and eyes are hard. I got the letters straight, didn’t I?”

Freddy waited for her to stop talking, then said, “Do you have a mailbox?”

“What?”

“At home. Do you have a mailbox?”

“Uh, yeah?” In this brave age of online banking, mailboxes were little more than decoration, like a lawn gnome or porch lamp. She did have one up at the house on Coldslip Mountain, even if it was still her aunt’s name stenciled on the side after all these months. She rarely stayed in one place long enough to need a mailbox, much less care about whose name was on it. She never got anything but junk mail and harassing postcards at the house anyway. “Why?”

“I don’t,” he said, still staring up at the sign. “I never have. I know this is a restaurant and I know what brand recognition is. I know that sign is for customers. I know. But for all my life, the only thing I’ve ever had that said, ‘This place is ours. This is where we live,’ is the sign over the door. It means more to me than it should,” he said impassively as static crackled in his speaker. “But you didn’t knock it down. If this is an apology, it is nothing you needed to apologize for.”

“Yeah, well… maybe it’s a little more than that. Maybe I’ve had a really… really bad week and it means a lot to me that I have someplace to go.” She grappled briefly with embarrassment, grit her teeth, and said, “A home. But it’s your home. It should have your name on it.”

Freddy glanced at her. His right arm shivered at the shoulder; his fingers twitched.
“Oh, they’re going to hug,” Chica whispered, clasping her hands tight together beneath her beak.

“No, we’re not,” Ana and Freddy said in perfect unison. They shared the same vaguely apologetic glance too, and then he headed for the building, gruffly calling back, “Get inside now, all of you. There are people at the quarry and more could be coming any minute. Ana, your promise.”

“Yeah, yeah. Tonight, I do anything you want.”

“Shut up, Foxy,” said Bonnie.

“So what am I doing for you, big bear?” Ana asked, doing her best to shake off her discomfort and put on a cheerful face. “Or should I say, what am I doing for me, because I know damn well that’s what you were thinking.”

Freddy grunted. “You were right.”

“Ha. So what’s it going to be? Bedroom? Bathroom? Kitchen? What is it you think I need the most?”

“None of the above.”

“Okay? Then what?”

“Nothing.” He reached the lobby door and opened it, fixing her with a stern eye while he waved the others inside. “I don’t really care how you do it. Go for a walk, play on your tablet, and for God’s sake, fix yourself a decent meal, but under no circumstances are you to work. You said anything,” he interrupted as she opened her mouth. “And this is what I want. For one night, you find a way to relax without the three Ms.”

And if that was all he’d said, Ana would have laughed and that would have all been fine, but damn Freddy, he stopped short as he realized the full impact of what he’d just said and turned around to clarify, “The two Ms, I should say. I would never try to tell you…anything…on the subject of the third…That is to say, what you do in your own time…I…I…I have to keep watch.”

He quickly walked off, leaving Ana alone in the hole he’d just dug with his big bear mouth, while the other three animatronics stared after him and at her with open curiosity.

“What are the three Ms?” asked Chica.

“Nothing,” said Ana, but of course, that only put a spotlight on it. She had to say something. “Just the things, uh, three things that I do to relax.”

“And they all begin with the letter M? That’s cute!” said Chica. “What are they?”

Ana’s mind went beautifully blank and she knew she had to say something. “Uh…mechanical repairs, medicate and…um…”

Foxy burst out laughing.

“Math,” said Ana, doing her best to ignore him. “I like to unwind sometimes with, like, Sudoku and other, uh, math puzzles.”

“Math,” said Bonnie, tipping his ears forward while Foxy doubled over, hook digging at the wall for support, just being a giddy asshole. “That’s the best you could come up with? Music, movies, miniature golf…and you went with math?”
“I happen to like math,” Ana insisted, heat flaming up the sides of her face.


“Mahjong,” said Chica, clearly bewildered, but happy to play the alphabet game. “Meditation. Mountain climbing!”

“The missionary position,” Foxy suggested, grinning.

“M is for math!” Ana said loudly and began to grope blindly behind her for the door. “In fact, I’m going to take a quick drive to town and get some food and a Sudoku book and, hey, how about I check and see if they’ve restocked their Easy Bake mixes? What do you say, Chica? Girl’s night in the kitchen!”

“Oh yes, please!” Chica chirped, actually clapping her hands in excitement.

“Coo, ye used to have to pay to see that,” Foxy hooted, digging his elbow at Bonnie. “Two pretty ladies, math or baking together!”

“You’re an asshole,” said Bonnie’s speaker, but his ears said he thought that was funny. He took the key out of Ana’s fumbling fingers and moved her aside so she could unlock the door, shaking his head very slightly.

“Please tell me I’m not blushing,” she whispered, right up close where hopefully only he could hear.

“You’re not blushing,” he said obediently.

“I am, though, aren’t I?”

“Yup. Red as a radish.” He opened the door and held it so she could escape, watching her with a crooked smile. “Math.”

She blushed even hotter, grabbed her keys back and fled.
Ana had never been the sort of person to do nothing on a weekend. Relaxation was a state that had to be achieved, usually through pharmaceutical augmentation after a long day slogging through the odd jobs and cleaning that piled up during a work-week. It wasn’t easy to switch that part of her off. The shopping trip that had begun as an escape from an awkward situation turned into an aimless trudge up and down the aisles of WalMart, looking for food that she felt like eating but that didn’t require appliances or effort. She ended up, as she always did, with a couple cases of energy drinks and junk food. Also a Sudoku book, because there was no fucking way she was facing Foxy without one. And a book of advanced crossword puzzles for Chica, because whatever. Girls Night.

She also picked up all the Easy-Bake refills they had, and just in case that wasn’t enough, she took a walk through the regular baking mix aisle, putting whatever caught her eye into the cart. Spice cake? Sure. Lemon bars? You bet. Sugarless oat bran muffin with chia seeds? Sounds gross, but okay. While she was picking out a few tubs of crayon-colored ‘buttercream’ frosting, she had a half-assed sort of epiphany. She would bring Mr. Faust a small selection of cakes. It would be a nice break from hospital food, full of calories, and most importantly, soft enough for a man who’d just had dental surgery to eat.

After another turn through the WalMart to pick up everything she’d need, she returned to Freddy’s and got to work.

Well…maybe ‘work’ was too strong a word, but it was definitely a chore. Ana understood food as a science. She could assemble ingredients and apply heat until the composition was sufficiently altered to create an edible result, but food had been too long associated with her mother’s fists for Ana to take any kind of pleasure from either making or eating it. Chica, on the other hand, was wildly enthusiastic and when she learned that it was going to be a gift for a sick friend in the hospital (knowing the relationship between Mr. Faust and the animatronics he had created was…complicated, Ana did not say exactly who her friend was), she got into it even more.

And it was fun, surprisingly, the same way that baking cupcakes with Kaya Morehead had kind of been fun, only more so, because Kaya was a nice person Ana sort of knew through a coworker, and Chica was…a friend. They were two friends hanging out in the kitchen, playing with their food and talking about desert ecology, philosophy, and the recurrent socio-political themes in the Berenstain Bears books (Chica’s interests were nothing if not diverse).

Once they’d assembled a suitable care package with the best-looking baked goods, they went their separate ways. Chica toddled off to the Reading Room with her crossword puzzles and a pen, and Ana met Bonnie on the main show stage for a movie (Alien, an oldie but a goodie, and the first movie they had watched together which he seemed to genuinely get into, which made his equally genuine reaction to the chest-burster scene that much more hilarious). When the movie ended, she went out to the loading dock to smoke a joint and think about nothing. She’d been at it for a while when she heard metal feet approaching across the parking lot—Foxy, returning from a midnight stroll. He didn’t have his eyes on and didn’t know she was there until she flicked her Zippo to relight, and his first response to seeing her was unmistakably wary, but Ana with half a joint in her was not the suspicious kind. He told her he’d just been on a walk around the base of the bluff. She told him whales were mammals, just like walruses or seals, but were more closely related genetically to a cow and that cows were more closely related to whales than to horses. They talked
about that for a while—it seemed very important—and then she made her way to bed.

She dreamed that the Puppet appeared on a cloud of putrescent air and opened the curtain. The next thing she knew, the camera was on, shining its blinding light onto Ana in her bed. She could move in the dream, so she rolled over, facing into the comfortable dark as the Puppet drew away her covering sheet and plucked the band from the end of her braid. It perched on the headboard and brushed out her long dark hair with its claws while Ana dreamed she dozed. At last, the camera blinked a few times, then shut off. The Puppet braided her hair again and kissed her on her sweat-damp brow with its cold, cracked porcelain mouth, then closed the curtain and slipped away into the shadows. After that, the dream changed and Ana was in the car again, locked in the trunk, and her mother was driving to the lake. She kicked and pulled at the back panel, but couldn’t get out this time and the water poured in and she drowned.

That was the dream she remembered when she woke up, although she still knew in some dim way that there had been another one…and it had been scarier.

She woke before her phone’s alarm on Saturday and as she dressed, noticed a puddle of rot that had leaked under the backstage door at some point in the night. It was dried now, but the smell sure lingered. She needed to do something about that, like, yesterday.

After fortifying herself with half a pot of coffee, Ana changed into her last disposable hazard suit and got to work shoveling out the mess backstage. She didn’t attempt to salvage anything. If it was small enough to be bagged, she bagged it. If it wasn’t, she wrapped it in heavy duty plastic and sealed it with tape. Everything went into the truck and then to the quarry. Since the Parts Room was really just a tungsten carbide vault, the rest of the cleaning was as easy as spraying it down with the power washer, scrubbing it with a bottle of ultra-concentrated cleaner, and spraying it down again. There was a drain in the floor (there used to be a hose on the wall, too, but it had been pitched out with everything else, including the camera that had been back here, watching her work), and it all swirled away down the pipe, leaving the room as clean and fresh as it was ever going to get.

Ana opened all the backstage doors to help it dry out faster, one after the other. The Captain’s cabin was empty; Foxy must be in the bow of his ship, since he hardly ever left the Cove, even now that he could. Bonnie was onstage in the dining room, playing with his guitar; he jerked hard when the door slid open behind him, but oddly, did not look around or greet her. Concentrating on his music, she guessed, so she didn’t interrupt with greetings of her own.

She opened the last door, the one to the Party Room, and stepped through the prop cabinet that acted as a doorway, already stripping out of her hazard suit. She wanted to keep her momentum going as long as she could, and knowing Freddy, he was going to insist she stuck to the schedule, which meant having a functional bathroom before she got to do anything fun. Having looked at all of them way back when she’d been mapping the building for the roof repair, Ana knew the arcade restrooms had seen the least amount of shit-related vandalism. She could spray the place down, plumb in a new sink and toilet, and satisfy Freddy’s requirements by the time the weekend was over. However, the pragmatist in Ana saw the immediate flaw in putting her personal bathroom clear and the hell on the other side of the building; she didn’t often need to sprint for the jakes, but when she did, distance mattered and there was a bathroom right here in the West Hall, just two doors down. It was in a shittier condition (so to speak), but needed exactly the same amount of work to fix it up. If she was going to be honest with herself, her biggest objection to it was the long-eared trollop on the door.

After changing into some working clothes, Ana picked up her tablet and headed into Lala’s bathroom to take some pictures, make notes and take measurements. It took a little longer than it
had to, owing to the fact that Ana didn’t want to touch anything, and as soon as she left the room, there was Freddy, waiting for her in the spotlight of the West Hall’s security camera.

“What’s up?” she asked cautiously, thinking he must have been in the Parts Room and noticed the missing camera already.

“Do not tell me you have been in the Parts Room,” he began, calmly enough but with a hint of I’m-not-mad-I’m-disappointed in the angle of his ears.

Ana switched her inner settings to the offensive. “Before you start reading me off the list of approved renovations, you do remember what was back there, don’t you? I wouldn’t have left it this long if I hadn’t gotten…you know, distracted, but I woke up this morning to that shit seeping out from under the door! Seeping! What does that tell you? Does anything good ever seep? I wasn’t doing anything wrong, I was just—”

“Shut up!” Freddy interrupted sharply.

Ana, startled, shut up.

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking off his hat to rub his brow. “But this is important, Ana. Do not, under any circumstances, tell me you have been in the Parts Room! As ridiculous as it is that the safety rules and regulations that governed this building when it was a pizzeria are still in operation, we do not have the luxury of picking and choosing which ones to obey. The backstage area is to remain off-limits. Access is restricted. Employees only are allowed in the Parts Room. The doors are to remain shut.”

“Oh.” Ana shifted back uncomfortably. “Hypothetically, if I had been back there, it would have just been to clean it and let it air out.”

“I understand, but my understanding changes nothing. If I had actually seen you open that door dressed the way you are and then step through it, I would have to remove you from the premises. Without a manager’s override, I could never, ever, allow you to return. The rules are for your safety! You may not think you have to follow them, but I still have to enforce them!” He gave her a moment with that, then softened his tone and the angle of his ears. “If you need access to the backstage area, you must be in uniform and you must ask me to admit you. I can work with you, but you have to work with me. Are we clear?”

Ana nodded, compliant but confused. Foxy had watched her come right out of the Parts Room into his cabin and hadn’t said a word. Or had he watched? His eyes had been off. Was that a loophole, like Bonnie just not turning around when the door had opened behind him on the stage, or…no, because Foxy had actually let her back into the Parts Room when their little chat was over. She wanted to ask, but not Freddy. “We’re clear,” she said instead.

Freddy grunted, looking her over. “And what are you doing now?”

“Um…I was thinking I’d start on the bathroom.”

“I’m sure you were,” he rumbled, eyes narrowing. “Ana, have you seen your work schedule?”

“Yeah, and the bathroom is next on the list!”

“Do you recall the work hours we agreed on?”

Ana rolled her eyes. “Not off the top of my head.”
“From noon to six.”

“The hell they were!” she said, startled. “They were ten to eight! Oh shit.”

Freddy pointed at her. “I’m docking you two hours for rolling your eyes and another two for lying to me. Keep it up and see what happens when you run out of hours to dock. Now. Do you recall the work hours we agreed on?”

Ana sighed and slumped against the wall, looking at the camera, inviting its blind sympathy. It had none. “Yes.”

“And what time did you start working?”

“I don’t know. It couldn’t have been that early. The sun was up.”

“Six-fifteen.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. I also say that you signed that schedule and I consider that a binding contract. When is your first break scheduled?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll remind you. Every two hours, you are allotted thirty minutes to rest. Every four hours, you are allotted one hour to have a meal. How long have you been working?”

Ana tilted her watch into the beam of the camera’s light. “About five hours.”

“Have you had a break?”

She could only shrug. “Sat down in the truck when I drove the stuff out to the quarry.”

“All right. And how long did that take?”

She shrugged again. “Ten minutes, maybe.”

“I think that’s being extremely generous, but all right. Have you eaten?”

“Uh, no. I’ve been hauling bags of carcass soup out to the quarry, and it’s easily eighty degrees out there and climbing. You don’t eat, so you’re just going to have to take my word for it when I say a full stomach is not a smart thing to throw into that equation. I’m leaving in a few hours, I’ll get something then.”

“So what you’re telling me is that you have worked for five hours, you have taken two ten-minute breaks, and you have not eaten. Coffee,” he growled as Ana opened her mouth, “does not count. Now. We are not going to have this discussion every morning. In fact, we are never going to have it again. This is your first, last and only warning. The next time you step outside the bounds of our contract, I will consider it broken and I will not enter into another. I don’t need these renovations and I don’t particularly want them. I am compromising my principles because this is important to you, but I am not going to stand aside and watch you work yourself to death. Do I make myself clear?”

“Work myself to death,” Ana echoed. “Oh my God, Freddy. Are you a bear or a drama llama?”

“I said, do I make myself clear?”
“Yes,” she groaned. “But come on with this shit. When I made that schedule—”

“We,” he interrupted. “When we made it. And you signed it, so I don’t want to hear you tell me you didn’t know what you were agreeing to.”

“I’m just saying, I didn’t know I was going anywhere today. I don’t know when I’ll be back. I’ve only got, like—” She checked her watch again. “—two hours at most to get as much done as I can.”

“I understand. So here is what is going to happen. You are going to take a fifty-minute break—”

Ana clapped her hand over her face and rubbed, hard.

“And when you are ready to work again, I will help you clear the restroom. You might want to ask the others for their help. I dare say you could accomplish more with the four of us, or even one of us, in one hour, than you could by yourself in two. You are not,” he said, emphasizing every word, “alone here. Do you hear me?”

She nodded.

“All right. Fifty minutes. Go. The next time I see you, I want to see a drink in your hand.”

“And coffee doesn’t count,” Ana muttered.

Freddy, already turning away, turned back. After a moment’s pause and a perceptible shudder, he reached out to gently grasp her shoulder. “Coffee is fine,” he said. “Water is better, but coffee is fine.” He gave her a careful squeeze, then let her go. “Beer would be pushing your luck, though.”

Ana did not drink this early in the morning and never when she knew she’d be driving later. Nevertheless, something in her bristled at being told she shouldn’t. “Yeah, yeah, and telling me I’m pushing my luck is pushing yours.” But she wasn’t fighting, just setting boundaries, so she finished with a friendly, “See you in an hour, big bear.”

Freddy grunted and ambled off in the direction of Pirate Cove. The camera swiveled to watch him go, but when Ana went into the dining room, the camera over the stage came on and focused on her.

“I can’t wait until all of those are accidentally smashed beyond repair,” Ana said conversationally, holding up one hand to keep its blinding light out of her eyes.

Bonnie, still onstage with his guitar, replied, “Don’t say that too loud around Freddy. His security protocols are a lot stricter than mine.”

“I said accidentally.”

“Uh huh. He’s looking for you, by the way.”

“Freddy? He found me.” Ana made a face, only to shrug it away, and went to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of cold coffee. “He thinks I’m working too hard.”

“You are.”

“Don’t you start. If I was spending my weekend hiking or mountain climbing or playing soccer, Freddy wouldn’t say a thing about it and that’s just as physically demanding, if not worse. This—” Ana returned to the dining room, gesturing broadly at the building around them as the camera followed the sweeping motion of her hand. “—is how I relax. And you’re getting a home makeover
out of it! Win-win.”

“Yeah, but Freddy’s main concern is…” His dancing fingers abruptly stilled as he raised his eyes from his guitar to her face. He smiled, but uncertainly. “You do something different with your hair?”

“Huh?” Ana felt at her head and found only yesterday’s braid, wispy from sleeping in it, but essentially the same braid she’d been wearing for more than half her life. “No?”

“It looks different.”

Ana put her coffee cup down so she could explore her hair with both hands. “How?”

Bonnie’s ears twitched a few times. He shook his head. “I don’t know, it just does. Like, it usually starts higher up, right about level with your ears, and now it’s lower…and the little braidy bits are looser. And I think it’s crooked.”

Puzzled, Ana had to laugh, even as she began to unknot her braid and comb it through with her fingers (a vague sense of déjà vu swept over her as she did this, like an echo of something she’d dreamed). “You sure this isn’t just a ploy to see me with my hair down one more time?”

He looked surprised, then somewhat offended, but before these emotions even fully registered anywhere but his ears, they had faded into something wistful as he watched her shake her hair loose and wild all down her back and around her hips. “Well, I’m sure not complaining,” he said, then forced a smile and returned his attention to his guitar. “But I’m a rabbit, you know. We love ‘hare’.”

“Really?” she said dryly.

“Hey, you don’t like dumb puns, don’t come to Freddy’s. That’s pretty much all we do.”

“Well, if you want to try something new today, I could use some help demolishing a bathroom.”

His ears went up. “Hell yeah! I’ve wanted to punch this place apart for years!”

“You’re not going to punch anything. You’re going to carry disgusting, shit-encrusted garbage out to the truck so I can throw it away. Like you don’t have enough issues with your hands,” she added, reaching out to give his troublesome pinkie a testing wiggle. It came right off. “I have got to fix this.”

“Now where have I heard that before?”

“It’s not my fault. See this? The flange on your knuckle is completely broken off on this whole side.” She fixed him with a hard sidelong stare. “Almost like someone’s been punching their knee. So of course the pin is going to keep slipping, there’s nothing to hold onto. What am I supposed to do, go down to Lowes and buy you a new finger?”

“While you’re at it, pick me up a new knee. It’s all bent out of shape because someone keeps punching it.”

“What a mystery.” Ana put his finger on as best she could and sat back to watch as he resumed ‘playing,’ holding his pinkie stiffly out like he was a kid at a pretend tea party. “I wish I could do more.”

Bonnie shrugged with his shoulders and ears together. “It is what it is, baby girl. Ana, I mean.”
“Stupid question,” she said, guiding the conversation back to less painful territory, “but where do all your extra parts come from?”

“There aren’t any here.”

“Yeah, I know, but when you had some, where’d they come from? You ever see a delivery truck when the parts came in? Or a name on the packing boxes? Anything like that? There’s no serial number or anything on any of your bits and pieces,” she complained, popping open and slapping shut the casings on his right arm one after the other from his wrist to his shoulder. “But if I knew who did the manufacturing…It’s been a while, but all that stuff has to be on file with someone somewhere. If I just knew who to talk to, I could maybe bullshit my way into getting a product list. Maybe even a catalogue.”

“What, like, from a store?” Bonnie asked, but his ears told her he wasn’t confused as much as cautious. “Dad…The guy who made us made all the parts himself. Except for, like, screws and pins and stuff. But everything else.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t a fabricator.”

“It’s not what he’s best at, according to him, but he said he didn’t trust anyone else to do it.”

“Yeah, I guess I can see why not,” Ana conceded, scowling. And she could certainly see the old man buying a manufactory just to run out a line of animatronic parts whenever he needed them. But on the other hand…

“Accidents happen,” she mused aloud. “Especially at a kid’s place. And it takes time to machine parts. Hell, it must take time just to order in the tungsten carbide. I just can’t believe he’d shut the whole restaurant down for days on end every time one of you needed an ear replaced.”

“Yeah, he found that out way back at High Street.” Bonnie huffed out a laugh. “Some brave little shit threw a pitcher at Foxy the first month we were open. They were glass pitchers in those days and I don’t think it was totally empty. Broke the whole side of his face off so the bones were showing. You should have heard the screaming. Dad had to shut down for a few days while he made a new head, and the next day after he reopened, I mean the very next day, Chica slipped on a slice of pizza some kid dropped and broke her entire back-end, head to butt. We all got non-skid feet and Dad started stamping out extra cases to keep in the back room.”

“Just the cases, though? None of the actual parts?”

“You mean joints and stuff?” Bonnie shifted, evasive once again. “Yeah, a few. Hands and feet mainly. Anything with lots of moving parts in a compact space is going to wear out faster than just your average pump or pin, so he kept some around the restaurants. I know you’re going to ask me what there was, but honestly, I don’t remember. It was a long time ago.”

Ana nodded, thinking back to that long night with Mike Schmidt, picking her way through the abandoned pizzerias at Circle Drive and Mulholland. They’d both been picked over by trophy hunters and vandals, but a lot had been left behind. Tables and chairs, arcade games, kitchen appliances, posters and toys and who knew what else?

Who knew…

“So when the other places closed,” she said slowly, feeling out the edges of the real question,
“what happened to those old parts?”

The camera on the stage wall whined.

Bonnie looked at it, then shrugged hard and started tuning his unplugged guitar. “I don’t know.”

“Were they left behind?”

“I guess. Pretty much everything gets left behind. If they’re not going to take the whole us, why would they take the bits of us?”

“Did you ever see anybody take any of it out?”

“No. I mean, yeah. I mean…I don’t know. The kids that break in always go for the old heads first, but they’ll take whatever’s there,” Bonnie said, fiddling with the tuning pegs with all his concentration. “If there were any important parts left by the time they came to get us, I’m sure Dad just took them home with us.”

Ana started to nod in discouragement, blinked hard, and looked at him. “Wait a minute, took them where?”

“Uh…”

“Home? He took them home? He’s got those old parts just sitting around his house?”

Bonnie focused in harder on his guitar.

The camera focused in harder on Ana.

“Were they stored with you?” she asked.

“No, we were locked in the vault. The spare parts are kept in the machining room.”

“The machining…Is that in the house too?” Ana gasped.

“Yes, but…” Bonnie blinked. His ears snapped up straight, quivering at the tips. “No! I mean, yeah, it is, but I don’t know how to make parts! The machine does it all!”

“The machine?”

“Yeah!”

“One machine?” Ana pressed. “That can make all the parts?”

Bonnie blinked again, several times. “I don’t know how it works,” he said quickly. “He just does things to the computer and the parts come out.”

“That sounds pretty straight-forward.”

“It isn’t!” Bonnie insisted. “It’s incredibly complicated! Plus, it makes all the noise when it’s going, just so much noise, and Dad never leaves the house! Even if you snuck in, he’d hear that damn thing going and he’d come down and catch you!”

Yeah, he probably would if he was home, but Ana knew for a fact that he wasn’t. The grandson might be skulking around or the wife might be staying there if she was still in town, but Ana could find that out at the appointment today. Assuming the house was empty, she could make as much
noise as she wanted. If not, well…she’d have to wait for one of Mammon’s prize-winning thunderstorms, which was never a long wait.

“Where is it?” she asked, but no sooner were the words out of her mouth, than she realized she already knew.

In the basement. The one he kept locked. Out of habit, he said. Purely out of habit. Nothing down there anymore. Nothing to interest anyone.

‘Except perhaps you,’ the old man had said, and boy, was he right. Ana was very interested.

Bonnie had actually clapped a hand over his muzzle like a cartoon character, and he didn’t remove it now even as his speaker said, “Ana, whatever you’re thinking…you know, we weren’t in a warehouse or anything like that. It’s not like you could just walk in and help yourself.”

“Pretty sure I can,” Ana replied, stunned by the ease with which the plan had come together. The old man was out of the house. She had the code to the security system. And Faust probably wouldn’t even notice a few missing parts, since he’d told her he hadn’t been down in the basement recently. Even if he did notice, Chad could be handily framed for any theft, as he had absolutely been sneaking around down there to get the mineral oil he’d used to try and bump his grandfather off. It was more than just a plan. It was Fate. With a capital F.

“Look, even if I wanted to help you out here, I can’t,” Bonnie said forcefully. “I don’t, by the way, but I can’t. I have no idea how to get there from here. It could be right down the road or on another planet for all I know. We’re always shut down for transport.”

Transport, right. How was she going to get the truck up there? Faust had always opened the gate from his phone. Would the access code for the house work on the gate? And if it didn’t, would it, say, take a picture of the thieving dumbass who put in the wrong code and send it to the old man? Possibly. And in any case, there would undoubtedly be a record of every attempt to open the door, successful or not. If he ever had a reason to check those records, he’d know someone had been in the house while he was away.

But it wasn’t necessarily the house she had to break into, Ana recalled suddenly. Of all the doors the old man kept locked, he kept only one key in the safe: the key to the garage. And not because of the cars inside. He seemed utterly indifferent to them. So what was he protecting? An access lift to his old workshop perhaps? It was that or bring the animatronics through that glass house with its marble floors and imported carpets when it was time to take them in or out of storage.

The more she thought about it, the righter it felt. All she had to do was find his office, get into the safe (behind a false panel on the south wall, he’d said), and make a copy of the key to the garage. The gate was still an issue, but hell, she could cut across the desert and hike up from the base of the bluff. She didn’t need much, to begin with: a finger and a knee for Bonnie, a couple pumps for Chica’s legs, a lower jaw and some other facial rigging for Foxy, and a new ankle for Freddy to help with that dragging foot. She could carry all that away in her day pack and if she needed more, she could do it again as often as she dared until the old man came home.

“Oh God, you’re gonna do it.” Bonnie grabbed at her arm and clutched it too tight. “Ana, for real…I don’t know a lot about the way the world works, but I know there’s a big difference between breaking into a place like this and breaking into a place like that. If you were caught, I…” His fan revved once, twice. He said, softly, “I’d never see you again. I’d never know what happened, I’d just never see you again. I can’t…I can’t handle that.”

“I’m not going to get caught.”
“Because you’re not going! Promise me,” he said, searching her eyes. “Promise me you’re not going to do anything stupid.”

“If I could do that, would I even be here?”

“I’m not kidding!”

“I know,” she said and sighed. “Bonnie, sooner or later…something’s going to happen. You know that, right?”

He didn’t answer, but he looked down at the shiny patch of shellac over his cracked chest. His ears lowered.

“Being afraid of that, wanting to stop it…that’s not stupid.” She patted his hand where he gripped her, then pried at it until he noticed and let go of her. She managed not to rub at the aching place he left behind, but it wasn’t easy. That was going to bruise. “I’m not just going to wait for you to fall apart in front of me and not even try to stop it. That would be stupid. Because I can stop it.”

The camera whined shrilly, distracting her.

She shot it an irritated glance, then caught Bonnie’s troubled gaze and gave him the full force of her conviction. “I can stop it,” she said again. “If I had the parts, I could fix you. All of you. And if I had one night in that house—one hour!—I could have the parts. Isn’t that worth a little risk?”

He hesitated, then shook his head hard. “This isn’t a ‘little’ risk. Ana, I could lose you!”

“Then you do understand,” she said. “Because every day that I do nothing, I’m one day closer to the day I lose you. All of you. And I can’t handle that.”

The camera whined again. Neither of them looked at it, although Bonnie’s ears twitched a few times. He searched her eyes, then lowered his own and sat for a long time just looking at his hands. He touched his knee, the strings of his guitar, the broken place over his heart…

“I really don’t know where it is, though,” he said at last. “I don’t remember seeing anything from the windows except desert, desert and more desert. There’s, like…a cliff? And a river at the bottom…and maybe some buildings way off in the desert, but never any lights. There’s a road, but I never saw any cars on it, ever. They really did shut us off for transport, but…” His plastic features shifted as he struggled with his conscience and finally admitted, “I don’t remember the clock discrepancy being all that big, so it’s probably around here somewhere.”

“I know where it is,” said Ana.

“You do?”

“Small town, Bon. Everyone knows where everyone lives.” She checked her watch. Forty-five minutes left in her ‘break’…although Freddy was sure to let her take longer if she needed it, and she probably wouldn’t need it. “I’ve got some cooking to do,” she said, getting up. “You can keep me company in the kitchen if you want, but you don’t have to.”

“Hey, I’ll keep you company in any room you want,” said Bonnie, putting his guitar aside with obvious relief. He probably thought the subject had changed. “You getting breakfast? That’ll make Freddy happy.”

“It’s not for me,” Ana said with a crooked smile. “And believe me, Freddy would not approve.”
Four animatronics did indeed make damned short work of deconstructing one restroom, even if Chica’s role was mostly supervisory. In less than an hour, Ana not only had the room completely cleared, she also had the old floor tiles scraped up and the walls torn down. She had to go then, leaving the room picked to its bones but ready for reanimation upon her return, and after a quick detour up Coldslip to use the shower and change into some clean clothes, she was on her way to visit Mr. Faust and hear what his doctor had to say about his diet.

In honor of Mr. Faust, she cranked the radio up and on those long, flat stretches between Mammon and literally the entire rest of the world, she drove very fast. Fast, but not recklessly. Beside her in the passenger seat was an oversized gift bag from Kitchy Kitchens that had once held a half-dozen aprons and which now held the care package she and Chica had baked last night, as well as this morning’s less conventional addition, and she wanted it to get where it was going without going frosting-first into the windshield.

Saturday afternoon made for a busier day at the care center. The small parking lot was halfway full and there were several kids of varying ages enjoying the shady fountains in the well-kept gardens, accompanied by family. The air-conditioned lobby was overrun with kids, some in hospital gowns and others in swimsuits. On weekends, it seemed the therapy pool was open to patients and their guests for recreational swimming. Oh, and there was a free sundae bar in the cafeteria until six. And the gaming room, of course, was accessible until midnight every night. The first time Ana had come here, the place had felt more like a hotel than a hospital; now it felt more like…well, like Freddy’s. Whatever else he did, Mr. Faust sure knew how to entertain kids.

However, the commotion was more or less quarantined to the ground floor, where all the amenities were. Once Ana stepped off the elevator onto the top floor, the hush and the smell of chemical cleansers enveloped her and she was back in a hospital again.

She could hear voices coming from the old man’s room. She knew she wasn’t late (if what Einstein theorized about speed and time were true, it was a wonder she hadn’t arrived here yesterday), and in her extensive experience, specialists were never early. She made sure to stop just outside his slightly open door and knock, so she wouldn’t interrupt if the nurses were doing nurse things.

“I think I have what I need from you,” she heard Mr. Faust say. He sounded tired, but that wasn’t all. Although he seemed to be making an effort to enunciate, his words were definitely soft around the edges and frayed off at the ends. Sounded like either the pain or the painkillers were getting to him. Or maybe he was just doing the best he could with fewer teeth than he was used to. “Someone will call you within the week. Good day.”

A young man’s voice said a semi-formal goodbye sprinkled with semi-casual get-wells and thank-yous. In another moment, the young man himself pulled the door all the way open, nodding politely to Ana as he went off about his business.

“Come in, please,” Mr. Faust called in that same soft, careful way, adding in an aside, “Did you not tell me that was the last of them?”

“It was,” someone else said.
“It’s me,” said Ana, stepping inside and raising the hand that wasn’t carrying the gift bag in a tentative wave. “Did I get the wrong time? I thought it was Saturday at three.”

“It is, yes. Please, come in. I’ve been interviewing home health care assistants,” he explained, motioning her toward an empty chair facing the bed. “In the hopes that I might secure an early release if the wardens here can be satisfied with my precautions.”

“How early?” Ana asked, eyeing the other occupant in the room as she tucked her gift bag self-consciously behind her chair. It wasn’t a man she’d seen around town and it didn’t look like a relative. He was an older man, not as old as Faust, with a vaguely coppish look to his features and a lawyerly look to his clothes. He sat in a chair on the other side of the bed—at the king’s right hand—with a briefcase balanced on his thin knees and if that wasn’t a genuine Prada, Ana would eat it.

“I don’t expect to occupy my usual seat in the Founder’s Day parade, but I don’t think the first of the month is too unreasonable. Mr. McCall does not agree,” he added as the other man plucked noncommittally at the cuffs of his suit jacket. “Oh, do forgive me. Where are my manners? Mr. McCall, this is Miss Ana Stark. Miss Stark, my assistant, Mr. McCall.”

Ana could see that her name was familiar to McCall, although if he was keeping Faust’s appointments, she was probably penciled in on today’s calendar. She offered her hand to be shaken, watching for the tiny crinkles around his eyes to deepen in that that unique I-am-shaking-the-hand-of-a-whore squint. She didn’t see it, but she did see a glint of some other kind of speculation behind his professional mask of neutrality.

“Thank you, that will be all,” Faust said once the handshake had ended. “I trust you to make the necessary arrangements.”

“Of course. Do you have any…special preferences?”

“No, I think this time, I should like someone with actual qualifications. However…” Faust brought out his phone and flipped through it. “Miss Wexler and Miss Hageman. Have Kinley find a place for them. Elsewhere, you understand.”

“Yes, sir.” McCall made a note in his own phone, nodded to Ana, and left.

“I work with a Hageman,” Ana remarked once the assistant was gone.

Faust nodded, fumbling at the bedside table for a glass of water. “His youngest and his only daughter. She was quite forthright in the interview. She said she had no experience whatsoever, but she could cook and clean and keep her mouth shut about anything she saw in the house.”

“Sounds ideal.”

“I have a cook and a housekeeping service,” he replied indifferently. “And my secrets have a way of protecting themselves. I suspect what Miss Hageman is really after is a fairly stable, fairly temporary job that would enable her to save up the necessary evil to move out and see some of the world. If that’s all she’s after, I can easily accommodate her.” He sipped at his drink in an exhausted way, then said, “And I just want to be rid of Cindy Wexler. She was difficult enough as a child and she’s grown into a dreadful précieuse.”

“Still sweeping out Mammon, are you?” Ana asked, amused.

“My doctor tells me keeping busy is an important part of the recovery process.”

“I don’t think she meant playing God with people’s lives.”
“She specifically said ‘hobbies’."

A well-timed knock put an end to that conversation. The dietician had arrived. She introduced herself, checked Faust’s identity, rifled through a small stack of papers she’d brought in a file folder, and brightly asked, “Are we expecting more family?”

“No,” said Faust and, seeing Ana’s surprise, added, “Abby flew home early this morning. One of the grandchildren has a recital, she tells me, and she promised to be there. And it’s difficult, as I’m sure you know, for her to be back in Mammon. As for the boy, I invited him, but he likes to entertain on weekends, and I certainly don’t expect him to cancel his standing plans simply to sit around a hospital and stare at an invalid. I have no other family.”

“Except me,” Ana said with a small, ironic smile.

He looked at her through the dark lenses of his glasses. “Except you.”

The dietician waited politely for this odd interlude to end, then began a detailed lecture on general dietary health, with emphasis on how the body’s nutritional needs change after an injury, that lasted thirty-five excruciating minutes and that Ana could have summed up in just two words: Eat more.

At long, long last, the magic words were uttered: “Do you have any questions?”

“Any restrictions?” Ana asked, reaching for the gift bag she had kept tucked between her chair and the wall. “Sugar, fat, salt…all of that is okay?”

“As much as it is for you or I,” said the dietician, which was as close to ‘No’ as she could probably get without having any medical justification for it.

“Is that for me?” Faust asked, not with jovial curiosity, but wary concern.

“For you or the nurses at the duty desk. It’s not going to hurt my feelings if you don’t want them, or if your mouth is too sore or whatever,” Ana replied and opened the bag. The first thing she brought out was the plastic tub Chica had filled with her decorated baked goodies. “My friend made those in an Easy Bake oven, can you believe that? Except for the ones that look like pandas, I made those. They’re all just your basic yellow and/or chocolate cakes. The muffins are either bran, blueberry, or cheddar and jalapeno. And I don’t know what the scones are,” she added quizzically, “because they weren’t there last night. My friend gets a little bake-crazy.”

Frowning, Mr. Faust brought out, not one of the mystery scones, but one of Chica’s mini-cakes—a plain yellow cake covered in white frosting with some confetti sprinkles and the words “Get Well” piped on in yellow letters. He did not eat it, only held it pinched between his fingers for a long minute of close scrutiny before placing back in the tub.

“They’re really soft,” said Ana. “So you won’t have to chew. And they all got a scoop of protein powder in ’em so you can sort of squint and pretend they’re healthy.”

The dietician cleared her throat. “Adding a scoop of protein powder anywhere you can is a great way to up your nutritional intake without overeating, but I’m afraid I have to strongly discourage using dessert to reach your daily goals. By all means, enjoy your cupcakes, just don’t let them become a habit.”

Ana leaned toward the bed and whispered out of the corner of her mouth, prison-style, “Give her a cupcake.”
“Oh, I shouldn’t,” said the dietician, but came at Faust’s beckoning wave and selected a Chica-cake. She took a polite bite…then a real one. “Okay, these are delicious,” she said gravely, studying the half-eaten cake in her hand with academic intensity. “Definitely habit-forming. It’s a good thing you need the calories right now or I would have to confiscate all of them.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Ana, once she was gone. “You need the calories, so it’s important to pad them out wherever you can. For example, when you have your English muffin in the morning —” She looked elaborately around to make sure they were alone, then went back into the bag. She came up with a small cardboard box decorated with a simple red ribbon, holding six blocks wrapped in wax paper. “—just add a little butter.”

“Butter,” Mr. Faust echoed, as if it were some alien word, incomprehensible.

“Expertly adulterated with only the finest, uh…let’s just say ‘herb’ and leave it at that.”

“How exotic,” he said, taking a stick from the basket and unwrapping the end to expose the creamy green filling for a questing sniff. His smiles had a way of accentuating his wrinkles, but this one somehow smoothed them out, making him seem a much younger man for just a moment. “I haven’t had anything like this in years. Is it likely to fuck me up rather terribly?”

“Yeah, for sure.” She thought about telling him she’d had one joint the previous night and spent a good hour discussing convergent evolution with a talking fox, but settled for, “That shit will kick your skinny old ass.”

“Marvelous,” he said and carefully rewrapped the end of the butter, replacing it in the basket. “Thank you. It’s a most thoughtful…”

And then he just stopped, looking at his hand where it rested on the basket of butters. Clouds rolled by across the window, dimming the sun and throwing shadows across his face, but the clouds rolled on and the sun came out, and the shadows stayed there on his face.

He looked at her. “I’ll keep the sweets here. I’m sure I’ll enjoy them. However, I don’t think I ought to enjoy this—” He gave the butters a stone-faced pat. “—where my antics could be observed and my blood tested.”

“I figured I’d keep it at my place until you’re out. You know what they say, the longer it sits, the harder it hits.” She pretended to think about it, just like the plan hadn’t been building itself all morning, then shrugged, so casually. “Or I guess I could drop it off at your place.”

“I hate to impose,” he said, staring her down through the lenses of his dark glasses. “I realize it’s quite a bit out of your way.”

“I got nowhere else to be.”

He opened his bedside table and brought out the set of keys with the Doctor Frankenstein string doll without hesitation. “You don’t mind leaving now, I hope? Forgive me, but it is rather fragrant and the nurses here are quite observant. We can continue our visit when you return.”

Ana felt a twinge of guilt then, but it wasn’t hard to snuff it out. She wasn’t going to hurt the old man. She wasn’t even really stealing, since he’d never even know the things she planned to take were missing. And besides, he’d created the animatronics. In a sense, he was their father. This wasn’t stealing, it was…child support.

Ana took the keys. “Anything you say,” she said, already on her feet, eager to be gone. “Do I need anything special to get past the gate?”
“You’ll have to call me. I’ll buzz you through. You remember the access code for the security system?”

“Yeah. 1-2-0-8-1-9-8-3.”

“Good. Don’t forget, as soon as you open the front door, you have only thirty seconds to reset the system or the alarm will trigger.”

“Awesome. I’ll be in and out, and I’ll be right back,” she promised.

“Drive safely, Miss Stark. I…I look forward to speaking with you soon.” He settled back into his pillows, resting his good hand over his bad one, watching her go.

***

In retrospect, she should have known better. Nothing had ever gone right for Ana unless it was secretly going wrong. But she’d find that out soon enough.

For now, Ana drove up Canyon Road in blissful ignorance, smugly congratulating herself for buying a golden ticket to the Fazbear Workshop for the low, low price of six sticks of weed butter.

When she reached the gate, she called Faust. This was the one moment she couldn’t plan for. Enough time had passed that he might be second-guessing his decision to let Ana—an accomplice to a crime, but essentially still a stranger—wander unsupervised through his house. If he wanted to stay on the phone with her or even video-chat to make sure she was really just hitting the fridge and not, say, smoothing the path for a midnight basement robbery, her day was about to get a whole lot more complicated.

But he didn’t. In fact, he might have been talking to a doctor or something, because, although polite as ever, he seemed impatient to get off the line. When she reiterated that she would just be in and out and back before he knew it, he simply said, “Take your time, Miss Stark. I have nowhere else to be,” and hung up.

Too easy.

One of the keys on the Doctor-doll’s ring fit the front door. Ana withdrew it without turning it in the lock and tried the keys on her aunt’s set, the ones attached to the Monster-doll. As expected, one of them also fit the lock—Erik’s key to Freddy’s house. And if she took the Doctor’s keys with her up the mountain, she’d probably find one that unlocked Erik’s old house, the one he gave to Aunt Easter. She could figure out which one easily enough and remove it right now, but she didn’t. Not because Faust might notice she’d taken one of his keys, but just because…because she didn’t mind him having it. She wasn’t sure what that said about her, that she could feel fond enough of the old man to let him have a key to her house, but still be here right now, preparing the mansion so she could come back and rob him.

Ana unlocked the door. The security system beeped a warning at her; she punched in the code to placate it, then came all the way into the formal foyer with its grand stairwell, taking in her surroundings.

The housekeeper had been by. The tiles she had last seen smeared with muddy bootprints and blots of dried blood were spotless now, and the cane he’d dropped in the fall was now in the stand by the door, awaiting its master’s return. There had been no car in the drive and Ana hadn’t passed one on the long road, but still she stood a moment, listening to the house.
It was empty. There were sounds, of course. All houses talk—boards creak, pipes knock, appliances hum—but Ana could hear the emptiness just the same. It was so different from her own house on Coldslip Mountain, to not feel the itch of unseen eyes or sense someone else’s presence just outside her perception. To finally feel alone. Different…and just as unsettling.

She didn’t have time to give herself the heebie-jeebies. She had work to do.

First things first, Ana pulled out her phone and set the alarm for twenty minutes from now. She shouldn’t need that much time, but hey, it was a big house and she had no idea where the office was.

So she told herself, although much later, she had to wonder if she subconsciously knew after all, because she didn’t start looking upstairs, where she had already seen an office-ish conference room. Instead, she set off for the kitchen, and although she opened a few doors on the way as she passed them, she wasn’t really looking for the office as much as exploring an empty house.

Ana remembered the kitchen being a fairly straight shot from the stairwell, but somehow managed to take more than one wrong turn on the way. It wasn’t her bad memory, or at least, not just her bad memory. The house was huge, a maze of featureless white walls set at disorienting angles (designed to disorient, perhaps, like the layout at Freddy’s). When there were windows, they all seemed to have the same view of the same endless desert. When there were furnishings, they were minimalist and modern—black and white, steel and glass.

‘I’m going to get lost in this place,’ she thought. It was a joke. She wasn’t really worried, but still the thought hooked itself in and whatever humor was ever in it withered away. She could imagine herself (oddly, a much younger version of herself), wandering through the funhouse halls until she died and then lying there undiscovered until the end of time.

Even that thought felt familiar, like something she’d imagined before, not the last time she’d been here or the time Shelly had brought her, but long ago, when she’d been young enough not only to have silly thoughts like that, but also to believe in them. She prodded at it like a bruise and felt the echo of an even sillier, younger thought: *I will be a ghost in this house and never ever ever find my way out.*

Of course, in the next instant, she found the kitchen, but the thought lingered, trailing after her like a shadow.

After dropping off the butter, Ana followed her instincts until she came to a spacious room at the rear of the house—not a dining room, lounge or even a ball room, but just a big, blank room with little spaces obviously set aside for entertaining and which just as obviously was no longer used for that any more. Her eye went directly to the back wall, lined with tall windows and thin curtains, through which she could see a glass door looking out over the patio. Nothing unusual, certainly not what she was looking for, but she paused all the same, and stared at it.

The late morning sun shining on the pool brought out some lying memory of the same sight in winter—rumpled blankets of snow concealing the rock garden, lacy metal chairs and lounges spiked all over with windblown icicles, and her own breath fogging the glass next to the sliding door’s latch-plate.

The latch-plate that was only a little higher than Ana’s hip. She would have had to have been kneeling to breathe on it. Or been very, very short.

She’d dreamed something like that and not that damn long ago. A dream as vivid as a memory. She’d been lost in this house and had come to this door and then…she wasn’t sure anymore. Had
she seen something? Heard something? She’d had some reason to turn her head and there had been a long hall with a huge door at the end…

Ana turned her head to the left and stared down a long corridor. Curtained windows on one side and a wood-paneled wall on the other, featureless but for a number of dark doors evenly spaced down its length. The floor was white marble, like the foyer, with a narrow carpet drawn like a broad line connecting Ana at the beginning to the end, where one more door stood, larger than the others, slightly ajar.

Had she been here before? Had she really? It wasn’t impossible. Erik Metzger had lived here once and although he seemed to have done a pretty good job keeping the various pieces of his twisted life separate from the others, it was easy to imagine him bringing Aunt Easter and David over to hang out with his best friend. Maybe for a birthday. A pool party. Christmas. Just because Ana couldn’t remember ever tagging along didn’t mean it had never happened.

It didn’t matter anyway. It was the basement she was here for.

Ana started down the hall, opening doors as she passed them. None of them were locked and she recognized nothing on the other side of any of them. Most of them seemed to be used to store furniture and other fancy stuff for parties no one was throwing anymore. A few rooms were just…empty. Ana found herself trying to determine what they might have been in those bygone days from the few structural clues she spied on her quick scan of the area. This one had something looked suspiciously like a service counter. No shelves and no sink, so not a bar. Maybe a coat room. That one still held a whiff of tobacco; a smoking room. This one had nothing, not even light fixtures, so…orgy room? Entirely possible, given what she knew about Erik Metzger…and now she was going to need some serious brain bleach to get the mental picture of Faust attending an orgy out of her head.

But she found no office and no basement stairs. Soon, there was only one door left to investigate, and it was already open. As she approached, she could see a thin stripe of hall light falling long across the floor inside, illuminating a sampler slice of the room: hardwood floor, large area rug with a pattern of interlocking vines and flowers in shades of muted red and blue, the clawfoot corner of a gargantuan desk, and a bookshelf beyond it.

Familiar.

Of course it was familiar. It looked like every stodgy, old-fashioned man’s home office she’d ever seen.

No, it was more than that. She’d been in that room. She’d seen it. She knew the walls were all dark wood panels just like the hall outside, with one lead-paned window in a little reading alcove. The curtains were dark brown and there was a leather chair in front of the window, with an end table beside it just big enough for a lamp. She couldn’t picture the lamp, but she knew it had a pull chain, just like she knew that the shelves lining the walls were as full of toys as they were of books. Not just any toys. Toys from Freddy’s. Top hats and plastic guitars, pirate swords and cupcakes, plastic poseable figures and Fazbear Band playsets. And plushies, of course, including a little gold Fredbear, just like David’s…

She pushed the door open. She turned on the light. The breath she had been unaware she was holding escaped her in a shaky, wordless rush that was almost a laugh and almost a baffled, hurt, “What?”

The walls were dark, sort of. The base color of the wallpaper was a deep maroon, like day-old blood, with a pattern of dull gold diamonds to break it up. There was a window, a bay window,
with either a wide ledge or a narrow sitting space largely taken up by a cascading trellis of spider plants; no leading in the glass. No curtains, dark brown or otherwise. No lamp. There was a chair, but it was upholstered, not leather, with an orthopedic cushion on the seat. There were no toys on the bookshelves, only books, interspersed with a few manly trinkets—fossil plates and brass figures, native pottery and a careless scattering of awards, mostly used as bookends. The desk was huge, but uncluttered. Apart from the keyboard and the sleeping monitor, the only item on its surface was a glass display case holding a stuffed Freddy bear, angled so it faced the empty chair behind the desk. And yes, it did look like David’s, although cleaner and in much better condition, but that was the only point of similarity between what she thought she’d see and what was.

This was not the room she remembered.

Because she didn’t ‘remember’ it.

She’d never been here before.

She really had only dreamed this after all.

Wait…What was that?

Almost invisible as it lay curled around the Freddy bear’s foot was about three inches of thick ribbon or flat string, striped pink and yellow and green and blue.

No, not a ribbon. Not a string. A shoelace.

Hardly aware of what she was doing, Ana moved forward and around the corner of the desk, revealing more of the glass case’s treasure: Freddy’s bright blue eyes and boopable nose, his neat bow tie, and a pair of scuffed sneakers, white with red and blue stripes when they’d been new, although the colors had faded and the white gone grey by the time Ana got them. There used to be a Captain America shield sewn on the heels, but Ana had picked those off because she got teased for wearing boy’s clothes. She could still see where they had been, though—pale circles edged in tiny holes where the stitches had been—flecked with dried mud. The rainbow-striped shoelaces Aunt Easter had put in her Christmas stocking still looked almost new, especially compared to the shoes, but then she’d only had the laces a few days; she’d had the shoes for months and David had worn them almost a year before her.

“Those are not my shoes,” whispered Ana, but of course they were. What in the hell were they doing in Mr. Faust’s house? It was just possible that Aunt Easter or even Erik Metzger had brought her here with David on some long-past occasion. She could accept that. And she supposed it was just as likely that she’d kicked off her shoes running riot around the house (David had a tendency to tear off his clothes at the slightest provocation until he started school, and led by his example, shy little Ana could be quite the exhibitionist as well), but even if so, why in the hell had he kept them? On his desk? Preserved in a glass case, with a lock on it! There was top-dollar crap spread from one end of this office to the other, but he kept her old dirty sneakers locked up for safekeeping?!

Her watch’s alarm sounded. Her heart slammed once into her ribs, then meekly settled back into rhythm while she set her watch for another ten minutes, swearing at herself for giving into the heebie-jeebies when there was a job to do. She could freak out about the old man’s sneaker-fetish later. Right now, she had to find the safe and get those keys.

Ana glanced at the window to orient herself to the descending sun, using its position to locate the south wall. Naturally, it was the one that appeared to be completely covered by heavy bookcases. She approached, looking for the promised false panel while thinking dourly of every cartoon she’d
ever seen where a secret passage was involved. It was never something as easy as a lever or a knob. There was always a most particular book that had to be pulled out or a gold figurine that had to be jerked off and only when the hands on the clock were set to the date of the anniversary of the night the villain in the rubber monster mask lost his virginity. Any goddamn thing in this room could be the switch—any combination of things!—and she did not have time to go fiddling up the furniture.

Ana ran her fingers along a few spines and then she stepped back and looked sensibly at the floor instead.

Five of the six bookcases rested firmly on the floor, but that one that was almost directly behind the desk seemed to hover about a quarter of an inch above the boards. Still no obvious switch, though. Ana gave the bookcase a half-hearted prod, but only one. She shifted around a few books, hunkered down to inspect the featureless undersides of the shelves, and stepped back again, thinking.

She looked at the desk.

She looked at the bookcase.

She supposed it could be automated—the click of a mouse, the tap on a smartphone’s screen—but that was a hell of a risk, wasn’t it? Computers crash. Networks go down. Systems can be hacked. Faust was high-tech, but old-fashioned. Whatever the switch was, it was physical and probably right out in plain sight. Secret things have a way of calling attention to themselves. The best hiding places are always obvious, just inexplicable.

She looked at the glass case next, because of course she did. Apart from the computer, it was the only thing on the desk, the most obvious and most inexplicable thing. The little door had a tiny keyhole, and if Ana managed to find a paperclip somewhere in this desk, she could probably pop the lock easily, but she didn’t have to. On the Doctor-doll’s set of keys was a teeny-weeny little gold key and she guessed she knew now what it unlocked.

So she unlocked it. She wasn’t sure what she hoped to accomplish by this, because the thought of hiding the remote controller to a secret passageway in her old sneakers was almost as bizarre as the old man having them in the first place. Still, she had to look.

Nothing in there but the long-stale odor of Ana’s sweaty feet.

She tried the plushie next, but it was just an old Freddy Bear. There was a balloon in his tummy that made him open and close his mouth when she squeezed him and a wind-up key in his back that played the Toreador March when she wound it, but that was all. Just a toy bear guarding an old pair of sneakers for reasons only another eccentric old billionaire would understand.

Ana put them back in their case and locked it. She stood for a moment, simmering in frustration, then picked up the whole case, but there was no button hidden beneath it, no weight-sensitive panel, no A-ha moment that revealed the true sinister purpose of the treasures it held. And now she had to open the damned thing up again to rearrange the sneakers and the bear to their original composition, and she did not have time for this!

She was overthinking this. She had to be. Think. Don’t think like the burglar, think like the homeowner.

Ana pulled the tall leather chair out from the desk and sat down. Mr. Faust had a few inches on her, but her feet reached the floor. Her arms fit the armrests. The desk was at a comfortable writing level. This could be her desk. This was her desk. And when she wanted to open the false panel
behind her, she wanted to do it simply and easily, moving as little as possible, because she was an old man now. She didn’t want to fuss with cunningly concealed switches, she just wanted to open her safe and get fifty thousand dollars so she could buy a car and an English muffin. Banks were so inconvenient and Faust was all about convenience.

Hmm.

Ana opened a drawer. She saw a gold pen-case, writing paper, envelopes and postage stamps, but she wasn’t looking at them. She saw only the drawer and it was just the right size.

Next drawer. More office-y stuff, slightly less useful or more personal than the last batch, and the drawer was fine.

The third drawer, where Shelly kept his forbidden bottle of Beam and Metzger had kept his photo album, was completely empty. It was also too shallow.

Ana felt around and found where to push to make the bottom slide out of the way. This revealed a luxe little compartment lined with velvet, with a simple brass control panel that boasted a single button.

She pushed it.

At once, she heard a click behind her and, with a low hum of well-oiled wheels on a well-maintained track, the bookcase slid inward and moved over, just like the hidden door in the Treasure Maze next to the Mermaid’s Grotto under Pirate Cove. Ana swiveled around in her chair and saw two things at once.

The first was, of course, the safe. From the way Mr. Faust had casually mentioned keeping several million dollars in it, she had expected something a bit on the ostentatious side, but there was ‘ostentatious’ and then there was…this. Black and shiny as the griddle in the Gallifrey’s kitchen, trimmed out at the corners with gold (she’d be tempted to think it was brass, except that it was utterly untarnished and Faust was unlikely to let the housekeeper access this secret place just to polish the gild-work on his piggy bank), the door was more than six feet tall and three feet wide—door-sized, in other words. She supposed that made this less of a safe and more of a vault. She wouldn’t be surprised if it came with its own diving board so the old man could swim around in his money like Scrooge Mc-fucking-Duck.

But as much arresting power as that had over her, what was next to it had just a little bit more.

An elevator, doors just whispering open to expose a small, dark-paneled interior. Well-lit. No music. The control panel inside was featureless, except one asterisk-shaped hole above a small black screen.

She didn’t have time…

Ana brought out her keys—didn’t matter which one—and found the one that had fit the animatronics’ control panels.

It fit.

She turned it.

The screen lit from that black color that meant it was off to the black color that meant it was on, and then two circles appeared, each one marked with an arrow: One up…and one down.
She could go right now. In and out, just to scout around. Reconnaissance was an important part of any burglary and Ana Stark did not half-ass a job. It would take two minutes.

Except that two minutes in Faust’s old workshop was the same as two minutes in Fairyland and she knew it. She’d go down there just to look, just to peek, and come up to find that hours had passed and her excuse of ‘just dropping off the butter’ had long expired. No. Time to go. She’d be back tonight and she could look all she wanted then.

Ana touched the down-button, just touched it, then quickly took her hand away. She pulled the key out and returned it to her pocket. She stepped out of the elevator—that sexy, enticing bitch—and turned to the safe.

From there, it was easy. Too easy, one might say. The same eight-digit number that worked on Faust’s home security system and the backstage vault at Freddy’s worked here, too. Once unlocked, the door swung open under its own power. Ana couldn’t have budged it otherwise. It was four inches thick of solid metal, and the walls were even thicker. The space within was narrow and just deep enough that she could have stepped all the way inside, if she wanted to; she didn’t.

Now to find the key.

The interior of the safe was as neat as the rest of the house. Document drawers of various sizes lined all three walls from the floor to about hip-height. She ignored them; she might be a thief, but she wasn’t a nosy bitch and had no interest in rummaging through Mr. Faust’s patent proofs and family photographs. Above this was a row of smaller sleeve-drawers, which seemed the likeliest place to put a key, but which instead held nothing but manly jewelry—tie pins and cufflinks and Rolexes for every occasion. The space above those drawers was taken up by open shelves, allowing Ana to easily see their contents at a glance: bricks of hundred-dollar bills stacked on her right, ledgers on the left, and on the back wall, only a metal case.

This last caught her eye, unassuming as it was. It was about the size of a shoebox, dull grey in color, reinforced with rivets and brass bands that made it look a little like a treasure chest, and then secured with two heavy padlocks.

It was the padlocks that really attracted her attention. What was the point of padlocking something that was already in a safe, behind a false panel, in the private office of a mansion protected by the finest security system money could buy? Come to think of it, why put two padlocks on anything? If you had the key, one lock or a dozen made no difference, and if you didn’t have the key, a ten-dollar pair of bolt-cutters would be just as effective.

Well, the mystery of the double-locked box would just have to wait. Ana’s questing fingers had found something tucked away on the door-most corner of the highest shelf just out of sight. Not the key, not directly…but the little string-doll to which it was attached.

It wasn’t as easily identifiable as Doctor Frankenstein or his Monster, although it showed the same age and signs of wear. At first glance, she wasn’t even sure it was meant to be a person, for all that it had a dingy pink ‘face’. The body was made from plain brown string, with arms but no legs, and a frayed fringe atop its head of the same color that was probably meant to be hair. Long hair. A female doll then, as made by someone for whom females were still abstractions. If it was part of the set, that made this the Doctor’s girlfriend and the Monster’s intended mate—the Bride.

This was the only key anywhere in the safe, but just to be on the safe side, Ana raced back through the house and out to the garage to test it in the lock. A time-consuming and unnecessary step, maybe, but better than making an assumption and coming back after dark to find she’d copied the wrong key.
The door opened. Like most garages, it was magically bigger on the inside, still spacious despite having five vehicles—no, six. She could just make out a low, long-bodied shape beneath a protective canvas sheet on the far side of the garage, well apart from its roommates. A rebuild in progress, perhaps. He was sure equipped for one. Shelves and racks lined the walls, fully stocked with automotive parts, tools and supplies. Beyond that, she couldn’t see much of anything. The garage had as few windows as would satisfy the building code, and all were heavily tinted and then sealed on the inside behind locked metal shutters that allowed no light. Her eyes were slow to adjust after the piercing brilliance of Mammon’s sun, but she thought she could make out a small separate room in the back corner, behind the canvas-covered shape. At least, she could see the gleam of metal that might be a door.

No time to explore further. She’d see it all when she came back.

Retreating from the garage, Ana locked up and turned her attention to making the copy. The key had Do Not Duplicate engraved on the head, and while that might stop Hank down at the hardware store, it wasn’t going to stop Ana.

She dipped into her back pocket and brought out her tools—her Zippo, a small reel of clear tape, and an old gift card.

Striking her lighter, Ana passed the blade of the key through the flame. The key looked clean enough, but there was usually oil in locks, not to mention the natural oils passed along on grubby human hands, and within a few seconds, the key had turned black. Ana pocketed her lighter, waited for the key to cool, then carefully pressed it to a strip of tape. This took away the burnt residue in the unique shape of the key, which she preserved by applying it to the gift card. Both sides of the key looked identical to Ana’s not-inexpert eye, but just in case, she took an impression of the other side too. A few minutes with her Dremel to cut out the teeth and gouge out the grooves, a little glue to fix both sides together, and she’d have a perfect plastic replica of the key.

Mission complete. Now to get the hell out of here.

Ana wiped the key clean on the edge of her shirt as she ran back through the house to the office. She arrived somewhat sweaty and a little out of breath, and placed it back on its particular shelf in the safe. She pushed the Close button on the lockpad and stepped back to let the door swing shut. She pushed the button to shut away the secrets behind the bookcase, replaced the false bottom and closed the desk drawer. Giving the office one last looking-over to make sure she’d put everything back the way she’d found it (she looked longest at the glass case on the desk), she switched off the light and made sure she left the door slightly ajar.

Perfect.

She left. She didn’t run (she walked fast, but she didn’t run). She remembered to set the alarm and lock the front door. When she reached her truck, she didn’t speed back to town. She drove safely and sanely through Mammon, tore ass up the empty road, and drove safely and sanely through St. George, arriving at Tranquility Care Center at a perfectly plausible time for having just dropped off some butter at the old man’s house. All she had to do now was get through the rest of this visit without raising the old man’s suspicions, wait for dark, and then go in through the garage with her very own key and burgle his basement for all the animatronic parts she could carry. Easy-peasy.

She really should have known. Anytime a plan came together that easily, it was someone else’s plan.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The lobby of the hospital was even more chaotic when Ana checked herself in for the second time. Intermission between movies, she was told. All the kids were loading up at the free sundae bar before the start of the next show.

She had to share the elevator with four sugared-up kids who, with no parent to ride herd on them, were simply a delight. Fortunately, they all got off on the second floor and went screaming away, leaving Ana with the relative bliss of a casual bongo instrumental for the remainder of the ride.

Mr. Faust’s door was shut. Hesitant to interrupt his evening sponge bath or whatever, she knocked.

She heard him say, “What?” so sharply that she thought he must have dozed off and she’d just startled him awake.

“It’s me,” she said.

“So soon? Come in, Miss Stark. Please. And close the door,” he said as she obediently entered. “Forgive me, you’ve rather caught me out. I wasn’t expecting you for some time.”

“I’d have been here sooner, but I had to stop for gas,” Ana lied, pretending she needed to wash her hands so she had an excuse to keep her back turned for a little while longer, just in case she’d ‘caught him out’ doing something personal.

“Where is it?”

She looked at his reflection in the mirror, hiding her caution behind surprised eyes. “Where’s what?”

“Is that a joke?” he asked uncertainly and with just a hint of impatience. “The box, Miss Stark.”

“What box?” Ana asked, and in that moment, her confusion was genuine. There were so many things she could not mention or even dare to think about too hard, lest the old man see her thoughts floating in the windows of her eyes—the key, the garage, the basement and even a certain pair of child-sized sneakers with rainbow laces. The mystery of the double-locked box had already been forgotten.

Faced with her unfeigned bewilderment, his tense posture subtly shifted toward astonishment and then to annoyance. “Didn’t you open the safe?”

Ana did not flinch, although it was a damned near thing. She had a split-second to decide how to react. The analyst in her presented only two viable suggestions: come clean and explain everything or double down on her innocence and bluff him out.

She slapped off the faucet and faced him. “No, of course not!”

His thin eyebrows lifted, then furrowed. “Why not?”

“I beg the fuck out of your pardon? Because I didn’t go to your house to fucking rob you!”
Not yet, anyway. The lie felt huge, burning across her whole face like a blush, but Faust seemed not to notice.

“Then why did you go?”

“Because you asked me to! I told you I’d take the stuff back to my place! You were the one who told me to take it to yours!”

After she’d suggested it, but he didn’t remember that part, or at least didn’t argue the point. He just took that in, turned it over a few times, and finally said, with an air of Freddy-ish disapproval, “That complicates things. You were supposed to come here with questions.”

“Was I? Okay, here’s a question: What the hell, old man? I’m here because I actually kind of like you, in spite of all that horseshit you put me through cleaning up your grandson’s mess, but if you think I’m kissing your ass to get at your fucking money—”

The monitoring equipment seemed to catch on before he did. His heart rate surged. His respiratory waves jiggled. Belatedly, he twitched back into the pillows. “No,” he said. “No, not at all.”

“Not at all!” she mimicked savagely. “You just said you think I talked my way into your house and went directly to your safe so I could go through your shit!” She had, of course, but she spared him none of the outrage an innocent person would have felt. “You think I’m a thief? A grifter? A gold-digger? What?”

“Forgive me, Miss Stark. I’ve handled this badly. I don’t…” He trailed off, frowning with consternation as the monitor behind him registered a chaotic surge of emotion. “I don’t read people well. I thought…It doesn’t matter what I thought. I was wrong. I apologize. But…I had hoped…”

He looked so confused.

‘Good,’ Ana told her guilty self coldly. ‘That means he believes you. Keep your goddamn game face on.’

She dug in her pocket, picked out the Doctor’s keys and slapped them down on the nightstand. She turned around.

“Please don’t go. Please…don’t be very angry with me. It was never my intention to offend you. I didn’t expect…The fault is mine,” he said with sudden, hopeless conviction. “Believe it or not, I used to take everything everyone said at face value. It made me rather a fool. I had to learn to lie…and to…to expect lies. Please sit down, Miss Stark.”

She didn’t have to. She’d done what she’d set out to do. More to the point, an innocent person whose integrity had been insulted would have stormed out, fumed for a few days, and then maybe, maybe, allowed herself to be appeased. Immediate capitulation was suspicious.

Ana did not sit down. But she didn’t leave either. Summoning up the last dregs of her fast-fading resolve, she stiffly said, “I thought we were friends.”

“Did you?” His heart rate surged again. “And are we? Or were we?”

“You tell me. Did you honestly think I just wanted to get into your house to break into your goddamn safe?”

“Yes,” he said plaintively and then added, as if the very concept were almost too ludicrous to say out loud, “But not to steal anything! There’s nothing there you can steal. I just thought…I thought
we understood each other.”

“Obviously, we don’t.” Here was another perfect place to storm off, but again, Ana couldn’t bring herself to do it. “Did you…Did you want me to look in the safe?”

“Yes.”

Well, for fuck’s sake.

“Why?” Against her better judgement, Ana took another step back toward the bed. “What’s in it?”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you,” he said after a long, faceless silence.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. Because you have been told, Miss Stark. You have been told over and over…and you do not believe.” He passed a shaking hand over his eyes. “It has to be seen to be believed, and even then…even then…”

“Try me.”

He looked away out the window, lost in some inner monologue, but at the end of it, he said, defeated, “All right. I’ll try. But you promise to listen and remember that I am not mad. My eccentricities, such as they are, are necessitated by my sanity. Remember that.”

Ana pulled the chair around to face the bed at a better angle and sat.

“I’ve never introduced myself to you properly, Miss Stark. I haven’t had to in many years. Decades, now. I’ve grown accustomed to letting my reputation precede me. My name is Fredrich Faust. I am the owner and CEO of, among other things, Fazbear Entertainment, which is the corporate entity behind Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria. I built the company. I built the restaurants. I built the mascots. I did not build Mammon, but it can certainly be said that I brought it back from a dead mining town and dying military base to this…stagnant, unnatural life. I have done this…and I cannot undo it without your help.”

They looked at each other while the heart monitor counted out the seconds beat by beat.

“You have no questions,” he said finally.

“I have all kinds of questions,” she retorted, “but you asked me to listen. I’m listening.”

“Thank you,” he said, and for a long time, that was all he said. Every so often, he’d start to speak, only to lapse back into silence until, with a kind of surrender, he said, “There must be a right way to do this, but I’m afraid I don’t know what it is, so I shall have to do it wrong. My apologies in advance, Miss Stark, for offending you. I beg you to hear me out…and to answer honestly. Have you ever killed someone?”

It took her by surprise, but not as much as it would have coming from anyone else. When Mason Kellar had asked this question, she’d answered it the ‘best’ way, without exposing weakness or issuing a challenge. For this man, she told the truth: “Yes.”

He nodded distractedly, as if he’d asked for and been told the time. “I shan’t ask details, but what can you tell me?”

There had been many deaths Ana had been involved with in her life, if involvement could be as
loosely defined as simply failing to act to save someone, like her mother, or by going out to buy primer and paint while Mason and his men visited the quarry and came back one fewer than when they set out. There were other times, several, when Ana had been there, standing on the sidelines while Rider ‘took care of some things’ and a few for which she had held the reins. She had seen the panicked light of life snuffed out, heard the gurgle and groan of a great many last breaths, smelled shit and blood and that piercing metallic sweat that only came from terror all mingled together into one foul slurry. She had no doubt she met the legal qualifications for so many murder charges that she probably merited her own episode of Dateline and a Facebook fangroup, but if she wasn’t innocent, she could honestly say she didn’t feel guilty. She led the kind of life where people died hard, and if it hadn’t been them, it would have been her.

Ana thought about it and said, “I can tell you I’m still here. And all things considered, the world is probably a better place.”

“For you being in it?”

“For them being out of it.”

Faust nodded. “I have been a silent partner to a great deal of violence, but the only…the only man I ever caused to die was my father, and what I told you of his death was the truth. I feel no remorse, but I never meant to kill him. It was not an accident,” he stressed, “but it was not a willful murder. In all my life, I only ever meant to kill one man…and I couldn’t do it. And for that, I do feel remorse. Every day. Every hour. It is always with me.” He looked away, out the window and into the west, toward Mammon. “It is with me even now.”

He lost himself in memory.

Ana waited and eventually, he found his way out.

“Concerning my father’s death, I will remind you that I sabotaged the device. I meant it to malfunction. His efforts to repair it caused it to explode. He died. I am therefore directly responsible for his death, even though I did not intend it. Now I will pose a hypothetical scenario,” he announced.

“Okay.”

“Had I deliberately rigged the device to explode on activation or had I produced an axe and split his skull open, and thereby put paid to years of abuse, would I have been right to do so? Before you answer, let me take it a step further. Suppose I had not been the sole target of my father’s attacks. If he had been a predator of children, would I have been justified in killing him…or even obligated to do so?”

Ana frowned, not thinking about her answer as much as the question itself. “David asked me something like that once.”

“Did he? What did you tell him?”

Time slipped. She knew where she was and who she was talking to, but half of her folded out of the hospital and into the desert, under the sweltering Mammon sun next to David, both of them still sweaty from climbing the bluff they called Edge of Nowhere. No access road back then. No Freddy’s to need one. There was a footpath, worn into the side of the rise by generations of Mammon’s children, but they never used it, preferring to play pirates and Count of Monte Cristo. They’d been sword-fighting. She could actually see the sword in his hand—Foxy’s sword, real metal. He gripped it with intensity, white-knuckled. They’d been talking about superheroes, or she
thought they were, and he’d just asked the killing question: If someone hurt him, would she hurt them back?

She wouldn’t. Couldn’t. She was a child, younger them him, and he was a child, too small and helpless to avenge anyone, but she hadn’t said that, had she? No, because it was David she suddenly saw in the closet, David’s arm in a cast, David stealing sandwich crusts out of the lunchroom trash when no one was looking, and all the outrage and horror that little Ana could not feel on her own behalf bubbled up from someplace hot and sour inside her and she said, “No. I wouldn’t hurt them back. I’d hurt them first.”

And she’d meant it. The very next day, he’d given her the doubloon and she’d taken it, knowing full well that Foxy would come for his cursed treasure and kill the one hoarding it, and she’d put it underneath her mother’s mattress. To save herself. To save David. To stop the fear and hunger and pain and finally have the family she loved, the big house, and everything she wanted and resented others having while she went without. If he’d given her the sword instead, she’d have probably taken it. Used it. There was a part of her back then that wanted to raise that sword over her drunken, stinking, sleeping mother and bring it stabbing down…there was a part of her right now, fifteen years after her mother’s death, that still did.

Mr. Faust was still waiting for her answer: What had she told David?

“The wrong thing,” said Ana, twenty years too late to make a difference. “Come on, man. You don’t need me to tell you that killing people is wrong.”

“And yet, you still believe, or at least you claim, that the world is a better place for the loss of those you have removed. On some level, you must surely feel your actions were justified.”

“No.”

She straightened up, glancing once behind her to make sure the door was still closed, then gave him a long, assessing stare—this frail old man in his hospital bed. “We still talking hypothetically?”

“No.”

Ana nodded, unsurprised. “Old man, no offense, but you are not always the best at communication and I want to be super sugar-frosted clear on this. Are you about to ask me to kill someone for you?”

“No. You’re quite right, for people, there are courts and prisons. But there are crimes that
the world is not prepared to acknowledge and will not punish. There are victims who can never have justice, can never even be buried. These are not people I would have you hunt. They are monsters, monsters who will only ever stop if they are killed.”

She thought about leaving then. It wasn’t like he could leap out of bed and wrestle her to the floor to stop her. She didn’t have to be a part of this. She didn’t have to listen. Why was she still here?

“I don’t believe in monsters,” she said.

“You should. They exist. I do not refer to my father,” he said with an impatient cut of his hand. “He was a brute and I, a coward. There were MPs who would have handled that situation through the proper channels had I made the appropriate noises. But there were far, far worse things in Mammon than my father. You know there were.” He reached out, and although she was fast, he was faster. He caught her wrist even as she pulled away and held her with surprising strength. She could see herself reflected in the dark lenses of his glasses—two pale blobs like lights in black sockets. “You know there are.”

Freddy’s. The name sat invisibly between them, stinking up the silence.

“Forget what I know,” Ana said. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to know that evil exists. Monsters exist. And yes,” he said, shaking his head, brows pinched with frustration, “I know you know that people can be cruel and savage and criminal, but I do not speak only of people. We live in Mammon, that town which does not exist on maps, and where the map ends, there are monsters. No, listen to me. There are monsters, separate from men who commit monstrous acts. Monsters. They are not just the stuff of fairy tales or nonsense to be painted on blank walls and billboards. It’s not a metaphor. It’s not a story or a game. There are monsters denning in Mammon, monsters who prey upon its people, its children. And the world does not believe in monsters and so no one hunts them…and so they will live on…and I will die. But before I do, Ana…” He looked down at his hand, iron-tight around her wrist, and watched himself release her. “Ana, I need to know that there is one person in this godforsaken place who will not look away when the monsters show themselves, and who will not flinch…as I did.”

“And you seriously think that person is me?”

“I trust no one else. You…You alone have the courage that I lacked then…and the strength that I lack now.”

“Wow. You have got some lofty opinions of me.”

“Merited, I’m sure.”

“You want to know how brave I am?” asked Ana, lifting her chin. “You want to hear about my heroic strength? When I was a kid, my mom used to starve me. Anytime she caught me eating out of the fridge or the cupboards, it was ‘stealing food’ and to punish me, she’d lock me in the closet, sometimes for days. No, shut up,” she said, raising a hand as he started to speak. “Sorry, but for real, don’t tell me how fucked up that is. I already know and it’s not the part I’m telling you, that’s just the part you have to know so the rest makes sense. Okay?”

He stared at her from behind his masking glasses and finally nodded once.

“So that was my life. I was hungry a lot. And after we moved out of Mammon, I got a lot hungrier because sometimes there was literally nothing to steal. To eat, I mean. And so the part I’m going to tell you is, sometimes Mom would come home and give me a drink. Orange juice or soda, you
know? Already opened. You get me?”

The old man said nothing.

“And I knew better, especially after the first few times this happened, but I was hungry, so I’d
drink it. Every time. And it would be bitter. And I would take a little nap. Okay? And I don’t know
what happened after that, because I’m a deep sleeper, but when I woke up, either Mom would be
gone or she’d be nice and high on a bunch of drugs that sure weren’t there before. So I know what
happened. We both know, right?”

Something glinted on his cheek—a tear, traveling along the channels of his aged face—but his
expression did not change and his voice was steady, if hoarse, when he said, “Yes.”

“And do you know what I did about it?”

“No.”

“Nothing,” said Ana. “Not a goddamn thing. I could have. I had chances. I made choices. I chose
to drink those drinks and take my naps and if I had it to do all over again, I’m not entirely sure I’d
do any different. My mother was a monster, if anyone was, and no one knew it like I did, but in the
end she had to kill herself. So, no. I’m sorry, Mr. Faust, but I am not the hero of your story. I’m just
another victim. But here’s the thing. I may never have justice, but at least she’s dead now and the
only way she can come back is through me. I have to let her go on living in my head. The way
you’re letting Erik Metzger live in yours.”

He did not flinch, but his heart rate jumped on the monitor behind him.

“Move on,” she said. “No, it’s not fair for all those missing kids or their families, but neither is
burying the whole goddamn town just to make sure you dug a big enough grave to fit him in. He’s
dead. Let him rot and for God’s sake, live a little of your own life before it’s over.”

“I can’t do that, Miss Stark,” he said, quietly but with such emotion that his words seemed to
crack in the air, as if underscored by the static from a hidden speaker. “I wish I could. But I…I
created them. Do you understand that? I made them. I brought them into being. I cannot sever
myself of responsibility. I have to fix this, now, before my time is over.”

“Mr. Faust,” said Ana, just as quietly and with static of her own, “if your idea of fixing this is to
kill—not even, it’s to send someone else to kill your creations, then that is the legit definition of
severing yourself from responsibility. You want to put it down? Fine. But don’t ask me to pick it
up and carry it for you, because I won’t. Mammon…sucks, but it’s my do-over. I may never be
able to do ‘right’, but I can sure do better than murder for hire. So if you were counting on me to
armor up and march into Freddy’s with a fire axe—”

His heart rate surged again.

“—then I’m sorry, but I want no part of that and I’ll have no part of it. Got me?”

He looked at her for a long time and finally nodded.

Ana waited for a moment, then leaned back and calmly said, “Got anything in that safe that’s
going to change my mind?”

“I would not try to change your mind,” he replied, just as calmly. “I will respect your choice…and
know that nothing you have said has changed my feeling for you.”
“Same.” She smiled. “I’m sincerely fond of you, you know.”

He offered his hand and when she took it, gave her a gentle squeeze. “And I am sincerely fond of you in return. I do hope you will visit me again, here or at home, and that we can enjoy a true and honest relationship for the little time that I have left.”

“Me, too,” said Ana, mentally drawing a line between her words and her plans to infiltrate his basement later that same night. “Me, too.”
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Bonnie heard Ana’s truck pull in at the end of what should have been the six o’clock show, if anyone but the stupid Swampy animatronic and the speakers were putting on a show anymore. She let herself in a few minutes later, but gave him only a hurried greeting on her way down the East Hall. She went directly to the Quiet Room, where she kept her tools, and shut herself in.

Bonnie waited as long as he could bring himself to wait—about five minutes—and then went after her.

He couldn’t just go in. Rule Thirty-Five said none of them could be in the room when Ana was working and he could hear the shrill sound of a tiny motor, so she was working. It was a dumb rule, but Freddy hadn’t rescinded it, so Bonnie had to obey. He lurked in the hall, pacing back and forth as he turned the rule over in his mind, looking for loopholes, and finally approached the door and knocked.

The sound of the whatever-it-was shut off. Ana had stopped working.

Bonnie opened the door, but found to his extreme annoyance that she was wearing her headlamp, and the magnifying goggles she’d worn when reconstructing Bonnie’s face, and most of her attention was still on her hands, turning over a little piece of colored plastic or something while holding one of her many gadgets. Still working, in other words. His vision lit up red when he tried to go in. He nudged his toes up to the threshold and there had to stand, just outside the room.

“What’s up?” she asked distractedly.

“I just wanted to see you. Are you…Are you back? From…”

She shook her head. “Haven’t left yet. Gotta wait for dark if you’re gonna do crimes, my man.”

“What are you doing?” he asked as she shaved another micro-sliver of plastic from the thing in her hand.

“Just getting ready for the big event.”

“And that’s part of it?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“A key.” She showed it to him, and apart from the top of it being squared off and the whole thing being plastic, it did look like a key.

“You made that?”

“Yeah.”

“Out of a credit card?”
“Sort of, yeah.”

Bonnie shook his head with rueful admiration. “You know, you talk all the time about how you’re not a fabricator, but that’s pretty impressive. Did you use to work as a locksmith or what?”

“Naw, I just used to work with some shady individuals, and some skills are useful to have when you’re homeless and hungry as often as I am. I know, I know, not cool…but burglary is definitely the lesser evil most of the time.”

“You’ve been a burglar?”

“I’ve been a lot of things, Bon,” she said, then shrugged. “It was mostly storage units anyway. The only time I ever hit a house was when Rider was sending me after stuff he was already owed.”

“So it’s not really a crime.”

“Yeah, it is. Crimes are about what you do, not who you do it to. And I did it. I did way worse than a little B-and-E, if it comes to that.” She glanced at him, her blue eyes huge and pale through the distorted lenses, not quite smiling and not quite sad. “I guess I’m not the good guy in your story either, huh?”

‘No,’ he thought. ‘You were the happily ever after. I just never got to read the whole book.’

“I guess not,” he said out loud. “But neither am I, you know. Real life makes a lousy story anyway. The plot’s all over the place, full of foreshadowing that goes nowhere and loose threads that never get resolved and way too many secondary characters who have nothing to do with the main story, and even if you make it through all of that, there’s a real bummer of an ending.”

She laughed. “Well, you’re not much of a reader, clearly,” she teased. “But as a musician, is the song of life any better than the book?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, more seriously than he meant to. “The melody is complicated and the instruments aren’t always in perfect tune, but…when it all comes together, it’s beautiful music, in spite of everything.”

Her smile grew, then faltered, and finally slipped away.

They looked at each other, alone together and just out of arm’s reach.

“I got a couple hours to kill,” she said suddenly, putting the key in her pocket and her little handheld back in its place. “I need to settle my nerves, so I’m going home to try and get some work done where Freddy can’t shut me down. With any luck, I’ll be back around two or three.”

“Be careful,” Bonnie told her, shuffling back out of the doorway.

“Relax. I’m breaking into a house, not robbing a bank. I’m not going to get hurt. Unless I slip on the stairs,” she added with curious emphasis.

“No, I don’t mean—I mean, yeah, obviously don’t get hurt, but also, don’t…you know, don’t hurt anyone else.”

“I won’t,” she promised, sketching a quick X over her heart. “No one else is even there, my man. Quick job, in and out, and if there are any complications at all, I’ll bail and just go back another day. I’m not getting stupid with it. Okay?”
Bonnie nodded, troubled. He wanted to ask her how she knew no one would be there, but the camera had just come on back in the hall by the pig, and soon afterward, Freddy moved into the light. He didn’t want to say anything that would draw his attention, so he said nothing at all.

“See you in a few,” she said, patting him on the chest.

The camera swiveled around at the sound of her voice, spotlighting her back as she walked away. It made her look like the last frame of a movie before The End came on, which was only fitting, since it felt like he’d just heard the last words he was ever going to hear from her.

Oh, she’d be fine. Outside of Freddy’s, people didn’t generally kill trespassers. If she got caught, she’d just go to jail. For how long, he didn’t know, but it didn’t really matter. Maybe Freddy would still be around when she got out and came back—because she would come back, he knew that, even if the walls had collapsed and she had to dig her way in, she’d be back—but not Bonnie. She might only be jailed up for a few years, but Freddy was the only one with a few years left in him…and only a few. After that, it would just be an empty pizzeria and some plastic animal bodies crumbling around powerless endoskeletons. And him, of course. Him and all the deathless, hungry things he had with him in the basement, waiting to be discovered.

Freddy’s unhurried stride brought him eventually to Bonnie’s side. He paused to shut the door Ana had left open and stood a while, his hand resting on the latch, watching Bonnie stare off down the empty hall. “Is her friend all right?” he asked finally. “Her friend in the hospital?”

“As far as I know. Why?”

Freddy grunted, tapping idly at the latch with his thumb before releasing it. “She seems worked up about something…and you’re upset. Is there something I should know about?”

Very aware of the camera, Bonnie shook his head. “Not right now.”

“Why am I not convinced?” Freddy asked dryly. “Just tell me this much: Is she in trouble?”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

Freddy glanced at him, his eyes lingering on Bonnie’s ears. He frowned. “I don’t think so,” he said in his no-more-Mister-Nice-Bear voice. “Tell me what’s going on right now and that’s an—”

“Wait! Not here!”

“—order.”

Rule Number Seventeen. Freddy was in charge. His orders could not be disobeyed or postponed.

Bonnie shuddered, fighting it, but his mouth opened and his speaker said, “She’s going to break into Dad’s house to look for parts for us.”

Oddly, the camera did not react.

But Freddy did. His ears smacked the brim of his hat, making it quiver comically while his expression went from shocked to furious in the blink of a plastic eye. “She what?”

Intellectually, Bonnie knew that was a rhetorical question. Rule Number Seventeen did not.

“She’s going to break in—”

“That’s enough.” The Toreador March began to play, loud and fast and stuttering. Freddy threw the
watching camera a scowl, then yanked open the Quiet Room’s door and shoved Bonnie inside. Stomping in after him, Freddy slammed the door, grabbed Bonnie in one massive fist and lifted him clean off the ground. “All right,” he said in a calm voice belied by the madcap music pouring out of him. “Which of you put the other one up to it so I know who to lock in the freezer for the rest of their life?”

“I did, I guess, but I didn’t know I was doing it. And she wasn’t being all sneaky or anything, we were just talking! My finger fell off again and…and she asked me if I thought there were any old parts left over at, like, Mulholland or Circle Drive. I could tell she was thinking about going there, so I was trying to tell her how pointless that would be, because he’d have taken anything like that home when he came and got us.”

“Oh, Bonnie,” Freddy said disgustedly and thumped him hard back on the ground.

“I know, okay? I wasn’t thinking.”

“Obviously.” Freddy eyed Bonnie’s twitching ears. “And there’s more, I see. Out with it.”

“She asked where he bought our parts from…like, who he got to make them.”

“And what did you tell her?” Freddy asked impatiently, only to rock back in the next moment before Bonnie could even answer. “You didn’t tell her about the machining room, did you?”

“I didn’t mean to. It just…happened.”

“Of all the asinine, irresponsible—! How could you—?” Freddy shut his eyes and kept them shut until the March began to slow. “So now instead of breaking into an abandoned building, she’s going to try breaking into his house,” he said at last, still angry, but hiding it better. “Or as much breaking as she’ll need to do, seeing as she has his spare keys. Did you tell her that?”

“No, but…”

“But what? Go on, make this worse, I dare you!”

“She was making her own key.”

The March faltered as confusion interrupted the anger on Freddy’s face. “What do you mean, ‘making’ a key?”

“I mean, she was making a key. She seemed pretty confident it would work, too.”

“I’m sure it will.” Freddy snatched his hat off to rub at his temples until the plastic under his punishing hand cracked. “And all that means is that she’ll definitely be caught inside the house instead of just skulking around the yard. Damn it. Damn it! Did you tell her his address?”

“No, but…”

“But what? Go on, make this worse, I dare you!”

“She was making her own key.”

“You didn’t try hard enough, because you let her go!” Freddy’s speaker crackled as the March sputtered back to life, and then he roared, “You have a deep-feed neural network capable of billions of processes per second, how could you be so stupid?”

“I know, all right?” Bonnie shouted and then sighed, holding out his empty hands. “What was I supposed to do? I made every argument I could think of, but look at me! What could I say that’s a better argument than this?” He tapped his chest—just a tap, he was sure, but his sensors weren’t working and he must have tapped just a bit too hard, because the fresh coat of shellac sealing Ana’s
last patch-job cracked.

Freddy took a huge step back, as if he was afraid the force of his glare alone could open a hole through Bonnie’s chest. He banged into one of Ana’s workbenches, upsetting a jar of screws onto the floor. Freddy bent to pick it up, paused, and picked up a shard of cocoa-brown plastic instead. He looked at his hip, where he’d knocked a fresh chip out of himself. The March skipped, slowed…and shut off.

“We’re falling apart,” Bonnie said unnecessarily. “We’ve never looked this bad before. I don’t know if we’ve been left alone too long or if he just didn’t put that much effort into us when he fixed us up this last time.” The words cracked something deep inside, and suddenly thoughts he’d never admitted even to himself came bleeding out: “We’re just like the rest of this stupid place. He only did as much as he had to do for appearances. He didn’t care about us, about making us last. He probably wants us to die.”

Freddy shut his eyes, turning his face away. “Bonnie, please.”

“Dad doesn’t care about us,” Bonnie insisted. “You said it yourself: He loved us until he knew what we were—”

Freddy reached for the door.

Bonnie got there before him, shoving his face into Freddy’s so that his words had nowhere else to go but straight into Freddy’s heart. “—and then he stopped. But Ana cares. And when she found out what we are, she only cared more! She’s doing this for us, to save our fucking lives, and she deserves better from you than this!”

“Enough,” said Freddy, but he didn’t hammer it in with another order and he didn’t leave when Bonnie backed away from the door. “Whatever her intentions, that doesn’t excuse the fact that she is committing a crime with very real consequences if she’s caught. You should have made her understand that.”

“You think she doesn’t? She knows what she’s doing. She’s done stuff like this before.”

Freddy huffed out a disapproving grumble and shook his head.

“You’re no saint either,” Bonnie reminded him. “My point is, she has experience and she says it’s going to be an easy job.”

Freddy served him a scornful glance. “Father did not make his home ‘easy’ to break into.”

“Yeah, sure, Dad’s security system was top-of-the-line… once,” Bonnie said meaningfully. “So was his crestomathy and his Scoop. Times have changed. Maybe nothing Dad made is all that goddamn special anymore and maybe, just maybe, Ana can actually pull this off. And if you really don’t think she can, then call her. She said she’s not going until it gets dark. Call her and try to talk her out of it, see how far you get.”

“I can’t even talk her into eating lunch,” Freddy grumbled, but he took out the phone and then just held it for a long time, ears twitching as he thought. “You’re not the most objective person when it comes to Ana’s abilities, but I want you to stop and really think about it and tell me whether or not she can do this. And tell me the truth. That’s an order.”

Bonnie twitched. Honesty scraped out of him, rusty and bent as old nails. “I think she’s the only person I know who’d even try. I think she knows what the risks are. And I think we’re not going to last much longer without her help.”
Freddy vented his cooling system and looked at the phone again. His fingers flexed, old servos whining in protest at even this small movement.

Bonnie waited.

Without another word, Freddy opened the door and limped away, right past the other rooms and corridors on his patrolling route. Bonnie followed just far enough to see him go into the gym. Where he would probably stay all night, keeping watch for her return with his phone in his hand. But he wouldn’t call and if, by some miracle, Ana called him, Freddy wouldn’t try to talk her out of her plan or even hint that he knew about it. Because she was stubborn and wouldn’t listen anyway, sure, but mostly because, whether he wanted to admit it or not, Ana was all they had.

Without her help, they’d die.

* * *

Ana worked in her aunt’s kitchen until it was time. At ten, when her phone sounded its reminder, she took a quick shower and dressed again in clean clothes (if she was going to jail tonight, she wanted to look good for her mugshot). She emptied her day pack of everything but her phone, her wallet, the Monster’s keyring, the plastic key, and a sturdy prybar, in case those keys weren’t enough. This done, she went to the kitchen again and gave herself a moment to meditate in that space, which was no longer recognizable either as the warm heart of the family she remembered from her childhood or the ruin she’d made of it with the help of a sledgehammer. New walls stood where the old ones had fallen, fresh mud drying at the joints. New tiles covered the floor, golden-hued marble to match the countertops, outlined in chocolate grout to match the deep stain on the new cabinets. The walls, once painted, would be a velvety tea-stained cream, triple-trimmed with carved mahogany molding. The fixtures would be burnished Victorian; the lighting, Georgian revival. Hand-crafted corbin pulls for the drawers, obviously. Gothic pilasters salvaged from some old cathouse thanks to the Ranch in Warren framed the new doorway to the dining room; the old one had been blocked up to make a wall where she intended the china cabinet to go. There was a brand-new bay window where the old china cabinet had been. She could put an herb garden in it someday or maybe throw down some pillows and make it a place she could sit and drink her coffee in the mornings. The full effect would be dark and broody, not to mention gaudy as hell, but it was her kitchen and she could do whatever she wanted with it.

Her kitchen. Her own. In her house.

She was centered. She was ready. She left.

Ana drove down Coldslip Mountain and toward town. Focused as she was on the job ahead, she nevertheless spared the pizzeria a smiling glance as she passed it. There were probably animatronic eyes on her right now (and there were, although she thought it might be Bonnie, watching from the front lobby, and not Freddy in the gym or the Puppet on the roof). Tempting as it was to turn in and collect a kiss for good luck—no, not that, but a hug for luck, just between friends—she didn’t want to jinx it. She also didn’t want Freddy to know what she was doing. Like the old saying went, it was easier to get forgiveness than permission.

Ana met no traffic on Mammon’s streets. There was one car parked out by the canyon, but the occupants were engaged in the backseat and Ana doubted they noticed her drive by. When she came to the mouth of the unpaved road that led up to Stately Faust Manor, Ana pulled off onto the open desert and found a place to stash the truck nearby where it could not be seen from the road. Shouldering her empty day pack, she started walking.
Faust had the best surfacing gravel money could buy, heavily blended with crushed white marble that made the winding road beneath her feet beautifully luminous even though the moon was only half-full. Ana appreciated that, especially as the ground began to angle upward and the cost of a fall went from ‘skinned palms’ to ‘broken leg’ to ‘meat pizza’.

It was a nice night, for Mammon. Warm, but dry and the wind was blowing out of the south, neither kicking up sand from the open expanse of the desert to throw in her eyes nor scouring her lungs with the stink of the quarry. She took advantage of it while it lasted, setting a brisk pace that would have been impossible in the rain or more oppressive heat, and soon came to the wall that shut the world away from Faust.

She thought she might be able to squeeze through the iron bars of the gate, but not enough to risk getting stuck if she was wrong, so after one half-hearted attempt, she climbed over. The top of the wall was lined with spikes; an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. She just had to take a little more time with it. After that, it was merely another hour-long hike up the steeply-climbing canyon road in the moonlight.

She arrived, sweating and out of breath, around midnight. Still no car parked out front, no lights in any of the windows, no reason to think she was anything but alone out here, with no one to witness her skullduggery for miles. She avoided the motion-activated lights anyway, although the one mounted over the garage door inevitably triggered as she fit her plastic key to the lock. She tried not to feel too conspicuous in its spotlight and just got inside as quickly as she could.

With the door shut again behind her and the sound of desert insects muted by four thick, windowless walls, Ana finally pulled out her phone and lit it up. Bluish light splashed over the neat row of Faust’s vehicles, and even if she was on a mission, walking past them without at least a token glance of admiration was like going to the Louvre and not seeing the Mona Lisa.

Ana had no special love for cars, but she’d shared Rider’s stable with plenty of guys who did. Through them, she’d picked up a casual familiarity on the subject of expensive machines and these…these were not hard to recognize.

In the forefront was, of course, Faust’s drive-around car, a black Jaguar, luxuriously appointed but nothing too showy. Parked beside it with the keys visibly dangling from the visor was a Bugatti, by God. Last year’s model, candy-apple-red where it wasn’t dulled by the reddish-grey dust of Mammon’s desert, custom wheels that could take a beating. This was the car Faust took out where the road ended—a four-million dollar German racing car. Beside that, three considerably more modest sports cars, also dusty…not because they’d been off-roading, but because they’d never been touched. A bronze Porsche, a silver Fiat Spider and a gold BMW Z4, sitting around the garage like three unwanted Christmas presents waiting to be regifted.

Ana’s gaze understandably went back to that Bugatti. If that was what he roaded around in, what the hell did he keep under the canvas?

She pulled the tarp back and saw to her complete lack of surprise, a Pontiac Grand Prix. Deep purple, of course.

After a short internal debate, Ana opened the driver’s door and got in.

The tarp had not been dusty. Neither was the interior. The leather upholstery was supple, well-maintained. The floor was spotless, or had been until her dusty boots touched it. It smelled like shampoo and the quarry, with just a hint of old, strong weed. The backseat was clean, but that special kind of clean that said it had seen a lot of hard use. Ana looked at it in the rearview mirror, thinking it was very likely that David had been conceived there.
She didn’t need any more proof, but what the hell. Ana thumbed through the Monster’s keys and fit one to the ignition. It slid home, turned easily. The engine purred like a lion in the close confines of the garage, roaring as she tapped the gas. She turned on the radio and got static, but there was a tape in the cassette slot. She ejected it to see what it was. Home-made mix-tape. Black sharpie on a torn label. Summer ’87. When she pushed it back in, music pounded out of the speakers, heavy on the bass. Blue Oyster Cult, midway through *Don’t Fear the Reaper*. She listened until the next song started—Bon Jovi, *You Give Love A Bad Name*—and shut it off. This was not what she had come for.

And yet…

She ejected the tape and put it in her day pack. Then she got out of the car, covered it carefully over with its tarp, and moved on to the office.

Not an office. An elevator. The doors were extra-wide, extra-tall. Bonnie could walk through without hitting his ears. Which was no doubt one of the reasons such huge doors had been installed.

The elevator opened with the push of a button, but the control panel on the inside required the star-headed key to operate it. Just like the much smaller elevator in the old man’s office, once activated, the dark screen lit up with two arrows, up and down, and up was greyed out.

Ana touched the down arrow.

The doors closed, trapping her in this metal box. Unseen engines hummed to life. She began to move, descending more rapidly than she expected. That might have been her imagination, her nerves and anticipation creating the illusion of speed, but she wasn’t imagining how long this was taking. Wherever she was going, it was much, much deeper than anything you could call a ‘basement’. This was ‘underground lair’ territory.

And just as soon as she had the thought, the elevator stopped. Settled. Opened.

The room she found herself in was massive, easily the size of the dining room at Freddy’s, which had a capacity of 150 people, according to the plaque she’d taken off the wall behind the cashier’s station. The floor was coated with some kind of poured rubber, easy on an animatronic’s feet, with a central drain for easy cleaning. Directly above it was an industrial fan, humming as it cycled good air through this subterranean chamber. The walls were covered in sound-dampening tiles; if they were not, the sound of Ana’s boots might well be deafening, because there was nothing else to block the echoes.

The room was empty. There were mounting brackets on the wall where shelves had been, a pale area sized just right for a bank of storage lockers, and small depressions worn into the rubber floor where heavy cabinets had stood for years, but it was all gone now. Not a great omen of things to come.

“Not an omen at all,” Ana told herself sternly and got moving.

There was another door. She opened it on a wide, featureless corridor, one so long that her phone’s flashlight app could not show her the other end. However, she could see more doors.

Ana started walking. The first of them went to a utility room of sorts, with the second Tesla power condenser the world had ever seen tucked against the far wall…or, more accurately, the first. He’d streamlined the design considerably between building this clunky model and the one in the basement at Freddy’s, but in comparing the two, Ana could not help but notice that the power
reservoir here was enormous, which raised the question: Why had he put such a tiny one at Freddy’s then? If it wasn’t a bug, it had to be a feature, a deliberate decision to restrict the power supply at the pizzeria at night. But why? The animatronics themselves had their own power supply and it wasn’t like he had to pay for it. What difference did it make how much power the building used when it was closed?

The next door she tried showed her an encouraging amount of open machinery, enough to create a corridor of sorts that spanned damn near the length of the room, but her optimism dwindled upon closer inspection. Bonnie’s description of one machine that could create any animatronic part meant, at the very least, a foundry and stamping press, and possibly a laser cutter or even a 3-D printer. She wasn’t entirely sure what that would look like, but she knew she wasn’t looking it one now. This had pipes. Tesla energy conduit pipes, sure, but also just plain plumbing pipes. And faucets…and ceiling- and wall-mounted rotating cylinders…pneumatic arms and extenders, all with missing tips…more taps and compressors…

Ana studied it, her physical eyes unfocused, letting her other-vision take in lines and connections and discern function, and all at once, she could ‘see’ long brushes, buffering pads and hoses. She wasn’t in a machining room at all. She was standing in an animatronic-wash, not just dried up but stripped down to its metal skeleton.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Ana told her sinking heart, but of course, it did. This was the last stop before loading up one’s animatronics, making sure they looked their best before driving them out to their new home. Now it was completely disassembled, which meant whoever constructed it did not intend to use it again.

Ana moved on. There were other doors, other rooms, all empty. And Mr. Faust was right—that was a long way to walk to see nothing.

But it wasn’t all gone after all. Behind the very last door, at the very darkest hour of her own personal night, Ana found the place Faust had dismissively called his ‘old workshop’. A big room, as they all were, but not an empty one. At first glance, it actually felt cluttered. The walls were lined with industrial shelves, some empty and others loaded with equipment, mundane machining tools, various cans and bottles (including a metric fuckton of mineral oil), and a small hoard of electronic parts that gave her a brief jolt of excitement until she realized they were all perfectly normal things like motherboards and heat sinks for computers going back to the stone age. Here was an archaic film projector and a collapsible screen, yellowing with age; the accompanying reel canisters, of which there seemed to be hundreds, had labels like *Freddy & Friends* (the first time she’d seen a handwritten ampersand in her life) or *Adventure! with Captain Fox* (the first several episodes of this series spelled his name F-A-W-K-E-S). There were dozens of R/C racers, boats, and even a few primitive flyers against the far wall, but the closest thing she could see to an animatronic was a biplane that looked like the one Amelia Owlheart flew in her Airplane Adventure game in the Party Room. Several work stations occupied the floor space—high tables made to lie flat or stand vertically, fitted with steel devices that could either be supports or restraints depending on how they were used. A conveyor looped back and forth across the ceiling, with metal hooks hanging from the track, so many, like the system at a dry cleaner’s shop…or a slaughter-house…but they were all empty now. Here and there, little hubs of home had been arranged amid all the steel, glass and concrete, giving her glimpses into the mind of Mr. Faust back when he was just Freddy—a *Blade Runner* poster over the couch and a *Metropolis* poster over the coffee maker, comic books hiding with the tech manuals and sci-fi collectibles scattered among the old computers, and, at the center of the largest wall, surrounded by photographs, ticket stubs, a small pair of felt mouse-ears and other odd souvenirs without context, a tattered map of Disneyland.
Less sentimentally and more significantly, she saw three doors. One of them was obviously the elevator from his office directly overhead, but the other two looked promising.

Ana started with the door closest to her. It had no latch, only a plain square button set beside it, just like the doors in the security office at the pizzeria. Also like the security doors, when she pushed that button, the door slid up into the ceiling and a billow of stale air fell out. The room within was about the size of the security office, and felt even smaller, airless and dead. The walls, floor and ceiling were all slabs of the same dark metal, featureless except for some scuff-marks.

The vault, she guessed. The vault where Bonnie had said they’d been kept when there wasn’t a restaurant to live at. She hadn’t realized anything could be worse than being trapped in the decaying pizzeria, but even there, there were windows to look out of and room to walk around. Being stored here, just stored…it must have felt like being buried alive.

She didn’t go in. There was no button on the inside of the vault and no way to open the door if it closed on her. Not that it would, but she felt no urge to test that. She could see from here that the vault was empty. There wasn’t even a few strands of purple fur or a shed plastic feather on the floor. Faust must have taken their casings off before he stored them. So now she could lie awake at night thinking about the four of them standing around this cheerless tomb as nothing but endoskeletons.

Ana closed the door. There was one more—just one—but in order to get to it, she had to pass a broad, horseshoe-shaped bank of computers and monitors, with a thickly-padded captain’s chair aimed at a monolithic wall-sized screen. She hesitated, pretending to be torn, then sat down and put her hand on the trackpad.

Faust had said he’d only been down here a few times in the last ten years, but the last time must have been recently. At her touch, the computer came to immediate life. The monitors blinked on, one by one, each with a different configuration of cascading icons. Most of the folders saved to the desktops were labeled with an incomprehensible series of numbers, but a few were set apart and named.

Curious, she moused over to one called FLand and double-tapped the touchpad. The screen in front of her opened up some kind of drawing program. Simultaneously, the giant monitor on the wall lit up with a map of Faust’s proposed theme park. There were a few differences—Mr. Hippo’s Storyland had switched places with Flappy Bat’s Haunted Castle, and Circus Baby’s Big Top had changed its name to the Funtime Circus—but essentially it was the same as the poster of that hung in the employee’s break room at the pizzeria.

And there…there was a file called EndoV5. Opening that showed her detailed schematics of an animatronic’s endoskeleton, impersonal as far as physical features went, but annotated to indicate some very interesting functions. Proximity detector and target tracking probably had something to do with their navigating systems, but they sure sounded ominous. Audio misdirection…was that related to Freddy’s magic act? Did the ‘voice modulator’ allude to something like Foxy’s ‘piratical’ accent? What was a ‘soother’ and why did it look so damn much like hypodermic needles hidden in the fingertips? Why was the central cavity in the torso called a ‘storage tank’ and what was it intended to store?

Those were great questions, but she didn’t have time to sit here and study the schematics all night, looking for answers. And there didn’t appear to be any helpful icons on the desktop labeled Animatronic Repair Protocol, so she’d better get off this damn thing and focus on why she was really here.

Reluctantly leaving the computers, Ana went to the last door and pushed the button to open it.
The machining room at last. Even if she’d never seen one before, she recognized it. Everything anyone would need to make an animatronic was here, from the kiln where ingots could be melted down and ready for casting, to the recycling compactor, where salvaged materials could be reduced to ingots, and every stage of the process in-between. Where another person might see a sprawling, alien contraption, all robotic arms and conveyors, Ana saw an endoskeleton slowly assembled, framed out, padded, and skinned. The only thing she didn’t see was how to tell it what to do. No computer, no dashboard, not even a big red button with Do Not Press written over it. Just like the Tesla condenser in the pizzeria’s basement and the animatronics themselves, there appeared to be no way to directly interface with the damn thing.

“Okay, don’t panic,” she muttered. “It has to be around here somewhere.”

But did it? Her mind kept going back to the animatronic washing station at the other end of the long hall, the one he hadn’t bothered to fully remove as long as he was able to render it non-functional. He was an old man, after all. He wasn’t going to work harder than he had to. Why put the time and especially the labor into dismantling something this size when all he had to do was toss out the only controller in existence? Damn thing was probably at the bottom of the quarry.

No. She couldn’t let herself think that way.

Ana wasted twenty minutes searching the machining room when she could see at a glance there was nothing here and another hour searching the shelves in the other room. She found a veritable museum of computer crap, probably a complete set of classic first-run Kenner Star Wars action figures, and several boxes full of old Freddy’s merchandise, but nothing that looked like a modular user interface for the manufactory.

But what did that look like anyway? Faust must have built it back in the damn sixties, which meant the interface that went with it was also from the sixties. In other words, he’d built a handheld interface of some sort two decades before most people owned a personal computer. Would it even look like anything she’d recognize?

She needed help. After some thought and not without a lot of doubt, Ana thumbed at her phone and put it to her ear.

It didn’t even complete a full ring before the other end picked up and Freddy’s deep, bearish voice growled, “What’s wrong?”

“Uh, nothing. Um…” Ana grimaced and said, “Could you maybe put Bonnie on the phone?”

“No. Chica took him for a walk. He was anxious about something,” Freddy said, a little too pointedly. “She thought it would help relax him. What’s wrong? Have you been arrested?”

“I made him tell me. And I would make you tell me, too, if only that were possible. Ana, for the third time, what is wrong? And don’t tell me nothing. You wouldn’t be calling if something wasn’t wrong.”

“I’m…oh hell, fine. I’m in the basement,” she began. “I’m looking for the—”

“Of course not! Why would you…think…? He told you, didn’t he?” Ana said flatly.

“I told him. And I would make you tell me, too, if only that were possible. Ana, for the third time, what is wrong? And don’t tell me nothing. You wouldn’t be calling if something wasn’t wrong.”

“You are?” he said with so much surprise that it was a little insulting.

“Yeah. And I’m in the machining room, but—”

“You are?” he said again, even more incredulous.
“Quit interrupting me, bear! There’s no controls. I think there’s a separate, like, detachable keyboard or something. Do…Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Silence hissed in her ear.

“Yes,” Freddy said finally.

“Can you talk about this? It’s not against the rules or whatever?”

Another silence, shorter than the first, but deeper, somehow.

“No. It’s not against the rules.” Air blew hard into the speaker as Freddy vented his cooling system. “It’s not a keyboard. It looks something like a small television, about six inches across, maybe…four tall, three deep. The last time I saw it, it was yellow, but he’s painted it before.”

“I don’t…see anything like that here,” said Ana, scanning the shelves.

“It might be on the charger, which is a metal pole with an adjustable arm on a rotating ball-and-socket. Do you see it?”

Ana glanced around and sure enough, there was a freestanding pole close to the door, with the arm just as described, but nothing plugged into it. “I see the charger, I think. But I still don’t see any little television…hang on, let me just…”

Ana went back and rummaged futilely through the shelves where Faust kept his old monitors, but gave up almost immediately. “Okay, I’m going to take a video and send it to you,” she decided. “When you get the notification, you just tap it with your stylus and it’ll open right up, okay? Don’t hang up, just watch the video and tell me if you see it.”

Freddy’s affirmative grunt sounded a touch dubious to her ear, but she took it for encouragement anyway. She scanned the shelves, making sure she didn’t go too fast, sent the video, took another of the computer station area, sent that, and was in the middle of scanning the machining room itself when Freddy said, “What?”

“You just tap the little box where it says something like, Ana has sent a video—”

“I did that,” Freddy said, a bit tersely. “I’m watching it right now. I meant…” His voice faltered and came back plaintive. “I meant, where is everything?”

“Is something missing?”

“Something…everything. I’ve never seen it look so empty. There used to be partitions everywhere with schematics and sketches and…and old prototype parts everywhere. Hands and feet and…all our old heads. And toys, there were…all the little toys he used to make…Let me see the machining room,” he ordered suddenly.

Ana finished her video and sent it. A moment later, she could hear the muted ambient sounds of her footsteps replaying through the speaker.

Another silence, almost a minute long, and heavy as only a full minute of dead air on a phone could be.

“It’s not there,” Freddy said finally. “Come home.”

“Are you sure? There couldn’t be a—”
“It’s gone, Ana. It’s all gone. The simulation stage, the operator’s module, the effector platform, the Lift, the Scoop, the Pendant, the Loader…I don’t even know why he left the Press. Everything else is gone. There’s nothing there that can help us. You have to leave that place. Right now.” A spurt of feedback shrilled in her ear, belying the calm in Freddy’s toneless voice as he said, “Please come home.”

Although she’d wanted to go up at least a little while to poke around the office some more, something in the sound of his voice made her abandon that plan at once and without resentment. “Okay,” she said. “I’m leaving right now. It’s a long walk to the truck, but I should be there in about an hour. All right?”

“You’re walking?”

“Yeah. A little ways.”

“Be careful. It’s dark.” Feedback briefly drowned out even his rumbling voice, dying back enough to let her hear, “—in the dark.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ana said, beginning to be concerned. He’d said there were no rules preventing him from talking about the hand unit, but clearly, helping her trespass in Faust’s old workshop was messing with some kind of protocol. He was holding it together, but he was not okay. She started talking, unconsciously adopting the same tone as she would with anyone who was on a bad trip and having trouble coming down. “So…Bonnie’s out with Chica, huh? Where’s Foxy at?”

“I don’t know. He went out. I don’t know where he is. I don’t know where my family is.”

Oh Jesus.

“You want me to stay on the line with you while I walk?” she offered, light and cheerful, like nothing was wrong.

Silence, broken by static, the grinding of gears and the whine of servos. “Until you reach the truck,” he said at last. “If you don’t mind. Do you mind?” he asked with a sudden, raw uncertainty that made him sound so much like Mr. Faust hopped up on opioids that, even knowing better, she almost wanted to double-check and make sure she hadn’t actually called the wrong Freddy. “Would it bother you?”

“No, I can manage walking and talking,” she told him, moving fast out of the workshop and down the long corridor. “And I’ll be glad of the company, to tell you the truth. It’s so quiet here.”

“All the same, be careful. Sound carries in quiet places.”

“Yeah, but there’s no one here to hear it,” she assured him. “House is empty, bear. Nobody around for miles.”

Silence.

“Freddy? You there?”

“Yes.” Pause. “Please hurry. Not…Not so much that you cannot be careful. Be careful, but come quickly. I need you home now. Where are you?”

“Still in the basement.”
“Where in the basement?”
“Just a long hall.”
“What’s in the next room?”
“Nothing,” said Ana, honestly enough. “Sorry, most of these rooms are completely bare to the paneling. I have no clue what they used to be for.”
Silence.
“Freddy?”
“I’m here,” he said, but he wasn’t, not really.
“Come on, bear, you’re scaring me,” said Ana, pretending it was a joke.
“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to. Come home, please. Where are you?”
“Almost to the front room with the elevator,” Ana promised him, walking faster. “Keep it together, big bear. Deep breaths.”
“I don’t breathe.”
“Think happy thoughts, then. What’s the best memory you have?”
Silence, broken by a hard click. “I don’t have any right now,” he said, so calmly. “Where are you?”
“Hold your horses, bear, I’m coming,” Ana said merrily and ran.

* * *

Bonnie hadn’t wanted to go on a walk, but he had to admit, he was glad Chica had been able to talk him into it. Just getting out of the restaurant, seeing stars and hearing the wind in his mics, had helped to ease the itch of dread as he waited for Ana to come back. And she would come back. With Chica’s gentle help, he’d managed to go from just saying that to believing it, and so he was relieved when he finally saw headlights speeding their way down the long road that led to town, but it was the breezy kind of relief, not the soul-squeezing, delirious kind.

“I think that’s her,” he said, and she must have been going like a bunny out of hell, because by the time the last word was out of his speaker, she was zooming past them where they sat together on a boulder at the edge of the bluff. Her tires screamed as she took the turn onto the Old Quarry road, and she kicked up a massive spray of loose sand on the access road that brought her to the top of the bluff. She’d whipped around the lot before Bonnie even had Chica on her feet, driving so fast and so hard that he fully expected to hear a crunch as she ‘parked’ nose-first in the loading dock.

“Oh my goodness,” said Chica, eyes huge in the moonlight. She looked down at her hands, gripping his arm for stability until she was sure she had her balance, and released him. “Go. Something’s wrong. Go without me. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Bonnie went, watching the ground, terrified that the second he took his eyes off his big, stupid feet, his unfeeling toes would catch a chunk of broken asphalt and he’d go down, smash his chest and his battery and die right there in the parking lot. So it was slow going even if it was faster than he probably should be moving these days, and before he was even halfway to the building, he heard
the loading dock door rattle up for the second time. Foxy, there before him. Damn it.

Bonnie dragged himself step by careful step, and finally, finally reached the unlocked lobby doors. He let himself in, stepping gratefully onto a flat floor, and heard Ana’s voice, startlingly cheerful. Huh. She’d driven in so crazy, he’d never considered she might have good news.

He limped into the dining room, following the sound of her voice and now Foxy’s (Foxy sounded cheerful, too…like, a little too cheerful…more like his stage-voice than his real one) to the kitchen. Freddy must already be there, and maybe that was the reason they both sounded so bright and sunny; they knew Freddy was pissed and were trying to get out of a stern talking-to by pretending there’d never been anything to worry about. Bonnie couldn’t blame Ana for trying, but Foxy should know better. When you fucked up, Freddy wanted an apology, not sunshine and cupcakes.

“How’d it go?” Bonnie called, valiantly throwing himself in the line of fire as a distraction.

Then he walked in and actually saw Freddy.

And the last time he’d seen Freddy look like this, he’d been standing over David as the blood spread slowly across the tiles to soak into the fake fur of Freddy’s feet.

Before he could say anything, Ana said, smiling broadly beneath worried eyes, “No luck, my man. Place was cleaned out and I couldn’t find the interface—”

“Hand unit,” Freddy said, and if the look of him wasn’t enough to scare the hell out of Bonnie, the sound of his voice did the job.

“Right, sorry. Couldn’t find the hand unit. No way to get the manufactory—”

“The Press.”

“—the Press working. Back to the drawing board, I guess.”

“Those were gone, too,” said Freddy. He looked at Ana. He frowned. “You must be tired. What time is it?” the animatronic with an internal clock forcing awareness of every second of every minute of every hour of every day asked.

Ana checked her watch while Foxy exchanged a glance with Bonnie. “A little after two.”

“You must be tired,” Freddy said again. “Where is Chica?”

“She’s coming,” said Bonnie, just as inanely cheerful as Ana and Foxy. “You know her. She’s got to mosey around and look at every blade of grass just in case there’s a blue-spotted sand-roach or some damn thing so she can lecture me about its amazing life-cycle for the next six years.”

Freddy nodded once and looked at Ana again. “You must be tired,” he said for the third time. “I don’t want you driving any more tonight. You should sleep here.”

“Yeah, solid plan,” Ana said, complying without hesitation.

“Good. Have you eaten?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Good. Go to your room now, please.”

“Sure.” Ana turned, locking eyes with Bonnie for a moment of perfect understanding: Is he okay?
No.

Stay with him.

We will.

She walked away.

Freddy followed her as far as the doorway, twitching a little at the ears and shoulders, then came back. He opened the freezer, shut it, checked the dining room again, went back to the freezer, stopped, opened the cooler instead and took out a bottle of water. “Go give this to her,” he ordered, holding it out in a hand that shook ever so slightly. “She had a long walk. It’s still summer. It must be hot. She must be thirsty.”

Foxy was closest, so Foxy took the bottle.

Freddy nodded a few times, went to the freezer, the store room door, the freezer, the dining room doorway, and always the freezer. “He’s not coming back,” he said suddenly. “I always thought he’d come back. I thought…and you’re right, of course. I know you’re right. I’ve known for years. I know he regrets us. I know he blames us. He blames me. I was there. I was there every time and I never stopped it, I never saved them. It was my fault, when you stop and think about it. I was there when David died. I watched him die. I watched all night. And if I’d been watching, really watching, it never would have happened. He’s gone now because I wasn’t watching. I know he blamed me. But…I always thought he’d be back. But he’s not coming back. The house is empty, she said. I saw it. Everything is gone and the house is empty. Father isn’t coming back. Father is dead. He died blaming me. Make sure she drinks the water. And make sure she eats something. She said she had, but she was lying. She doesn’t trust me. She’ll never trust me. I ruined that. I broke our family and I can’t fix it. I can’t fix it. I can’t fix it. I can’t.”

Freddy walked into the freezer and calmly shut the door.

Bonnie and Foxy stood, side by side, waiting for the screaming to start, but it never did. Freddy wasn’t in the black. He was in a much, much darker place.

“I’ll wait with him,” said Foxy, holding the bottle out without looking around. “Go sit with yer girl, make sure she don’t blunder out and get in the middle o’ this. It’s likely to go on a fair goodish while.”

“Is it true?”

“Eh?”

“Do you really think Dad’s dead?”

“Been dead to me a long time, mate,” Foxy said curtly. “Don’t matter a squirt whether he were walking or not. I got nothing to say to him and I don’t care to hear a word from him to me. He could have come through that door at any time in the past twelve years and he didn’t, so I reckon that says it all anyhow. I don’t care. Don’t even care enough to curse his name.”

That sounded like a whole lot of talking for a guy who claimed he didn’t care, but Bonnie didn’t say so. Did he himself care? He…didn’t know. He felt something, he just wasn’t sure what. He’d seen the age on their creator’s face the day this restaurant closed, so he couldn’t say the news of his death came as a surprise, but it didn’t feel real. Should he be upset? Just a few hours ago, he’d been telling Freddy how their creator had abandoned them, didn’t love them, left them to die…should he be happy now? Emotions tumbled through him, all noise and color, like the arcade back when
there were kids, making it impossible to catch and identify just one. The more he tried, the harder it was to think about anything at all, except…

Except for waking up that first time, down in the basement, seeing that young face made blue in the electronic light, bending over him to wipe Bonnie’s eyes clean and bring the whole world into focus…and there was music coming from a radio on the shelf and when he looked that way, he knew what a ‘radio’ was and a ‘shelf’ and ‘music’, and the music was amazing. “You like that?” the man asked, watching him as he listened, and he realized he did, he liked it, and that was his first emotion, that manic swoop of pure joy and wonder and he was ‘happy’, the music made him ‘happy’. When the man flipped the table upright and helped him take his first steps, he went straight to the radio and just listened until the music was over, and when he turned around, the man was there with something his programming called a ‘guitar’, and the man said, “Then you’re going to love this,” and he did, he loved it. He put his hands on it and his hands knew what to do even though he didn’t, and he broke all the strings with that first strum, but the possibility was still there, and the man laughed and took the guitar back and showed him how to restring it and then sat down on the table beside him while he tried again, and this time there was music, his own, that he made, and he thought, ‘This changes everything.’ While he played, the man put his arm around Bonnie’s shoulders and said, “He’s going to love you,” and he hadn’t, of course, but Bonnie didn’t know that then. In that moment, all he knew was that he was happy and he was loved and all the world was made of music…

That man was dead. That guitar was broken and thrown out long ago. Probably even the radio was gone. Bonnie was the only thing left from that memory, that moment…and just look at him.

“Oi.” Foxy gave the water bottle an impatient shake.

Bonnie took it and headed out.

“Oi,” Foxy said again, without the edge on it. “Ye all right, mate?”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie and felt a little sick because it was true. “I’m fine. Life goes on, right?”

For a little while, anyway. Because if Dad was dead and all his stuff was gone, then there were no more parts.

He thought about that as he walked through the restaurant. It was dark in the dining room, dark in the hall; the camera was in Ana’s room already. The door whooshed open almost instantly, giving Bonnie a glimpse of the anticipation in her brilliant blue eyes before disappointment clouded them.

“I thought you were Freddy,” she said, stepping back to let him in. “Is he okay? Don’t even answer that, it’s a stupid question, I know he’s not. I’m so sorry. I called him from the place. I didn’t mean to fuck him up so bad. Is he going to be okay? Did I—” Her gaze fell to the bottle in his hand. Her brows furrowed. She took it and looked at him, a question in her eyes.

“He says you walked a long way and it’s hot,” Bonnie explained.

Some of the tension left Ana’s body in a huff of dry laughter. “So he’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah, just not…not tonight. Him and Dad were…close. Once.”

The camera whined, focusing.

“It’s complicated,” Bonnie said, ignoring it. “You probably shouldn’t say anything to him.”

“Not a word,” she said at once. “He is going to be okay though, right? He didn’t go black, did he?”
“No.” Not yet. “He’s just upset. We all are, I guess. I kind of don’t want to talk about it either.”

Ana nodded, dropping her eyes. “I’m sorry, man. If it was just the mechanical end of it, maybe I
could do something. Hell, if I had a few days alone with that thing, I’m sure I could at least rig in
some manual switches, but it’s the computer that knows how to print the parts and if the only way
to talk to that computer is with the interface…but is it? I mean, is it really just that one specific,
nothing-else-will-do, just that one device? Because if it’s just a prototype wireless keyboard—”

“No,” said Bonnie. “I don’t know much about technical stuff, but it’s not just a keyboard and it
really is the only device that will work on the Press or us or any of the F.E. Inc robotics junk.”

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Ana squinted at him. “This Hand Unit thing is the same gadget that’s the
only thing that can access your guys’s CPUs too?”

“Yeah.”

Ana rolled her eyes and clapped both hands over her face, muttering, “Fuck me running.”

“Sorry,” said Bonnie lamely. “But come on, it wouldn’t make any difference. You still couldn’t
get in there without…um…his voice-print, remember?”

Ana swore again and paced away, raking her fingers through her hair until they snagged on her
braid. The camera followed her, keeping her in the spotlight while she thought.

“Well, we better hope that thing is somewhere in that stupid house,” she said at last, defeated. “See,
every piece of you is impregnated with all this microcircuitry, like a…like the nervous system in a
human body. That’s what lets your CPU read information from and give commands to the rest of
you. Give me a week and I can probably brute-force that machine to operate on an extremely
limited scale, but without that interface, all I can do is stamp out some things that look like parts,
without the microcircuitry or the ability to talk to your CPU.”

“It’s better than nothing, I guess,” Bonnie said uncertainly. “But…But our sensors wouldn’t
work?”

“No, and worse than that, any…What did that Yoshi guy call them? Objects of function,” she said
and shook her head again. “Anything that would need to talk to a computer wouldn’t work. And on
you guys, that’s almost everything. Even if I could get that machine to spit out all the individual
pieces of a pump and even if I could put them together, it wouldn’t work as one because it
wouldn’t be reading any signals from your CPU. I’d have to rig in some actual animatronic
equipment, like compressors and batteries and shit, and apart from the headache of where the hell
I’d even put it, you still wouldn’t be able to feel it and you’d have to have some kind of external
controller to work it. Not to mention having all those dead limbs would probably start fucking with
your systems eventually. Like, if your CPU can’t register a leg, but you’re still walking, would that
fuck you up?”

All he could say was, “I don’t know.”

“And even if it doesn’t, replacing all the good shit with prosthetics has a limit. I’m afraid you’re
going to end up—”

She broke off too suddenly, guilty color flaring in her cheeks.

“What?” Bonnie asked. “End up what?”

“Stuffed in a suit,” she said and clapped both hands over her face. “God, it’s like a bad joke, isn’t
Down in the basement, the dead man in the rotting rabbit watching all this on the monitors snorted and said, “Ha-ha-fucking-ha. Joke’s on you, sweetheart.” His eyes shifted, creaking in their sockets as he studied the bottom drawer of the desk where he sat. He shifted, wedging two fingers through the handle and managing with some effort to work it open without flinging it across the damn room. Once he’d extracted his fingers from the handle, he reached in and got his mostly non-functional hand to fold around one of the objects inside.

It looked something like a small television, painted yellow, with a charging plug on the bottom and docking ports on either side that would allow it to interface either with the Press or an animatronic’s CPU. There had been a third port on the top of the device, to allow it to speak with the computers at the base years and years ago, but those computers no longer existed and the purple man had painted cartoonish eyes over the reader, a simple change that transformed its utilitarian features into an impishly smiling face. It had made Freddy laugh, he recalled, which was of course why he’d done it. Making Freddy laugh had been one of the few things that ever made the purple man really, truly happy. Even now, the twisted mechanisms inside the springlock suit tried to make the rabbit’s mouth smile as he remembered Freddy’s dark, serious face lit up with laughter, so much more than a stupid pair of painted eyes was worth, but then, Freddy never seemed to see the joke coming.

“I guess we had that in common,” the dead man mused, holding the Hand Unit up to the light of the monitors so he could see it better through his filthy plastic eyes. “I sure never saw this coming…and now the joke’s on all of us.”

The Puppet dropped from its nest of cables high in the corner of the room and came toward him, reaching out its long, clawed arm.

“No,” said the dead man, returning the device to the drawer and closing it firmly. “She’s just a little too smart for our own good. Once she figures out which port goes to the Press, she’ll start wondering what the other one goes to, and if she figures that out, you can bet she’ll use it on them. She’ll change the rules. Hell, she’ll erase the rules…and that silly old bear will tell her everything the very first chance he gets.”

The Puppet gestured.

“Yeah,” the dead man drawled, lacing his twisted hands behind the rotting rabbit’s head. “Somehow, I don’t think she’s going to fall into Daddy’s arms just because I hold ‘em open. She’s going to need some…convincing before she decides she wants to be part of the family.”

The Puppet gestured again, patting itself on the chest.

“Don’t hold your breath.” The dead man glanced at the Puppet. “Metaphorically speaking. Look, don’t worry about it. If I have to, I’ll give it to her, but not yet. I want to see what she can do without it anyway. If you want to do something useful, go home and check on the baby. And…And go over to Freddy’s house, too. See if…if he’s really gone.”

The Puppet stroked its claws across the rabbit’s cheek. The dead man caught its hand, hesitated, then leaned into the touch for a few seconds before gently pushing the hand away.

“Go on now,” the dead man said, and the Puppet leapt back to the ceiling and crawled away.
through the narrow vent.

The girl was still talking to Bonnie on the monitor, but the dead man’s attention wandered. He put the security cameras back on auto-cycle and opened another desk drawer, knuckling papers, pens and other drawer-clutter aside until he came to a newspaper at the bottom. An old newspaper, old even when this building was brand-new, preserved in a shadowbox under a glass panel. He couldn’t read the letters anymore and no longer remembered exactly how the headline went. Grand Opening, blah blah, young entrepreneur opens restaurant, blah, unique robotic entertainment, blah blah blah. It was the accompanying photo that mattered.

He stared at it, head cocked so the less clouded of his eyes was aimed down into the drawer. He could barely make out anything but blobs of grey, but he knew it was in this picture, him and Freddy, with his father’s arms around them both. A family. As much as he’d hated his father, he’d loved that picture, and had always dreamed of someday recreating it—him and Freddy with something great in the background and kids in the foreground. He’d always known he’d have the ‘something great’ with Freddy around to make it happen, but the kids had been surprisingly difficult to come by, both in making them, and especially in making ones worth keeping. He’d actually begun to think he’d never have a photo-worthy family of his own and then Marion had come along and made David…

The dead man glanced behind him at the silent, motionless figure beyond the restless crowd. He couldn’t sigh, but he shook his head and looked again at the newspaper. Him and Freddy, young and happy, all their best days ahead of them…

“Peggy,” the dead man said.

Across the room, sitting by herself on top of the Press where her brothers and sister were less likely to notice her, Peggy raised her head from out of her folded arms. At his beckoning gesture, she unfolded her legs and climbed carefully down, picking her way, flinching, through the others to stand beside him.

“Find someplace to hang this,” the dead man ordered, pointing at the newspaper.

Peggy looked at it, looked at him, and looked helplessly around at the walls, paneled with sheets of tungsten carbide alloy, featureless but for the dents where rage had failed to beat a way through them. She took the shadowbox and a pen and wandered over to the Press, peering at the mechanisms along its body until she found a place to wedge the pen in and use it for a hook. “Who are they?” she asked, trying to get it to hang straight.

“That good-looking guy on the right?” He thought he was on the right. He couldn’t remember after all these years. “That’s me.”

She froze, pink fingers lifting off the edges of the frame as if it had turned white hot in her plastic hands. She looked at the photograph.

“Handsome fella, aren’t I?”

She nodded, but he didn’t think she meant it.

“Hey.” The dead man waited for Peggy to turn, then pulled the Party Room back up on the monitor, where Ana and Bonnie still talked. “She look like me at all?”

Peggy studied the monitor, then the photograph. She nodded as her brows drew slowly together. “I think you’re on the left in this picture.”
“Whatever.” It had been a long time since he’d seen it. “So she looks like her Daddy, huh?”

Nod.

“She pretty?”

More nodding.

“Well?” the dead man prompted, beginning to lose his good humor.

Peggy jumped and looked at him. “W-What? What do you want me to say?”

Useless. Marion would have described her, every detail, until this rusted hulk of scrap could almost feel her squirming beneath him…if only Marion still had her damned voice.

And that was a joke, too, wasn’t it? There were dozens of speakerboxes in this room, most of them installed in unalive animatronic shells, but they were all sealed away in protective cases with tiny screws and clamps that the dead man’s hands were utterly incapable of removing. The Puppet’s speakerbox was the only one that was just plugged in—it had been one of Freddy’s earliest designs, after all, conceived when he was only, what? Ten? Twelve? Even younger than he’d been when he’d designed the springlock suits for Fredbear’s Family Diner. Too young to realize how often simple mechanisms like plugs…and springlocks…fail.

“All right, go on, you’re excused,” the dead man snapped, waving Peggy away as she scrambled back up onto the top of the Press. Exasperating to think she was the best of them. Once he got out of here, he’d scrap the whole batch and start over.


Soon.

The dead man shifted in his chair, staring at the blurry face before him on the monitor and trying to imagine what she looked like. His baby-blue eyes, his high cheekbones and pointed chin, all that dark hair—must have gotten that from the Blaylock side of the family—and especially those talented hands.
Chapter 28

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ana woke sometime before dawn with a confused impression that something wasn’t right. She listened and heard an animatronic’s cooling system cycling air close by. “Bonnie?” she mumbled, sitting up.

They were not Bonnie’s borrowed green eyes that lit up in answer, but eyes almost the same shade of unreal blue as her own. Freddy sat on the edge of the stage, stained shadow-purple by the camera’s light filtering through the heavy curtain. His broad, scuffed shoulders were slumped; his scarred back, bent. He clasped his hands loosely between his knees, looking at nothing, not even her.

“You okay?” she said finally, knowing he wasn’t, but there was nothing else to say.

He acknowledged the inadequacy of the question with a puff of vented air—an animatronic’s sigh. “It’s been a difficult night.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. You have nothing to be sorry for.” He paused, one ear ticcing, and then said, “Apart from breaking into a house, but we won’t talk about that. I can appreciate your motives, even if I can’t entirely approve of your actions. I know you did it for us.”

Ana nodded uncomfortably.

“Bonnie tells me that you are still…exploring your options, but you should know that the Press will never be fully functional without the Hand Unit.”

“I’ll think of something.”

“You are very good at what you do. It would not surprise me if you were the best in the world…the best alive. But our…” The pause stretched out, thin and brittle, and finally broke with a hard shuddering of Freddy’s joints. “He was unique,” he said tonelessly. “And even he couldn’t do what he did without help, someone whose way with computers was also…unique.”

“I’m not giving up on you,” she said simply. “I can’t promise you a win, but I’m not walking away.”

He grunted, then glanced at her. The glance lingered. She could sense his thoughts, but couldn’t read them anywhere in his plastic features. “I shouldn’t encourage you,” he said at last. “Nothing you can possibly do to help us comes without risk, and yet…Everything left in me that ever was…good…is found in my family. I’m going to lose them, Ana. I’m going to lose them all, one by one. I’m going to be alone in this place…and who will I be, without them?”

Impulsively, she reached out her hand, even though she knew she was too far away to touch him, and he didn’t like to be touched anyway.

But Freddy put out his own, and she had underestimated the sheer size of him, because as far away as he was, his hand enveloped hers—coarse and hard and trembling at the joints. It was only for a
moment, but it was a good moment, while it lasted. Then he released her and took his hand back.

“Go back to sleep,” he said and shut off his eyes.

Ana lay back down and rolled over. She didn’t ask him to leave. It was weird, knowing he was there, but she’d slept under his watch before and she dropped off eventually.

He was gone the next time she opened her eyes. Her phone told her it was past seven. Time to get up. The problem of how to get her hands on animatronic parts had not solved itself in the night, so she put that pot on the back burner of her mental stove and let it simmer on low. Lala’s bathroom was cleaned out and ready to go, so she guessed she was doing that today.

She made herself some coffee, let Freddy see her enjoying a nutritious breakfast of Pop-Tarts and ramen, and then drove to the Lowe’s in Hurricane to pick up some sheetrock, grout and tiles. She took too long, apparently, as Freddy called while she was perusing the countertops in stock. He made up some story about wanting more black plastic for the windows, claiming some of them had gotten torn, but Ana suspected he just wanted to know where she was. Rather than call him out on it, she took some pictures and got his opinion on counters, then light fixtures and even faucets. He sounded better when he finally hung up and he looked fine when she got back to him, although he had a tendency to hover while she worked. Ana pretended not to notice.

Work was slower than it had to be with Freddy underfoot so much of the time. Despite that, she had the new walls, ceiling and floor in place by her first break, the grout and mudding done by lunch-time (a savory cheese muffin leftover from Faust’s care package, a cold can of mushy ravioli, two Monsters and half a lemon scone, all under Freddy’s too-watchful eye), and since she had plenty of mud left over and nothing to do in the bathroom until everything she’d already done was completely dry, she spent the rest of her day in the gym, finishing the job interrupted by Mike Schmidt’s phone call a lifetime ago, while Freddy came and went, metaphorically underfoot until the inevitable happened: She stepped off the ladder with an open can of primer, turned around and bumped directly into him.

The can tipped. She grabbed at it, felt the contents shift, felt her boot slip off his foot, felt her balance tilt past the point of no return, had one lightning-bright moment of clarity when she knew she was about to get wet, and then she was falling, still fumbling at the can, already too late. Her butt hit the concrete slab of the floor, knocking the breath out of her so that she had to gasp it back in right as the primer slapped into her face.

Primer tastes like liquid chalk in a tin can with a kind of bleachy aftertaste.

Ana spit it out and then just sat there with primer dripping off her hair, down her face, seeping through her clothes and trickling along her bare skin, trying to find something to say that didn’t begin with, “What the fuck.”

“It’s fine,” she sputtered finally. “It was almost empty.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Just my ass, my dignity and my—” She swiped a hand down her chest and had a look, then sighed. “My Bitch, Please t-shirt. No big deal. You never did like this one.”

“You don’t think I meant—”

“No, no, accidents happen. No,” she said again, avoiding his outstretched hand as she gathered herself to rise. “Back up, bear. I don’t want to get any on you.”
“Relax. It’s not the first time and won’t be the last. Seriously, back off. I clean up a hell of a lot easier than you.” She gained her feet, wiping off primer into a growing puddle and trying not to feel like the promo poster for one of those stupid CGI videos in her ‘gardening’ folder. “Well, I guess I’m done for the day.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t even worry about it, bear. This is not the first time I ever got dirty on a job and it sure ain’t the worst thing I ever been dipped in. I’m just… I’m just going to run home and get a shower. I’ll be back. Don’t try to clean up,” she added, kicking the empty can away as Freddy reached for it. “Just let it be. I was going to resurface the floor eventually anyway.”

“I’m sorry. I was hovering. I shouldn’t have been in here at all while you were working.” He coughed up a bitter sort of electronic laugh. “The rules are for our safety.”

“It’s all good,” she assured him. “We’d hug it out, but it’d get all over and we’d end up scrubbing you bald trying to get it off. Although,” she added, making a point of looking him up and down, “we could always just keep painting. I think you’d look good as a polar bear.”

“I think I come across as cold enough already, don’t you?”

“A polar bear with a heart of gold.”

He grunted. “And rhodium, palladium and painite, among other things. But even if I don’t always like the bear I am, I’m not willing to pretend to be someone else just because it’s easier than coming clean.” He paused there, making an obvious effort to dispel the gloom he carried around with him, and forced a lighter tone. “Having said that, I must admit that you look good as a polar bear.”

“Ha ha,” Ana drawled, shaking more primer off her fingertips, but careful to direct the cast-off at the floor. “Find me some clip-on ears and a squeaky nose, give me a tambourine and just put me in the band, right?”

The ever-present security camera whined.

“I wouldn’t wish a squeaky nose on my worst enemy,” Freddy said, with feeling, and went to open the door for her.

Ana left primer-white bootprints and Rorschach splatters from the gym to her workshop in the Quiet Room, where she took a box of garbage bags and a can of WD-40 off the shelves and then left sketchier prints and smaller spatters all the way out of the building. She covered her seat with plastic, climbed in, waved at Freddy, who was watching her from the loading dock with his ears low, and then drove away.

Once home, she stripped in the driveway, threw her clothes into the dump trailer, hosed herself off in the yard, then went in, leaving wet, grassy footprints all the way upstairs. In the bathroom, she sprayed her hair down with WD-40, worked it in to break up the dried paint, and spent the next two hours combing it all out. It took another hour after that to shampoo the WD-40 out, by which time she had damn well earned an hour-long bath in Aunt Easter’s Jacuzzi tub.

The mirrored ceiling helped to find all the spots she’d missed, and afterwards, she just let the massaging jets do their work while she thought of unimportant things…like the nagging feeling that there actually already was a girl polar bear on the poster of Freddyland in the back of the break
room. She could almost see her...in a little blue dress and a little hightop ponytail. She thought her name was Snowball. Snowball was a stupid name. Not as stupid as Lala, but damned high on the stupid-name list. If Ana was a Freddyland polar bear, she was not going to let herself be named Snowball or Frosty or anything else stupid and obvious like that. So...what should her polar bear name be? Aurora...or January, that was a good name. And anyone could play the tambourine.

She dozed, pondering this, until the water went cold and emerged at long last to find that Plushtrap had vacated his chair at the end of the hall. It stopped her, but not for long.

“Come on out,” she called, opening the nearest door and peeking into the room on the other side, listening for the pitter-patter of tiny plush feet. “You want to play games, I’m all for it, but I’m not a fan of Hide and Seek.” She opened another door on another empty room. “You like board games? I think there’s some still down in the basement or the attic. Come on out, little guy. We’ll play some chess, maybe Connect-Four...Operation might still work if I can find some batteries. I’m not going to hurt you. And I don’t think you’re going to hurt me.” Another door.

David’s room.

Plushtrap wasn’t there, unless he was hiding in the closet or under the bed. She didn’t check. She stood in the doorway, looking at a boy’s room preserved in the past like a bug in amber, and after a long, thought-free span of time, she went over to the TV and pushed the power button.

Sound came at once and it was good sound. Images faded in slowly and the picture it made was clean and clear. This TV had probably put Aunt Easter back several hundred or even a thousand bucks on the day she’d bought it and there wasn’t a pawn shop in the world that would give her two cents for it now. Bulky, heavy, low def. Obsolete.

Ana got the handcart from the truck and loaded it up, wrapped in one of David’s old blankets, but she didn’t take it to the dump trailer. She put it carefully in the back of the trunk and returned to David’s bedroom. After she gleaned what she could from there, she squeezed through the clock and felt her way down the spiral stairs to the playroom in the basement. She dumped the action figures out of a mostly empty plastic tub and filled it again with movies and games. When she turned around, arms laden with plunder, Plushtrap was sitting on the pillows of the pirate-ship bed, staring at her accusingly.

He might have been there all along. She hadn’t looked at the bed. Why would she? She was alone in this house.

“How’ve you been?” she continued, listening to her voice and recognizing with some discomfort that it was the one she used when talking to her truck or her tools, not the one she used when talking to people. It wasn’t even the voice she used on babies or dogs or anything that could hear her but wasn’t really expected to respond. And that was odd, because back in the very beginning, that first night with Bonnie and Freddy, high as balls and believing completely that the animatronics were sophisticated robots with advanced AI, she’d used her people-voice on them.

“You mind?” she asked, hefting the plastic tub, weighted now with VHS tapes and game cartridges. Again, her voice fell flat on her own ears and she couldn’t understand why. She knew he was alive. At least, she knew he definitely ran around the house when she wasn’t looking. “I just want to borrow them for a while,” she said, and felt a little more ridiculous with every word. “I’ll
bring them back.”

Plushtrap did not answer.

“Silence gives assent, little dude,” she warned, heading toward the door. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Plushtrap continued to stare straight ahead. Its head did not turn. Its glass eye did not follow her. He looked…like an inanimate object.

“You can come with me if you want,” she offered, watching him closely for any sign of life and finding none. “I’ve got some friends you might want to meet. And I’m sure you want to meet them. They’re just like you. Only taller.”

Not a word, not a flicker of movement.

It was almost like she was talking to a toy.

“Well, if you change your mind, just let me know. I’ll be back tonight.”

Still nothing. Ana went without a goodbye…but she left the light on for him. Just in case.

* * *

Chica was in the kitchen when Ana returned to the pizzeria, leaning super-casually against the prep-counter as she tried to redirect Ana’s attention with a flustered, “I thought you went home!”

“Just to clean up,” said Ana, guiding the handcart into the kitchen and around the pizza oven that dominated the center of the room. “I wouldn’t leave for the day without at least saying goodbye. Please tell me you’re not baking again already?”

“Oh no! No, no, no, no, no,” Chica said soothingly, inching over to block just a little more of the counter. “I’m just…um…cleaning up.”

“Cleaning, huh? I don’t remember making a huge mess.”

“You didn’t,” Chica hedged, shuffling sideways as Ana pushed the handcart to keep the bulk of her body between Ana’s line of sight and the decorating stuff behind her. “A few drops of soda, a few crumbs…it’s not a lot, but, you know…that’s how you get ants!”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s that?” Chica asked, a trifle desperately.

“It’s a surprise. It’ll take me a few minutes to set it all up, so you go on and finish what you’re doing, and by the way, you do know I have a sense of smell right? And that baking produces a very distinct odor?”

“Oh. Um…I do now.”

“Yeah. Also, you make a mean cupcake, no lie, but I can’t live on them, so rather than let them go stale or moldy waiting for me to eat them, maybe explore some other hobbies outside the kitchen, okay?”
Chica’s eyelids took on a crestfallen slant. She scraped her toes across the tiles. “Okay.”

“Thanks. Hey Bonnie, want to flex your big bunny muscles in my direction?”

“Yeah, sure.” Bonnie put his guitar aside at once and heaved himself up from his usual place on the showstage. Almost before he’d finished speaking, the spotlight he’d been playing in had swiveled around, tracking Ana’s voice, and pinned her in the dirty cone of its stare, blinding her until Bonnie had limped in front of it. “What do you need?”

“Can you grab this extremely heavy and extremely fragile thing and take it to the office? I’ll go get the rest of it. No peeking,” she added as he tried to do just that.

“I need to see where the edges are or I’m going to drop it,” he told her sensibly. “My sensor plates are fucked, remember?”

He held his hands up, as if to prove it. She looked at them and felt their phantom touch, playing her scars like strings, making music out of old pain.

“Yeah,” she heard herself say, as if from far away. “I remember.”

She remembered all of it.

‘I am not over this man,’ she thought, not for the first time. Then she shook it off and smiled big enough to hide the thoughts beneath…probably about as effectively as Chica hid her Easy Bake cakes. “Okay, you can look, but you can’t tell Chica what it is.”

From the kitchen, a wounded: “Hey!”

Bonnie snickered and unwrapped the blanket. His ears snapped up at a wide V, tipped forward, then bent at the hinges for a conspiratorial whisper: “Can we keep it?”

“It’s too heavy to move back and forth, so yeah, you can keep it. The other stuff may be on loan. It’s not all mine,” she said, thinking of Plushtrap. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“Other stuff? Cool.” Bonnie wrapped the TV back up, worked his fingers carefully under its corners, and lifted it with ease. He looked at her, his ears slowly fading out of enthusiasm toward something softer and a little sad. “It is cool,” he said, with emphasis on the second word. “Chica wants us to do more stuff together, so this is awesome.”

“But?”

“But…I’m kind of going to miss sharing a little screen with just you.”

“Well, that doesn’t have to stop,” she said, deliberately not thinking about what he might think that meant. Because that was a perfectly normal just-friends thing to say.

“Cool,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

He carried the TV away. She went out to get the rest of it.

Once in the security office, she wired everything up to talk to each other and crawled under the desk to plug it all in. The promised multi-outlet was there. So was Babycakes, which resulted in Ana giving herself one hell of a whack to the head on the underside of the desk when she recoiled in surprise.
“You okay?” Bonnie asked, nearly resulting in a second whack.

“I thought you left,” she said, quickly dealing with the plugs and wiggling back out. Straightening up, she looked over at Bonnie, who shrugged a non-answer and found something to look at on the ceiling.

‘He was totally checking out my ass,’ thought Ana and for the first time in her life, that thought did not come paired with a mental sigh of irritated resignation, but with a little bloom of warmth, quickly stifled. That part of her life was over.

…It didn’t have to be.

She stifled that, too.

“You hurt your head?” he mumbled, still avoiding her eyes.

“No, just bumped it a little.” Flustered, she ducked under the desk, grabbed Babycakes and held it up, yawning to life in her hand. “Little motherfucker is stalking me,” she said and threw it back in the Lost and Found box in the bottom of the cupboard. “I think we’re ready for Movie Night. You go tell Chica, I’ll get Foxy, and I’m sure Freddy will bump into one of us before we get back here.”

Bonnie took grateful advantage of this chance to escape. As soon as he was gone, Ana opened up the cupboard again, found Babycakes, left the security office and went to the emergency exit just outside in the hall.

Babycakes giggled as she unlocked the door. “I think I’m lost. Can you help me find—” And away he sailed into the sunset, his last word stretched out hilariously long: “—Chicaaaaaaaaaaa?”

She didn’t wait to see it land. In her mind, it was flying forever over the desert and the mountains and into the wilds beyond, lost to Man but free in its cupcakey heart. In reality, it fell and hit the cracked asphalt, snapping off its candle. It bounced high and hit again, popping the bright blue plastic cap off one eye and cracking the lens of the camera beneath, then rolled, transmitting a spinning view of grass, asphalt and sky back to the basement (“Damn it,” said the dead man. “Now I’m going to miss Movie Night.”), and finally came to rest aimed at the burnt remains of some cheap fireworks, where it would stay until the Puppet collected it later.

Ana walked back through the winding halls of the pizzeria, catching Freddy just as he was leaving Pirate Cove.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming back,” he said by way of greeting. His eyes moved over her, searching for missed blobs of primer or maybe bruises. “Not that I would have blamed you. If you want to get back to work, I’ll extend your hours this once and I promise not to get in your way.”

“Lighten up, big bear. I told you we were good. Keep bringing it up and you’ll make a liar out of me. Wait up,” she said as he grunted good-naturedly and turned to go. “I brought over a spare TV from the house. We’re setting it up in the security office.”

“A television?” He turned back with a startling amount of alarm. “Why?”

“So I could hook you up a couple game consoles and a VCR. They’re really old,” she admitted. “Probably won’t get a whole lot of use out of them, but they appear to work now, so we’re all going to watch a movie tonight.”

Freddy blinked and leaned back slightly. “You want to use it to watch movies?”
“Uh, yeah? Kind of like how I use my coffee maker to make coffee and my table saw to cut things? What else would I use it for?”

He stared at her for a moment, then said, “I thought you only watched movies on your chr—your tablet now.”

“Oh. Okay, I see the confusion now, but yeah, televisions are still a thing, and I thought you guys might appreciate having something to do with your time besides—” She gestured at him, sweeping her arm back to demonstrate the length of the hall and the visibly sunken, shiny path his constant patrolling had worn into the floor. “—this.”

Freddy’s gaze lingered there a long time before he looked at her again. “It’s a kind thought. I’m sure the others will appreciate it. Thank you.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome, but also, ‘we’re all going to watch a movie,’ means you, too. Let’s go, bear.”

Freddy snorted and folded his arms. “I know the sorts of movies you watch. No thanks.”

“There’s not an R-rating in the whole box, I promise.”

“Some other time. I need to keep watch.” He started walking again.

She side-stepped in front of him. “No, what you’re going to watch is TV, because what you need is to get out of your own head for a little while. I’d get you stoned if I could, but I can’t, so this is the next best thing. Come on,” she said with her widest eyes and most cajoling tone. “It’s not Movie Night unless we’re all there.”

He frowned. “It’s…a family thing,” he said slowly.

Ana squirmed. “Don’t make it weird, bear. Just come watch the damn movie.”

Freddy looked back down the hall, then sighed and rubbed his muzzle. “All right. I’ll be there.”

“You won’t regret it,” she assured him and continued on to Pirate Cove.

The restaurant was still ‘open’ and the show was on, hornpipe music blaring through hidden speakers and animatronic fish all around the room singing the yo-ho-hos to a song Foxy himself was supposed to be leading. The curtain was up and the one working stagelight was lit, but the deck of the ship appeared to be empty. Ana cupped her hands around her mouth and called, “Ahoy, Captain!”

A hook lifted into view down in the auditorium and gave her a lazy wave. “No need to bellow at me, lass. I’m right here. Ahoy yerself.”

Ana went to the rails and leaned over them to get a narrow glimpse of Foxy stretched out across the lowest bench, one knee up, one arm crooked behind his head, eyepatch up and eyes closed, looking for all the world like a drunken sailor sleeping it off. Except he didn’t sleep. Or get drunk. And was a fox.

“Bit early to be hitting the rum, isn’t it?” she teased.

“Sun’s over the yardarm somewhere in the world, luv.” He hooked his abdominal casing open with a casual flick and tapped the bottle hidden inside. “Plenty left if ye’ve a mind to join me. But ye’ll have to ask me nicely.”
“No thanks. I’m driving later.”

“Suit yerself.” He snapped his stomach shut. “Come to see the show?”

“Seen it. Want to see a better one?”

Foxy’s ear flicked. After a moment, he opened his eyes and sat up, looking around at her with a crooked grin. “What did ye have in mind?”

“Well, I’m probably not going to see a lot of blood, but I’m hoping for explosions at least.”

He blinked. His rakish leer shifted into a puzzled squint and by gum, there really was a difference. Imagine that. “Eh?”

“Meet me in the security office,” she ordered and walked out.

He let her go without any kind of comment and he gave her a considerable head start, but curiosity must have overwhelmed him in the end, because she heard his metal feet clanking on the tiles by the time she reached the signpost.

In the office, any hopes Ana had held out for casting a vote for the night’s entertainment were soon dashed by the sight of Chica excitedly rummaging through the bin beside a growing tower of cassettes.

“This one,” she chirped, holding it up for Freddy to take so that she didn’t have to pull her head out of the bin, “and definitely this one and maybe this one…Oh!” She popped up with a cardboard case in both hands. “It’s Indiana! I’d forgotten. Gosh, I’ve been calling him Banana Jones in my head all these years.”

“Banana like the fruit?” Ana asked.

Chica met her crooked smile with a sniff and a toss of her few remaining feathers. “Indiana like the state? How is that less weird?” She put the video on the pile to be watched and looked at it, rubbing her hands. “Where do we start?”

“Why are they all kids’ movies?” Bonnie asked, looking Chica’s selections over with noticeable disinterest.

“Because they belonged to my cousin when we were kids,” Ana told him. “David didn’t like horror movies anyway. He said they were boring, but I think he just had a thing about blood.”

“Movies?” Foxy had reached the doorway and was looking in at the scene with an expression halfway between amusement and irritation. “Ye pulled me out o’ the Cove for movies?”

“I told you I was putting on a show.”

“I didn’t think ye meant on a bloody television.” But Foxy came all the way inside and had a look in the box. He picked up a Gameboy, poking at the buttons a few times with his hook. When nothing happened, he dropped it and moved on to the tapes, dismissing them all at one glance. “Sorry, luv, I got better things to do with me night.”

“No, you don’t.”

“For once, I’m with Foxy,” said Bonnie, shaking his head as he read the back of a tape case. “These are cartoons.”
“Not all of them,” Ana protested, but had to admit, “Just most of them. But hey, some of them are definitely less kiddish than others.”

“Like what?” Bonnie asked skeptically.

Ana took *A Toy Story* out of his hands and replaced it with another tape case.

He grimaced. “A dinosaur movie?” he said, not quite groaning. “Seriously? Dinosaurs…come to life…at a theme park?”

“Yes, but you’ll see,” Ana said as she popped the tape in. “Trust me.” She pulled her camping chair around and more or less collapsed into it, stretching herself comfortable. It wasn’t even dark yet, but all at once, she was exhausted, just like all her body had been waiting for was reassurance that it didn’t have to do any more work before giving out on her. “Chica, there’s a fan around here somewhere. Turn it on and aim it at me, would you?”

“Sure! Um…Like that?”

“Yeah,” sighed Ana as the breeze hit her. The building’s air conditioning worked fine most places, but it didn’t reach the security office, and having four animatronics pumping hot air through their seams every few seconds sure didn’t help. “Someday, I’ll get the real theater fixed up and we can spread out some, but this is good for now, right? Everybody see the screen okay?”

They shuffled around in the small room. Freddy took up position in one of the doorways, where he could at least keep an ear turned toward the emergency exit in the back of the hall. Chica started out next to Ana, but moved to the other doorway when the security camera came on in the employee’s lounge, helpfully blocking its annoying light so that Ana didn’t have to close the doors and turn an already uncomfortably warm room into an oven. Bonnie took his usual movie-watching place on Ana’s left, but he moved to turn off the lights when Ana asked and when he turned around again, Foxy had stolen his spot. Pretending to be oblivious to Bonnie’s stare (and Ana’s, and for that matter, Freddy’s and Chica’s), Foxy sat himself on the floor, put his back against the manager’s door, propped an elbow up on his bent knee and pulled out his bottle of rum, all his attention apparently fixed on the screen where the opening credits were giving way to something big crashing through the jungle, but with a glint of enjoyment in his eye that she was sure had nothing to do with the movie.

And what was she going to do about it? What could she do? One spot was as good as another. Bonnie had no proprietary right to the space on her left.

She looked at Bonnie.

Bonnie’s ears did some grumbling, but he said nothing as he found a place to stand on her right.

It felt odd. Unbalanced. She felt a strong urge to reach out and hold his hand, like that would restore the world’s equilibrium…and maybe it would.

Fortunately, at that moment, an unseen velociraptor grabbed a man and pulled him slowly, screaming, into a transport crate to be eaten, which handily distracted all of them.

“Oh my goodness!” breathed Chica, her eyes as wide open as their dimensions allowed. “You said this wasn’t a horror movie!”

“It’s not. Although, true talk here, when me and…When I saw this on the big screen, I legit climbed over the back of my seat at a certain scene—you’ll probably know it when we come to it —into the row behind me, and that seat was empty because the grown man who’d been in it had
climbed over the back of his seat and run from the theater. It’s just a movie now,” Ana remarked as the scene shifted out of the dark into a sunny day. “A lot of people today don’t even think it’s that good, but let me tell you, when this was new, it wasn’t just a movie, it was a phenomenon. Overused as the phrase may be, it legit changed the industry. And people can roll their eyes all they want at talking raptors and motorcycle chases and giant hamster balls, but none of the goofiness of the later installments take away one goddamned iota from the fact that this—” She pointed at the screen as the camera came to sharp focus on a bug trapped in amber. “—is a masterpiece.”

They all gave that a moment’s respectful silence.

Then Chica softly said, “You don’t dig amber out of mines like that.”

Ana sighed.

“I’d be very surprised if you could even have a mine like that within lawyer-walking distance of a river.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“That doesn’t look like a very realistic paleontological digsite either,” Chica observed as the scene changed. “Since when do you find totally intact, articulated fossil skeletons in sand?”

“This isn’t a documentary!” Ana said loudly as Foxy laughed.

They watched the movie while Ana covertly watched them, measuring minute changes in ears and eyelids until she was sure they were really watching and not just being polite. Chica got into it right away, scientific inaccuracies and all, and seeing her unfeigned wonder when that first Brachiosaurus appeared made even sitting in the crosshairs of Foxy’s and Bonnie’s animosity worth it all. Freddy was slower to win over, but gradually began to pay more attention to the TV than the empty hall and ultimately shifted himself around so that he had a better view, both ears forward and everything. The raptor feeding got a grunt out of him, the security system shutting down got another one, and as a certain scene opened with two jeeps stranded in front of the T. Rex paddock, he said, “How old did you say you were when you first saw this?”

“Ten,” she said. “Well, maybe nine. I don’t know. I just know it was summer, right before…I left Mammon. Probably nine, almost ten. Why?”

Freddy didn’t answer, but Bonnie snorted and said, “You should see the stuff she watches now.”

“She’s a grown woman now.”

“Oh, so you do realize that,” Ana remarked.

Unabashed, Freddy continued, “She just chooses not to behave like one most of the time. I’m beginning to suspect than an overexposure to violent films and video games in her formative years has stunted her emotional development.”

“Well, as much as I’d love to argue with you, the fact that I’d be arguing with a giant teddy bear would suggest you’ve got a point,” Ana said dryly.

“Shh!” Chica’s fingertips had begun a nervous tapping. On the screen, the evidence of an impact tremor rippled through a convenient cup of water. “Something’s happening.”

Something indeed was.
As a relatively small scaly hand slipped over the obviously unelectrified fence, Freddy shifted. A little static crackled through his speaker when the T. Rex raised its head and slurped the goat down. The lawyer bolted; Freddy folded his arms.

“You okay, big bear?” Ana asked.

He nodded once. “I don’t like things that derive entertainment value from putting children in danger.”

“They don’t actually kill ‘em just to make the movie, Fred,” Foxy remarked in a bored voice, reading the label on his bottle of rum. “Lighten the hell up.”

Freddy grunted.

The T. Rex came through the gate and leaned down to stare into the beam of the flashlight.

“This is the scene, isn’t it?” Bonnie said.

Ana held up one finger, waited until the exact moment that a T. Rex snout punched through the windshield, massive jaws held back by four tiny hands and a thin pane of safety glass, and pointed. “Right there. That’s where I went over the back of my chair. In a few more minutes, you’ll get to see the tree bit, where I legit took my shoe off and hugged it because I could not get through that scene without something to hug.”

“That’s almost as adorable as it is sad,” Bonnie remarked, wincing a little as the jeep on the screen was crunched under the T. Rex’s foot, crumpling like a pop can while the kids inside screamed and the mud slowly poured in through the broken windows. “Why weren’t you hugging on your cousin?”

“He was hugging Aunt Easter,” said Ana and smiled, in spite of everything. “Her seat wasn’t big enough for three of us. Wasn’t even big enough for the two of them, but fear, like life, uh, finds a way.”

Bonnie looked at her, ears folding forward in concern. “You okay?”

Ana nodded and she was. She could look at this scene and see herself at ten, scrambling over the back of that worn red velvet seat as the entire darkened theater seemed to roar around her, but with her grown-up eyes, she could also see right through the silicone skin of an animatronic dinosaur to the metal bones, hydraulics and wires that made the movie magic happen. It was still a good scene, still a good movie, even if it couldn’t make her feel the same way it used to. Likewise, she could remember David’s arms locked around his mother’s neck while Aunt Easter happily screamed along with everyone else who was screaming, and it was still a good memory, whatever else her grown-up self knew.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Bonnie asked.

“Just tired,” she said, rubbing her eyes. It wasn’t even a total lie. “It always seems to catch up to me all at once.”

“Oh my goodness!” Chica squeaked and clapped both hands over her eyes, peeking through them only to snap her splayed fingers together again when the T. Rex and the lawyer came face to face. “I can’t look. When can I look?”

“In about an hour,” said Ana helpfully. “You big chicken.”
Freddy unfolded his arms to give Ana’s nose a stern boop. “No name-calling.”

“She’s literally a chicken, Freddy.”

“He got crunched, didn’t he?” Chica moaned. “I can hear the crunching! Oh, I hate scary movies! Why are we watching this? We could have been watching Banana Jones!”

“We could have been watching *Blood Orgy of the Insatiable Slug-Beasts*, too,” Bonnie pointed out. “Count your blessings.”

Foxy rolled his eye and shared an expressive glance with Ana, who shrugged and nodded. Foxy chuckled, then took a swig of rum and offered up the bottle.

“I told you I’m driving. Tomorrow’s a work-day.”

“Just giving ye options.”

“To get home safely or to get soused and have to stay over? Sounds more like you’re giving you options.”

“Say hey for the life of a pirate,” Foxy growled and winked his eyepatch.

Bonnie put his hand out.

Foxy and Ana both looked at him. Bonnie watched the movie and waited, palm up.

Foxy passed the bottle.

Bonnie took it, chugged it and handed it back empty.

“Yeah,” said Ana as Foxy went through the exaggerated comic motions of shaking it and peering into the neck. “He does that.”

“Ye don’t even like rum, ye long-eared git!”

“He doesn’t like gin either, but he drank all mine the other night.”

“You had plenty before I got to it,” Bonnie remarked.

Freddy grunted.

“Fortunately, I came prepared for that pillaging weevil’s bottomless gullet.” Foxy popped open his abdomen with his hook and, in a single dexterous one-handed motion, tossed the empty bottle up, removed another full bottle from inside its storage cavity, spun the cap off and bit down on the neck, tipping his head back for a quick swallow as he caught the empty bottle and tucked it away. He closed up his stomach with a flick and a tap from his hook, took the bottle out of his mouth and pretended to smack his plastic lips with satisfaction.

“Show-off,” said Bonnie, his eyes firmly fixed on the TV and his ears folded irritably back.

Freddy grunted again, although there was a tinge of envy to Ana’s ear and he stole a glance at his hand soon after, flexing the fingers.

Unperturbed, Foxy gave the open, nearly full bottle a few more completely unnecessary flips, high and fast, trusting to centrifugal force to keep the contents inside, and caught it again without spilling a drop.
“Well, if the pirate-thing bottoms out for you, you can always make it as a juggler,” Ana told him, then took a sharp second glance at the bottle in his smug hand. “Hey, that’s my Fireball! You ass, I’ve been looking for that all over!”

“Surely not, or ye’d have found it. It ain’t budged since I put it away.”

“You ‘put it away,’ all right. You put it all the way inside you! Give me that!” Ana snatched it out of his grip and plunked it down firmly on the other side of her chair, glaring at him. “Thief.”

Foxy shrugged and leaned against the back wall, folding one arm behind his head and picking his teeth with his hook, feigning indifference even as he grinned. “Pirate.”

“Oh, who cares who took what bottle of whose silly drink?” Chica demanded, thrusting both hands at the screen. “People are dying!”

“Sorry.” Ana settled back into her chair, but couldn’t get comfortable. Probably for the best. Comfortable was starting to feel a bit dangerous to her, like if she closed her eyes now, she wouldn’t be opening them again until her phone’s alarm went off in the morning. So it was a good thing that this goddamn chair had been designed by Satan himself to keep the sitter awake and alert. A very good thing. Damn it.

Foxy paid her fidgeting no outward attention, but he mimed a yawn and a stretch and sprawled even more.

“Are you bored, Captain?” Ana inquired, nudging his infringing foot out of her personal space.

“It ain’t for lack o’ stimulating company, luv, I assure ye.” He dipped into the pocket of his jeans (no point thinking of them as hers anymore), and came up with a shiny gold-painted doubloon. He began to walk it across the knuckles of his metal hand, watching it rather the television. “Just having trouble getting me scare on by a bunch o’ rubber lizards.”

“It’s not supposed to be a scary movie,” she reminded him. “It’s just supposed to be a good story.”

“Oh aye. ‘Ooo, dinosaurs be alive! Yar, they’re gonna eat ya!’ Prime story-telling, that.”

Ana tried to watch the movie, but she’d seen it too many times and the lazy scratch-scratch-scratch of his hook moving back and forth across his abdomen would not be ignored. She glanced at him, a lingering glance that led her scar by scar across his body until she came to a large gash low on his torso that damn near bisected the casing. Light from the TV reflected off the empty bottle stored inside. Beyond that, his metal bones glinted dully. Beyond that, she could see the black-and-white checkerboard of the floor tiles. “What happened here?” she asked.

Foxy’s ears ticced. He folded his arms and looked at the TV. “Don’t recall. Happened a long time ago.”

“No, it didn’t,” said Ana, and touched it, tracing the scar from one hip to the other. The edge felt rough, each individual gouge still distinct under her fingertips, and the color of the plastic was a rich reddish-brown, without the grimy greyish tint that time had stained his exterior. “This is new.”

Foxy watched her hand, then peered curiously at her face, showing her teeth as he pretended to smile. “If yer going to feel up in me crevasses, luv, it’s only fair I gets to do the same.”

Freddy loudly and unnecessarily cleared his throat.

She took her hand back and stood.
“Ah, don’t go,” Foxy sighed. “I’ll keep me hands to meself if’n ye do likewise.”

“I’m not going anywhere, I’m getting the putty. I need to get that patched before it gets any worse.”

“I has a patch,” he said and snapped it down over his eye. “And I don’t need doctoring.”

“If I don’t patch this, it’s going to break right off, Captain.”

“Just the skin, no real harm done. Sit down, girl. I be trying to watch a show here.”

Ana sat and tried to pay attention, but it was harder than it should be. Little Ana could hardly breathe for terror, watching the Jeep crash down through the tree, branch by branch, pursuing the man and boy with a relentlessness and ruthlessness that made it seem almost alive and just as hungry as the Tyrannosaurus from before. Now, Grown-Ana saw a Jeep attached to a crane just out of shot with the line edited out. There was a whole squad of people standing around with fingers on switches, making sure the rig dropped exactly as planned and practiced, with angled shots and forced perspective to make it seem as though the actors (or their stunt-doubles, more likely) were only inches from death, but who might actually be on another soundstage entirely.

It was still cool, but it wasn’t scary, and worse, she couldn’t understand why it had ever been scary. Even as a child of nine or ten or whatever, Ana knew they didn’t kill people just to make movies. And yet, she had still pulled her shoe off and hugged it, blinking back tears of terror because if Aunt Easter saw her crying, she might make them leave, and she had to see this. It was just a movie, just make-believe, and there were little kids in it, so obviously everything would be all right in the end, but she just couldn’t see how that could possibly happen. In this world, there were dinosaurs in cars and cars in trees and nothing was where it should be, no one was safe. Not even her, here in this theater. Just by watching this, she had put herself in the story and now she could die too.

Ana watched the scene play out to the punchline, although her mind was mostly in the past, examining the terror of her child-self, too grown to feel any of her own. Once they were out of the tree (but back in the Jeep), her gaze had a way of wandering, taking mental measurements of the damage to Foxy’s casing, calculating weight and stress…and before she knew it, she was touching him again, this time feeling at a deep crack in his upper arm.

“Just can’t keep yer hands off me, can ye?” he remarked.

“How did this one happen?”

Foxy glanced at his arm and shrugged.

“Come on, all your scars have a story. That’s the whole point of you.”

“Oh no, it ain’t,” Foxy said dryly. “I doubt very bloody much me story-telling capacity would rank anywhere a’ tall on anyone’s list o’ me talents.”

“It’s right at the top of mine,” Ana said.

Foxy humphed, but his next sidelong glance had a smile.

“Well, what about this one?” asked Ana, flicking a finger against the round curve of Foxy’s hook. “There has to be a hell of a good story for how you lost your hand and I don’t think I’ve ever heard it.”

“I didn’t lose naught. I were built this way.”
Ana raised one eyebrow. “You won your sword in a duel with Captain Blackmane, after chasing him across the Sundered Sea and pulled the feather for your hat from the tail of the Firenze Firebird, but you were built with a hook for a hand?”

“Ye caught me,” he said dryly. “Sharp as a sharking gaff, ye be. Aye, they’re all lies. I ain’t a real pirate. I’ll tell ye a secret, luv, I ain’t even a real fox. Ain’t none of us here are what we say we are, nor does what we says we do.”

“Ahem,” said Bonnie, staring stone-faced at the television. “I can actually play the fucking guitar.”

Freddy uttered a censuring grunt.

“Well, I can. Chica can really bake and Freddy can really do magic tricks. Magic tricks,” he emphasized as Foxy snorted. “He doesn’t go around claiming to be a wizard or tell kids he stole a magic hat from a riddling goblin or some stupid thing. He calls them tricks, but he can do them.”

Foxy cupped his ear and said, “Eh? Sorry, lad, ye’ll have to speak up. Appears to be a whining gobshite hereabouts. I can hear it buzzing every time ye opens yer mouth. Me point being,” he continued, addressing Ana again as Freddy sighed and rubbed his muzzle, “all the stories I tell the kids, they’re just files programmed into me memory. I never even seen the sea, unless ye counts the one what they painted on the wall.”

Ana pulled her phone out and gave the screen some taps, then held it out to him with a picture pulled up: the sun setting over the watery horizon, the sky and the water fighting for colors and the black fans of palm trees in the foreground.

Foxy barely glanced at it, but when Ana started to offer the phone to Chica, who was already reaching for it, Foxy plucked it from her hand and looked at it again. One ear twitched, perhaps from the effort of appearing so disinterested. “Looks big at this angle, don’t it?”

“It covers, like, eighty percent of the planet,” she replied. “That’s pretty big from any angle, Captain.”

“Ye been here?”

“In that exact spot? I don’t know. Photo’s tagged southern California, so maybe. I’ve seen plenty of sunsets like that. I even lived by the ocean once.” She wriggled back into her chair, her eyes drifting toward the TV, although she wasn’t watching it, really. “Not in So Cal, in Oregon. A place called Tillamook, all craggy coast and trees that stay green all year. I was there three months. Worked at a cheese factory. Terrible job. Beautiful town. It rained the whole time.” She smiled, remembering. “The wind blew in over the rocks and it was wonderful. You could see sea lions bobbing out on the surf and sometimes whales…and at night, all the lights on the ships way out in the harbor.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It wasn’t. It was beautiful, sometimes, and sometimes scary, but it was never nice. If you ever saw the sea, you’d know nice is never the word for it.” She took her phone back and handed it to Chica. “You want to see it? I’ll take you.”

His ears twitched again. “Why would ye say that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You don’t have to stay here,” said Ana. “Neither do I. I could sell the house, buy a commercial van that can take the weight and roll out west, all of us.”
“We’re homed here, Ana,” Freddy said, ever the voice of reason.

“Don’t distract me with the facts,” she told him and turned back to Foxy. “We’ll get us a big house high on the rocks and glue googly eyes on seashells and sell ‘em to tourists. What do you say?”

“I say saltwater and sand probably wouldn’t do good things for me servos.”

“Oh my God, not you too. Since when do pirates care about the truth?”

“He’s not a pirate,” Bonnie muttered.

“I ain’t a pirate,” Foxy agreed. “Just a liar, thief and procurer o’ unguarded bottles o’ grog.”

“Sounds like a pirate to me. How’d you lose your hand, Captain?”

“Never had a hand to lose, lass.”

“And you never saw the ocean, but you sailed over the Sea of Stars to the island that floats on the back of the great sea-turtle and freed Princess Marina from her golden cage. You have saved a lot of princesses, now that I think about it. How many, do you know? Like, four? Five?”

“Eight—er,” he cut in quickly, clapping a hand over his eyes. “None. Never met a princess, unless ye count the ones wearin’ paper crowns.”

“And you never fired all cannons into the squirming sides of the sea serpent that held your ship in its slimy coils or leapt onto the neck of the Kraken of Kaelbraken and drove your sword, that sword you didn’t win in a duel, into its one great staring eye. You never plucked the feather you wore in your hat from the tail of the Firenze Firebird or stole the jewel you wore on your belt from the eye of the idol of Tuk Tuk, deep in the Jungles of Green Death.”

“Coo, ye don’t have to tell me how the silly babby-tales go,” he said cheerily. “Ain’t I been telling ‘em day in and day out for the whole o’ me miserable life? I tells ye, I’d trade me hand—aye, and a foot!—just to be able to forget!”

This possibility had never occurred to her. Hearing it cut across her sleepy good humor like a cutlass and left her adrift and slightly embarrassed.

“Oh,” she said lamely and looked at the TV, where a great director had used nothing but ominous music and jump-cuts to a bunch of breaker switches to make an actor climbing a fence seem suspenseful to the dumb little kid watching it for the first time and hugging her hand-me-down sneaker.

And she had been dumb, hadn’t she? Mechanical knack notwithstanding, she’d been every bit as stupid as her mother always said she was. For a lot of reasons, really, but mostly for caring about the lives of made-up people more than her own. For wasting her time reading books and wishing for the paper princess to be saved while she spent half her life starving in a goddamn closet and telling no one. For cheering for Foxy as she watched Aunt Easter’s tapes, when she knew damn well the age of piracy on the high seas had ended and there were no such thing as talking foxes anyway.

Bonnie nudged her arm, silently asking her if she was okay, which was loud enough apparently to attract everyone’s attention. He knew it and his ears lowered sheepishly, but the question stayed in his eyes.

She smiled for him and rolled her shoulder. “Just thinking, my man.”
“About what?”

“Stories. How powerful they are. How manipulative.” She nodded at the television, where a door slowly opened and a dinosaur stood on the other side, scaly hand still gripping the latch, sniffing the air of a seemingly empty kitchen as the camera pulled up and revealed two small children with only a cabinet between them and certain death. “The danger isn’t real, sure, but…nothing is. There’s no courage either. There’s no glory, no romance. And we don’t even really believe it, we just pretend to. For an hour or two. But the way we feel is real. Isn’t that weird? That you can watch a fake dinosaur prowl around a kid who’s only pretending to be scared, and you know it, but you still feel really relieved when they get away. I mean, when I saw this the first time, when the girl does this—” She pointed just as the velociraptor on the small screen banged head-first into the shiny reflective face of a cabinet. “—I legit cheered. Out loud. And when it was finally over and the credits started rolling, I stood up on my seat and clapped so hard, I hurt my shoulder. And I knew it wasn’t real, but I shit you not, I was the happiest I think I’d ever been in my damn life that day, walking away from the theater, knowing those kids were safe. And I knew they were going to be safe before I ever even sat down. But he got it out of me anyway, that son of a bitch.”

“Who?”

“Spielberg. And the actors, I guess. And the special effects guys. And I guess some credit goes to Crichton, although not very fucking much, let me tell you. I read the book after I saw the movie and it’s terrible. I don’t know how the hell the man made a story about dinosaurs coming to life and eating people in a theme park boring, but give the man a cookie, he did it. Never mind,” she said, waving one hand to shut that away like a freezer door shutting on a raptor. “My point is…I don’t know what the hell my point is. It’s just funny, isn’t it? How the mind tricks you into needing to know what happens next when you know, you absolutely know, that nothing ever happened at all.”

“It’s probably an extension of dream theory,” Chica said and paused to playfully smack Bonnie’s shoulder when he loudly groaned. “Some psychologists believe that dreams serve a purpose, as a kind of dress rehearsal for events that might happen in waking life.”

“What, so that you’re prepared when you suddenly discover you can fly, or forget to wear clothes to work—” She glanced at the TV, then pointed at it. “—or have to fight off velociraptors? Realistically, how likely are any of those things to happen?”

“I’m sure there’s more to the theory, but I don’t sleep, so I didn’t look into it very much,” Chica said apologetically. “I only heard about it at all because I was curious about why…well, why I like to read.” She tucked her head, a little pink light shining through her cheeks as the others looked at her, and clasped her hands tightly over her round stomach. “It doesn’t make a lot of sense, particularly since most of what I have to read are children’s books, but some of them are still good stories, just told with simple language. And pictures. But they can illicit an empathetic emotional response…and I guess that’s why I do it. Because a good story is really just a shared experience, whether it’s about having friends or going on adventures—” She looked at the TV with a wince. “—or being eaten by dinosaurs. The fact that they will never actually happen only makes the story more important, because some of us will never share those experiences any other way.”

Ana laughed, in curious harmony with the TV screaming. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Well…maybe, but it isn’t the dinosaur you clapped at when you were little, was it? It was getting away from the dinosaur. The need to feel safe is directly proportionate to the level of danger, and children don’t really have a well-developed sense of proportion. Their lives are so uncertain and they have such a limited means of expressing their insecurities, but they all understand that
dinosaurs are real and want to eat you, whether the dinosaur is a bully at school or divorcing parents or…an actual dinosaur, I guess. There’s an element of wish fulfillment, but the wish isn’t the scary parts, it’s seeing that that scary parts can end. And for some children, movies and stories are as close as they’ll ever come to—ow!”

Chica rubbed her plastic elbow, where Bonnie had no-so-gently nudged it, but her expression of hurt annoyance blinked away in a moment to wide-eyed apology. “Oh! Oh, I didn’t mean you!”

“How the shoe fits,” Ana said, smiling. And boy, did it fit. Before Netflix, she’d had a library of DVDs and even some tapes hundreds strong, sorted by subject and by whether it was better to watch them straight or high, and she’d been known to pick apartments based on how close they were to the local video store. She’d wasted her teen years skipping school to sneak into the movie theater, no matter what was playing, because anything was better than school, or worse, home. Before movies, it was books, from the day she learned to read, right up until she moved into Rider’s stable, where being ‘the kid’ and ‘the girl’ was hard enough without being ‘the bookworm’ too. Even in Mammon, she’d preferred the library to the playground at recess, and her weekends and holidays were spent watching tapes over at Aunt Easter’s house, singing along with the songs and marveling at the magic acts, but it was the stories she loved most of all. Freddy’s and Chica’s, sure, but Foxy’s were the best. She’d watched them until she knew every line by heart. She and David could act them out, swashbuckling on the stairs when it rained or down by the quarry when it was sunny. And later, hiding under their blankets with flashlights and walkie-talkies, making the kinds of plans only little kids make: he’d marry her when he grew up and take her away with him, and they would both be pirates and sail the seven seas forever under a black flag.

One story after another, as long as she could remember. Anything to keep from living in her own life.

Beside her, Foxy started to scratch at his muzzle, only to pull his arm back and look at his hook for a while. “Could’ve been a shark, I reckon,” he muttered. He glanced at her, shrugged, and folded his arms. “Tell ye what, lass. If’n I ever has an audience again, that’s how I’ll tell it.”

Ana waited, but Foxy appeared to be enthralled in the gripping resetting-the-computer scene, and at last she had to say, “Well?”

Foxy raised his eyepatch and looked at her. “Well what?”

“What’s the story?”

His ears came forward. “Me hand got et by a shark.”

“Come on, tell it right.”

He rolled his eye. “Once upon a time, me hand got et by a shark. The end. Hell, woman, what do ye want from me? There ain’t a story!”

“Make one up.”

Foxy blew a bit of noise through his speaker. “I don’t do that bit.”

“Now you’re just making excuses.”

“I’m telling ye the truth, lass. Some other bloke come up with the words. I never made up a damn story in me life!”

“You’ve told enough of them, though. You know how it’s done.”
“Oh aye?” Foxy leaned toward her, a gleam of challenge in his eye. “Ye think it’s so damn easy, then ye tell me how I lost the bloody hand.”

Ana Stark did not back down from a challenge. “First of all, it got bit off by a dragon, because sharks get a bad enough rap.”

“Well don’t just say it like that, luv. Ye has to tell the story,” Foxy said, adding almost in sing-song, “There’s always a story.”

“Captain Fox fought a lot of dragons over the years,” said Ana, shifting once again in her damned uncomfortable chair. Somehow, she ended up half out of it, leaning up against Bonnie’s side so she had a full view of Foxy. “So when the Caliph of Fakenamia—”

Foxy snorted. “Choice, that. I’ll have to remember it.”

“—offered a boundless reward of riches for the hero who could kill the dragon that had seized his palace, Captain Fox set sail at once. But when he got there, he quickly realized this was a much older and more powerful dragon than any he had faced before. His cannons did no damage to the beast. His harpoons merely bounced off its scales. Again and again, the fearless Captain Fox attacked,” said Ana, warming to her tale and really rubbing some funk on it, “only to be driven back barely ahead of the monster’s snapping jaws and fiery breath. With no other recourse, he turned his ship around and sailed as fast as the winds would take him to the Tempest Temple, which safeguards the last known shards of the drakestone, which, as everyone knows, is deadly poison to dragons. The trials he faced there would take days to tell, but suffice to say, he stood victorious at the end and took the spoils of the Temple which he had well-earned.”

“There be a handy way of saying, ‘I don’t know what the hell happened,’” Foxy remarked.

“Must be why you used it, twice, in the Quest For Neptune’s Spear, huh? Anyway, upon his return to Fakenamia, Captain Fox hid a shard of drakestone in a fish from the market and, with the help of a conveniently-located catapult, fired it at the dragon, but the dragon knew he was being baited and he wouldn’t eat it. So Foxy tried again, this time with a haunch of meat, and then with a loaf of bread, a wheel of cheese, even a flagon of beer, but nothing tempted the dragon to bite. At last, Captain Fox, he ran straight at that dragon, dodging its fangs and fire while his sword bounced harmlessly off its scales. He fought, knowing the beast could never be harmed, and for hours, they thrashed and crashed through the rooms of the palace, until at last, the dragon swung its tail and knocked the sword right out of Foxy’s hand.”

“And then what happened?” Chica asked, her head cocked to an interested angle, ignoring the children on the TV who climbed a crumbling T-rex skeleton to get away from a pack of angry velociraptors to listen to this improvised crap. Freddy appeared to be listening too, and so was Bonnie, although with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“Captain Fox was weaponless,” Ana went on. “Defenseless. And fearless. He ran at the dragon like a madman, and swung his fist like to punch it in its scaly face. And the dragon, laughing—”

“Dragons can laugh?” Chica asked.

“Of course they can laugh,” Foxy answered her. “But they have a cruel sense of humor, bein’ dragons. A dragon’s laugh is the last sound many a doomed man has heard.”

“The dragon, laughing, lunged and bit!” Ana brought both hands together with a clap of finality. “It snapped off Foxy’s right hand with one bite and swallowed it whole, then reared up and laughed again. But Foxy laughed too, because he knew what the dragon didn’t—that hiding in his fist, now
working its way to the bottom of the dragon’s belly, was the last shard of the drakestone, wrapped up tight in the one bait Foxy knew no dragon could resist. And soon enough, the dragon stopped laughing and began howling in pain. And as the red sun fell out of the red night sky into the reddest sea that ever was, it broke through the walls of the palace and fell off the cliffs into the sea and died. So the grateful caliph gave Foxy all the treasure he could carry and Foxy sailed away and whenever anyone asks him if he’s sorry he lost his hand, why, he just laughs and says—”

“Lost me hand?” Foxy interrupted in his stage voice. He raised his right arm high, the hook gleaming blue and green in the light from the unwatched television. “Ye may say I lost me hand. I say I gained a hook!”

Chica applauded and even Freddy clapped his hands twice.

Bonnie did nothing, just kept staring at Foxy.

“Not too damn bad a’tall, luv,” Foxy said, resettling with a broad, toothy grin. “Has me flavor all over it.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like I’ve heard you tell a million stories before.”

“Well, it’s a good’un. I’m stealing it.”

“It needs a princess,” Ana said apologetically. “Number nine. You’ll have to work one in there somehow. Caliph’s daughter or temple guardian or something. You can leave her crying on the shore when you sail away, because your one and only love…” A yawn caught Ana unawares. “Is the sea,” she concluded when it finally released her, and pushed herself out of her chair. She picked up the whiskey and gave Bonnie a goodbye pat on the chest. “I’m out. Clear a path, bear.”

Foxy’s ears came up. “Ye ain’t leaving already?”

“Yeah, sorry. I got work tomorrow.”

“But the movie ain’t even over!”

Ana pushed both hands at the screen just as the first ending credit popped up.

“It’s over,” she said, popping the tape out and plugging it into the rewinder. “We just missed most of it because I was talking the whole time. Sorry.”

“Good movie,” said Bonnie and left, waving one hand behind him. “Later.”

“Night, Bon,” she called, somewhat startled by his abrupt departure.

“But ye can’t go yet,” Foxy insisted. “Woman, I ain’t hardly seen ye!”

Before Ana could reply, Freddy said, “That’s enough. She has obligations at home and work in the morning.” When Foxy subsided, grumbling, Freddy turned to Ana. “But this has been…fun. Perhaps we should do it again sometime.”

“I told you you’d like it. I’ll be sure to bring some more grown-up stuff next time, and maybe some board games. I bet you kick ass at cribbage.”

“I do, as a matter of fact.”

“Only when ye deal,” Foxy said archly.
“See you on the weekend, guys,” said Ana, stretching. “Night, Chica.”

“Goodnight,” said Chica, already looking through the stack of tapes for a new movie. “Remember there’s a cupcake on the counter. Last one, I promise. Take it when you go.”

“Thanks. Fair winds, Captain.”

“Don’t ye fair winds me, ye lubbery git. Just go. Faithless wench.” Foxy flipped onto his feet in a single effortless move and sauntered out, patting Chica on the butt as she bent over to put a tape in the VCR. This meant he had to sprint away to avoid her indignant smack, but when Ana called his name, he skidded to a halt immediately, catching the door with his hook to anchor him. He leaned back in through the open door, well out of slapping range. “Eh?”

“While we’re on the subject of missing parts,” Ana drawled, “I’ve always wondered, how’d you lose your eye?”

“Oh, that.” Foxy lowered his eyepatch and cocked his head at her. “After the business with the Fakenamian dragon, I was taking me a bottle of rum on deck, in celebration-like. A stray wave caught the ship as I was raisin’ me bottle and a drop of rum hit me in the eye.”

Still smiling, but quizzically now, Ana said, “A drop of rum hit you in the eye and you lost it?”

He shrugged. “First day with me hook.”

Groaning even as she laughed, Ana headed for her room. The security camera followed her down the East Hall, blipped off, and came on again over the show stage in the dining room. The empty show stage. Bonnie’s guitar was there, but Bonnie was not.

Ana thought about that while she collected her day pack and made sure she had her charger and her tablet. The stage was still empty on her second trip through the dining room. She hesitated, knowing something was wrong, but not sure what to do about it. If he wanted to talk, he’d put himself somewhere she could talk to him; if he didn’t, should she really confront him anyway? Sometimes, a person just wanted a little privacy to sort through their feelings and at those times, there was nothing worse than well-intentioned sympathy butting in and making you admit out loud how you were acting like a child.

Reluctantly, Ana went on her way. She found her cake set out on the prep counter, decorated with a sad face—all big eyes and frosting tears. Heartless Ana smeared the features out of recognition when she wrapped it in plastic for travel. As she was tucking it into her day-pack, she heard the wind gust and felt a stiff breeze blow through the kitchen.

Ana went to the store room and looked, knowing what she would see. Sure enough, the loading dock door was wide open and she could see a purple border along one side of the jamb. He was out there, leaning against the wall under the No Smoking sign where all the employees probably used to stand around and smoke. He must have known she was there (those ears didn’t miss much; he’d probably known she was there when she was still in the dining room), but he didn’t look at her, not even when she stepped out on the dock.

Ana checked his ears—loose on their pins and low, but folded forward over his face and not down his back. He wasn’t angry, in other words, but he was not happy.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure.”
Wow, she knew that tone. I don’t want to talk about it, that tone said. Don’t ask.

So she didn’t.

Ana found a sturdy-looking rail to lean on, still warm from the long-set sun, and cautiously settled her weight on it. When she was more or less assured it wasn’t going to break off and spill her onto the hood of her truck, she relaxed a little and looked out across the desert. It was a windy night and the parking-lot grass rippled silver and black, lapping at the asphalt like waves on the shore. She thought of Tillamook and the ocean and Foxy, who had told a thousand stories of adventure on the high sea and had never even seen it in a photo.

A few minutes passed in silence.

He spoke first, after several false starts she heard mostly as extra-loud whirring inside his head before he finally said, with more than a hint of self-rerimination: “I know, okay? I know that whatever…whatever we were, you and me…”

“Bonnie, please…don’t.”

“I know. I’m saying I know it’s over. And even if it wasn’t, you’re still totally free to say whatever with whoever and that’s fine, but I just…I can’t…With every word he says to you, I just want to punch him in the face so hard that both of us break. I’m sorry. I know that’s bullshit of me. I don’t want to feel like this. Believe me,” he said, with sour intensity, “I do not want to feel like this…but I can’t help it.”

“Oh wow,” she said, not quite laughing. “Did you think we were flirting?”

“No! That’s the thing, I knew you weren’t! And I know he wasn’t, for a change. You were both just sitting there, talking, like you both had a perfect right to do, and do you know how much difference knowing that makes?”

“From your tone, I’m going to guess ‘none’.”

“None! I’m sorry. I don’t want to be a jealous dick, it’s just…you know, I don’t want to be a purple fucking bunny either, but here we are!”

“Bonnie, what the heck are you even jealous of? We were talking about dinosaurs and, like…” An idea struck. Incredulously, she said, “Wait a minute, is this about that stupid story?”

“It wasn’t a stupid story.” He vented his cooling system hard and said, “It was a fucking great story. And he was right, it was one-hundred-percent him, the way all his bullshit made-up crap goes, which meant you knew how to make him the hero. You don’t get that just from listening, you get it because you care. And…And it just suddenly hit me in the face that when he said you had a crush on him that one time, he wasn’t just bitching around, he meant it. You had a crush on Foxy.”

“Yeah, the keyword there being ‘had’. I was ten,” she reminded him, stepping in front of him so he had to see the look of gentle reproach on her face. “Ten. I cannot emphasize enough the tenness of that whole situation! I was so ten! You can’t hold anything I did back then against me. If I’d been a different kind of girl, I could have been crushing on…on…and okay, I have no clue who normal girls crushed on in the nineties, but you get my point.”

“You were ten?”

“I was ten! Come on! Do you honestly think I could fall for a guy like him now?”
“I thought you could fall for a guy like me once,” Bonnie murmured, ears lowering.

“Don’t,” she said again, but gently. “Please, don’t. Bonnie, I…I’m sorry. I am. More than…than you could ever possibly understand, but I can’t…I just can’t—”

“I know,” he said, not bitterly. Worse than blame, his quiet resignation was hard to hear.

“Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not. I know how that sounds, but I’m seriously not mad.”

“Not at me, just at him.”

He didn’t answer that out loud, but his low ears went lower.

“You legit don’t like him, do you?”

“Foxy?” Bonnie snorted. “Tell you the truth, baby girl, I don’t ‘like’ any of them. Well…Chica, you know. Everybody likes Chica. And Freddy’s all right most of the time. But we don’t live together because we’re all such great friends. We just woke up and there we all were. And we’ve had forty or fifty or however many years living with each other’s bickering and bad habits, never able to get further than a few rooms away. It’s not about liking him or not liking him. I live with him, that’s all. We’re family. I guess we love each other—” He pulled a rigid grimace to show her how deep that emotion ran. “—but it’s not always easy to like him.”

“He gets all the good stories,” she guessed.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“But you got the groupies.”

“Ha. Guess again, baby. He got those, too. Foxy’s everybody’s favorite.” He lowered his voice to a hum of static, like white noise that, with a little imagination, might have included the words, “…churned more butter than Land o’ Lakes…”

She wasn’t sure if she was meant to hear it or not, but she knew she wasn’t supposed to understand it unless she knew about the party rooms at the Toybox, so instead of pointing out that being programmed to fuck on command for paying customers was nothing to be jealous of, she instead said simply, “That’s not fair.”

“Yeah, I know it. I’m a bastard. You want to hear something else petty and unreasonable?”

“Sure.”

“We were here first.”

“Wow, Bonnie.”

“Yeah, I know, but still. We were designed as a trio. The Fazbear Band. It was the three of us all the way back to the very first pizzeria and even before. Before Fredbear’s, before any of us were even alive, it was just supposed to be the three of us. There was no reason for a new guy, none at all, but he wanted Foxy.”

Ana did not ask who ‘he’ was. She knew. And she knew if he could say the name, he would. She stroked his head some more.
“Foxy was his idea, his toy, his design,” Bonnie said. “I realize that’s not his fault, but we were fine without him. When the very first Freddy’s opened, those kids swarmed us like a horde of locusts. It was great. They fucking loved us. And when Foxy pulled his curtain back that first time, the place goddamn near emptied as every kid hit the floor and were washed out the door on a wave of panic-tears and piss. And I felt bad for him.” Bonnie was quiet for a second or two, then said, “You never saw him back then. He looked scary. We all looked pretty ugly, to be honest. Dad is one hell of an engineer, just, you know…”

“Not a fabricator.”

“He got better at it,” Bonnie admitted. “But in the beginning, yeah, we were ugly, especially Foxy. He was made to be scary. He knew it and it really bothered him.”

“Pirates are supposed to be scary.”

“Yeah. And kids love to be scared. It took a while to warm up to him, but after that first month or so, they might as well have changed the name on the building to Foxy’s. We were his bit players. Were,” he said with a sour laugh. “We still are. The first Pirate Cove was a closet in between the bathrooms. He could barely fit in it. Look at the one he’s got now. It’s bigger than the dining room.”

“But he’ll never play guitar like you.”

“He doesn’t have to. He doesn’t have to do anything, he just tells his stories and everyone loves him! Can you imagine if I did that? ‘Oh yeah, I’m a total rock star. I mean, not at the moment, but I still dress like one. Oh, let me tell you about this one time I totally rocked out. We’re talking epic tunes, epic.’”

“Nice story, Bon, but it needs a dragon.”

Without skipping a beat, Bonnie said. “So I played my most metal set, kind of a Sabbath riff with a full-out Deep Purple shred, and after three days and nights of relentless sweeps, legato taps and thrashing, this fucking fox swung in through the window and let the damn dragon bite off his hand. Then it died, because the fox had a magic dragon-killing stone and I had a fucking guitar.”

“Aw, come on.”

“‘He sailed off into the sunset with a ship-load of dragon treasure and a princess, but I totally rocked, man, you should have heard it.’”

“He never sails off with the princess. He always leaves her behind.”

“Not this one,” said Bonnie bitterly. “This one, he took. Just to prove he could.”

“I’m going to put on my Freddy-hat for a second, just to tell you that if the princess let herself be won over by a measly, flash-in-the-pan dragon-slaying, the rock star is well rid of her. The world will run out of dragons. Music is forever.”

“Okay, first? That’s really more of a Chica-thing to say. Freddy keeps way the hell out of the personal stuff if he can. And secondly, I would like you to sign a paper to that effect.”

She laughed. “How about I get a tattoo?”

“Gee, would you mind? And can I pick where it goes?”
She had to stop herself from kissing him, to the effect that she stepped close and awkwardly hovered before turning around again. “Goodnight, Bonnie,” she said firmly.

He sighed. “Yeah,” he said, but not to her. He watched as she climbed down off the dock and went to her truck. “You know I’ve still got your name on my heart,” he said suddenly.

She looked back, one foot on the runner. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He laughed; it would have sounded mechanical even if he’d been human. “You wrote it with a Sharpie. That shit doesn’t come off easy. You must have scrubbed me out a dozen times that one day, but it’s still there and always will be. Your name…on my heart.”

And he waited for a while, but she didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything.

“I’ll see you later,” he said at last and went back inside.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The next few days were not bad ones, just monotonous, unfulfilling, and slow to pass. Scouring the internet for information on animatronic technology brought her no new revelations since the last time she’d looked and within a few fruitless hours, she had to face the facts: The only hope of repairing the animatronics was to get the manufactory in Faust’s underground lair working again, and the only hope of doing that was to find the interface.

Maybe she should just ask him for the damn thing.

Yeah, sure, that would go over well. Just a few days after he’d asked her to kill his creations, she was seriously going to ask him for the device that would allow her to repair them? No, that wasn’t happening.

So what did that leave? Break back in, she supposed. Search the house, top to bottom. Try the safe again. She couldn’t remember seeing a device such as Freddy had described, but then, she hadn’t been looking for one either. And it might be in the mysterious double-locked box that the old man wanted her to open.

But there was a car parked in front of the glass mansion when she made the long walk back up the drive on Monday night, and through the windows, she could see Chad restlessly moving room to room. Looking for evidence he’d neglected to mop up or just looking for loot, she couldn’t tell, but his unpredictable presence made her own search impossible, so she bailed and went home. Tuesday night, one of Mammon’s world-ending storms blew in, and not only would it have been unpleasant to hike two winding miles up the canyon to the house, but she could not have avoided tracking mud in, and in any case, she got an early morning call from Shelly to go out and help clear a tree that had fallen over the only road leading out of town, so it was just as well she hadn’t gone burglarizing that night.

She and the other poor bastards Shelly had rousted out of bed worked clean-up in the steady rain until the rest of the crew arrived back at the office and then they all topped off their coffee canisters and trudged out to the site of the future dealership to ‘start’ the work-day—muddy, sore and bone-tired.

So it was a long day, part-time notwithstanding. Some of her new crew were still a little sour on the subject of her promotion over every man who had been there longer, and Bisano in particular would not let the fuck up about it. Although Ana heard the mutters, she did not confront him. Instead, she put everyone on interior walls for the day, which had the dual benefit of keeping everyone dry and also in close quarters. After that, all she had to do was wait.

Within a very short time, the worst of it had been said enough times to get old and annoying to those who had to listen, even if they hadn’t been up since four, sawing stormfall alongside Ana while the guy doing all the complaining had been sound asleep in his bed. This was what Ana was waiting for. If she had even once told Bisano to knock it off, it would have never stopped. When Hageman bellowed at him to quit his infernal goddamned bitching before he put his whining face on the other side of his goddamned head, Bisano shut his mouth and kept it shut. He remained surly whenever circumstances forced him to interact with Ana, but she couldn’t care less if he liked her, as long as he did his job.
To celebrate the peace and quiet, she offered hot food on her dime down at Gallifrey’s after the shift was over and most of the crew took her up on it. It was the first real chance she’d had to sit down in almost twelve hours and the hard wooden seats of the diner’s chairs were almost heavenly, like her Betty Burger, her first plated meal since the eggs benedict in the hospital with Mr. Faust. No one went out of their way to include her in their conversations, but they didn’t exclude her either, so that was progress.

No one had much to say anyway. Big Paulie and his wife merited a few remarks, but the death was old news and everyone agreed that the kids were smart not to make a big deal out of the funeral. Best just to get them planted quietly and forget it had ever happened. The city had already taken possession of the property and the order was on Shelly’s desk to demolish the lot just as soon as the weather permitted. And after that, there was nothing to listen to except Hageman’s nervous blend of pride and pessimism as he told them all about his daughter’s new job in Seattle. He wasn’t too clear on just what the job was, but it was management, paid well and came with great benefits, and most importantly of all, his ‘little princess’ was excited, even if her old man had reservations. Seemed like all the young ones were leaving. Slater was no great loss, but Wyborn’s folks were missing him, the last of the Gallifrey flowers had planted herself on the west coast, and now the Wexler girl was headed off to some remote mountaintop in Alaska, of all places.

“All the young ones are leaving,” Hageman said again, shaking his head as he picked straggler fries off his plate one by one and crammed the whole mass of them into his mouth at once. “I think you’re the first I’ve seen come back since…huh.”

“Since Mace Kellar,” Ana prompted.

“Ah hell, girl, I wouldn’t peg you in with that lot of bad apples. No matter what his mama says, those boys were rotten to the core.”

Grunts of affirmation ran around the table.

“Besides, he didn’t come back in the sense of the word, just lay up low for a few months, bringing in all them disreputables and heing out again soon as the wind changed. At least he took his brother with him when he left this time. Tell you what, I only thought little Jackie was bad news until I saw Mason and that pack of prison-dogs he brought with him. They were all mixed up with cartels,” he added sagely.

“That’s what I hear,” Ana agreed and thought again of waking up on the floor in Pirate Cove with someone else’s blood dried on her face and soaked into her shirt, which only led to her thinking of Freddy’s story that Mason got a phone call as they were dumping Bonnie in the quarry and they all just left. She guessed she had to believe that, not because Freddy had told her, but because Chica had. Freddy and the truth were nodding acquaintances at best, personal feeling notwithstanding, but Chica wouldn’t lie about something like that, and for that matter, if Foxy had killed Mason for her that night (as some fuzzy false memory insisted he had promised to do), would he really keep quiet about it? Or would he brag it around, play the my-hero card and maybe even tried to steal a kiss out of her as if she were one of the many princesses he’d saved in his stories?

Maybe Mason really had left.

Or…and here was a thought Ana couldn’t believe had taken this long to occur to her…Or maybe Ana had killed him herself. Mason’s crew were exactly the faithless bunch of bastards who would cut and run if they saw the girl they’d come to kill take a bandsaw to their boss’s face. She supposed she could believe Freddy could have dumped Mason’s body and lied about the call rather than tell her what she’d done to keep her from doing something even more stupid, like confess to a murder.
Not that she ever would. The thought that she might have killed Mason brought with it no great
swell of any kind of emotion, only a cold peevishness that she couldn’t remember doing it. She
didn’t really care if the man was dead or alive (although she certainly preferred dead), as long as
she knew he wasn’t going to turn up on her doorstep again someday.

Still, it was kind of cute that Freddy thought she could develop a guilty conscience over someone
like Mason Kellar. He had a higher opinion of her than she deserved.

“I think it was Jimmy,” Hageman said suddenly, bringing her out of her sentimental reverie. “Hey
Jergens!”

“Nix the name-calling,” Ana said. “Mind your manners.”

“Yeah, boss. Jimmy!”

Jimmy broke the trancelike hold his half-eaten club sandwich had on him and looked around.
“What?”

“You know of anyone else but you and Stark who ever come back to Mammon?”

Jimmy shrugged, looking far more uncomfortable than the simple question should have dictated,
then forestalled further questions by taking a huge bite of his sandwich, chewing like it was
actually made from sand.

Hageman took the hint and pushed his chair back. “I got to get home,” he announced, peering out
the window. “You all better do the same and get some early sleep before they call us out to stack
sandbags down the middle of Main. And you ought to think about taking a room at the SugarTree
tonight, boss.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“Hey, you get caught by a slide driving up that mountain and you’ll be in the quarry before you
know what hit you.”

“Goodnight, Hageman.”

“Yeah, yeah, what’s an old fart like me know? S’Like I’m talking to one of my kids.”

His departure signaled the end of the meal and soon, Ana was alone at the table with Jimmy,
watching him choke down the last of his food.

“What’s up?” she asked, thinking that all the flowers she and Jimmy had just finished planting not
one damn week ago were all doing to die in this flood. Fucking Mammon.

“Nothing. Nothing bad, anyway.” He hesitated, his gaze wandering out the window and down the
street to Hank’s Hardware on the corner lot. There was an odd wistfulness to his expression, as if
there were nothing in the world he wanted more than a forty-pound bag of chicken feed for $17.99.

But that wasn’t right, was it? He wasn’t looking at Mammon’s overpriced, understocked home-
garden-and-feed store like he wanted to go there, he was looking at it like he thought he’d never go
there again.

And just as this thought struck, Jimmy said, “I got a job offer Saturday. Cold-called me out of
nowhere.”
“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I was playing with the girls when Kaya called me in. There’s me in my drippy swim trunks and some guy is telling me there’s a six-figure salary that comes with a four-bedroom house in Helsinki if I want it. That’s in Finland,” he added and uttered a gulping, uncomfortable sound more like a burp than a laugh. “I had to look it up to be sure.”

“What kind of job?”

“I don’t…really know? The company has something to do with technology, which I know nothing about, but I guess what they want is a liaison for the various people that are flying in for…I don’t know, demonstrations? Meetings? I’d book their hotels and get them…whatever, tickets to the theater or reservations at restaurants. I don’t have to meet the people or do the entertaining, just do the purchasing. With someone else’s money! I mean…it’s got to be the world’s easiest job, right? I’d have to be an idiot to say no, right?”

“Did you?”

“I said I had to talk it over with my family, but, sheesh, what’s to talk about? Me and Kaya spent the weekend just trying to figure out if it was a joke or something, it’s so…but it’s not! They sent me all this information on, like, the house and the city. And Helsinki’s one of the top ten best places in the world to live, according to the internet. Culture, low crime, good schools and healthcare. And it’s…it’s the chance of a lifetime! I just…” His haunted gaze tracked a lone car on Main Street from the park all the way to the bank, where it turned off and disappeared from sight.

“I never thought I’d leave this town. After my mission, I mean, and that was just to Fort Worth, not exactly the other end of the world. I was so happy to be back, but ever since, it’s been…”

The rain fell, hitting the window as hard as stones, smearing the world outside out of focus.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “It’s just…not a nice place. I don’t mean it turned bad either, I mean…it’s like it’s always been bad and I never knew it until I met Kaya. She sees it. And I see it around her. And around you.” His eyes flicked toward her and away, ashamed. “But is that what to do about it? Just leave? That’s not right. I can’t do that. And I wouldn’t even know how to tell my folks.”

“Send ‘em a postcard when you get to Helsinki.”

“You’re joking, but I’d be tempted. My mom would die, I just know it. And my sister is going to say Kaya put me up to it and make life heck…well, heckier for her right up until we go. And Shelly…I’d have to quit,” he groaned, rubbing at his face. “I’ve never had to quit a job in my entire life. I don’t even know how! Do I write a letter? Do I tell him in person? When? Do I really have to wait and dump it on him just two weeks before we go or should I tell him now so he can hire a replacement? And what about moving? How do I even move our stuff overseas? Oh! Passports! We’d have to get passports! Or do I immigrate? How does being an American in a foreign country even work?”

“Well, that part’s easy,” Ana remarked. “I’m sure if you call the guy back, he’ll hook you up with what you need to know about work visas and dual citizenship or whatever.”

“No, it’s impossible. I’m not doing it. I can’t. I’d have to learn a whole other language and I don’t even know what language they speak in Finland!”

“I’m guessing Finnish.”
“My whole family is here,” Jimmy said, thumping both hands quietly but with force on the table. “And what if I go and the job doesn’t work out? I’d be stranded in another country with three kids and no skills! I can’t do this. I’ve got to say no. I’ve got to. I’m not doing it. It’s a lot of money, but there’s more to life than money, right?”

Ana made sympathetic noises, although she couldn’t help but notice that hidden in all that What-if and Never-happen was a whole lot of I’m-thinking-about-it.

“What…What would you do?” Jimmy asked tentatively.

Ana shrugged. “What I thought was best for me, I’m sure, but that doesn’t mean it’s best for you. I’ve never had a wife and kids to worry about. I’ve also done a lot of moving, taken a lot of jobs for the first time, started over in a lot of towns and had it go south on me. All I can tell you is, it was never the end of the world. Hard, yeah, but not the end. Waiting for the worst to happen is always worse than the worst ever is.”

Jimmy decoded that, then took a deep breath and breathed it out along with most of his tension. He looked out the window as the storm picked up strength, watching whitecaps lap at the curb as water washed down the street. “Hageman’s right,” he said suddenly. “All the young ones are leaving.”

“And yet life goes on.”

“Does it? There’s no more Gallifreys to take over when Tim and Lucy retire. No more Greens to run the dealership after Eustace goes. No more Taylors after Fred closes the hobby shop. No more Webbs once Betty hangs up her apron at the Donut Hole. Shelly’s boys all moved away and got into other work. Little Paulie was supposedly coming back after his apprenticeship, although I can’t imagine he will now after…you know. Shelly would rather burn the business down and salt the earth than sell it to Villart, so once he retires, there goes Shelton Contractors. Villart will be building everything then, assuming Villart sticks around at all once his lease runs out, and what’s he going to build anyway? I haven’t seen a new business open since…”

Thunder grumbled.

“I’ve…never…seen a new business open,” Jimmy said, staring blankly into the unnatural twilight of the storm. “They just…relocate. Or close. You know…You know, I don’t think this town is going to be here at all in twenty years.”

“All towns have a life-span,” said Ana.

“Not like this. It’s not even like it’s dying, it’s like something’s killing it.”

Ana made some more noises, but said nothing.

“They should fill in the quarry,” Jimmy said at last, decisively. “That would help. Get rid of that stink and then build the theme park the old man promised.”

“What, here?”

“Why not? Disneyland was built in the middle of the desert.”

“Disney was orange groves. You’re thinking of Vegas.”

“Same thing. Can’t you just see it? Lights and music and happy people—”

“Crowds and crime and traffic and pollution—”
“You’re right,” Jimmy said and sighed. “But what about just a plain pizzeria? Maybe that would be enough to turn things around.”

“No pizzeria is going to revitalize an entire town, I don’t care who the mascots are.”

“You never went there. You don’t know. Those things were amazing. People were coming from all over.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they were, back then,” she said pointedly. “But these days, we’ve got digital music, hi-def TV and VR video games in the privacy of our own homes. It’s tough for the Chuck E. Cheeses of the world to compete with that. It’s even getting tough for Disneyland, I hear, and they have rides.”

“Freddy’s was better,” Jimmy insisted. He sat for a while, contemplating the town through the streaky window. “You should think about it.”

“What, opening my own Freddy’s? Yeah, I don’t know what they’re saying in town, but my aunt’s house was full of rats, newspapers and taco-holders, not bags of money. What makes you think I could buy a pizza place, much less run one?”

Jimmy was already shaking his head. “I mean think about what you’re going to do when Shelly folds. You know it’s going to happen sooner or later.”

Ana didn’t argue, merely shrugged. “I’ll get by. I always do.”

“And if you don’t?” he pressed.

“Then I’ll roll on back to California and pick up where I left off. But that’s not going to happen. Shelly doesn’t have to be the greatest contractor that ever lived. He’ll have a business as long as this town is still around.”

“Yeah, but wait a minute.” Jimmy leaned over the table, looking troubled. “Mammon will only be around as long as the old man lives. You know that, right? And if he’s already at the falling-down phase of his life…I mean, lots of people younger than him just don’t come back from an injury like that. And I don’t know if anyone is thinking about that, you know? Everyone complains about how hard it’s getting, but I don’t know if they’ve thought about how much harder it’ll be when he’s not there to buy their house at whatever price they put on it when they decide to move. Or…Or hand out dream jobs in Helsinki. People here have never had to feel desperate, you know? Not like they will when they really do have no way out. Not like…like Big Paulie did. You know?”

After a long moment, Ana nodded.

“And I know he’s helping you out. The old man, I mean. I’m not saying him and you…I’m not saying that at all, I’m just saying…as bad as things are right now, they’re going to get worse when he’s gone.” A blush began to creep up from the neck of Jimmy’s company shirt, turning his boyish face an ugly shade of purplish-red. “For you especially.”

“Me? What did I do now?”

“What did you ever do? We’re not bad people,” Jimmy said unhappily. “We’re really not. But even good people can get the wrong idea about someone. Multiply that by two or three generations and…and you’re not going to change anyone’s mind.”

“As long as they don’t come marching up the mountain with torches and pitchforks, I think I can handle it. Go on, get out of here while that cute little Camry of yours can still drive in this mess.”
Jimmy got up, turning his worried eyes out at the storm as a new volley of thunder shook the windows. “You sure you want to risk going up the mountain tonight? We got a fold-out in the rec room.”

“No, thanks.”

“You sure?” he pressed. “Kaya won’t mind and I promise none of the relatives will be there. The girls will be in bed by nine and I’ll even let you have a root beer.”

“Rain check,” said Ana while the rain poured down in frothing sheets.

Jimmy retreated, giving her doubtful looks all the way to the door, while Ana politely ignored him and ate a few of his leftover fries. Once he was gone, she stashed a few napkins and sugars for her morning coffee in her day pack, then picked up the check. She took in the damage, glanced at the date, started to open her wallet, blinked and looked at the date again. 8-12, it said in Lucy’s harried handwriting. August 12th. Her birthday. God, it snuck up on her every year and it wasn’t like she didn’t have plenty of reminders lately. It was the access code, sort of, to Faust’s home security system and the backstage area at Freddy’s, after all.

Freddy’s…

On impulse, Ana pulled out her phone and gave Freddy a call.

“I keep forgetting to turn off the vibrations,” he grumbled after the second ring. “You have no idea what that’s like. I feel them in my teeth.”

“And hello to you, too,” said Ana lightly. “How are the roads looking out there?”

“Wait.” His footsteps sounded in her ear, dull at first and interrupted by a few creaking hinges as he bulled his way through various doors, then obliterated by the racket of wind as he let himself out the main doors, bold as a flashing neon sign to anyone driving by the bluff, except that who would be, in this weather? “Passable, for now, but there’s a significant wash beginning to happen down by the turnout to the quarry.” The noise of the storm increased as he turned so that the wind was aimed directly into the phone’s speaker, then abruptly silenced with the banging of the lobby doors. “Do you live on this road?”

“Yeah, up on the mountain,” she said, surprised. “You didn’t know?”

“I suspected. I almost never see anyone driving on it, apart from you. But it doesn’t look very safe tonight. Are you going to stay in town?”

“I was thinking I might stay at your place, if that’s all right with you.”

Freddy grunted one of his rare I-approve-of-this-decision grunts, then raised his voice in answer to a half-heard inquiry: “I’m not talking to myself, I’m on the phone…With 1-900-SEXY-BEARS, of course. With Ana! Who else on Earth would I possibly be talking to?…Bonnie says hi,” he said flatly.

“Tell him hi. See you soon.”

“Be safe. Ana returns your hello,” he said, away from the mic. “No, you can’t talk to her, she needs to drive…Because it’s my phone, that’s why! She’ll be here soon and you can talk to her then…Oh, for heaven’s sake, it’s still on. How do I turned this damned thing—”

The call ended.
Shaking her head, Ana put her phone away. While she waited at the register, she studied the photos on the wall. Four generations of Gallifrey, going all the way back to Betty and Joe-Bob themselves, proudly holding the first black-and-white dollar they’d ever made between them while a couple kids sucking down malts at the counter looked back to see what the commotion was…and wait, was that…?

It was. That skinny kid eating a sundae half as big as his head was Mr. Faust, back when he was still just Fred or even Freddy. She couldn’t guess how old he was in this picture, but she had no doubt he was small for his age and every part of him conveyed the awkwardness of that size and that age, preserved here for all posterity. The toes of his loafers dangled well above the checkered tiles. His clothes were absurdly neat for a child, but didn’t fit him very well. He sat with his back very straight and his head slightly hunched, as if the flash of the camera had caught him mid-flinch. His blond hair was shiny with whatever he’d used to try and tame it, but it was no good; thick locks peeled up all over his head in ridiculous flyaway spikes, giving him a perpetual look of fright in spite of his shy smile.

So. If this was Fred Faust, then the teenager sitting beside him with one arm causally thrown around his narrow shoulders was Erik Metzger. He was bent forward, pointing at the camera and saying something in little Freddy’s ear…and looking so much like David would have looked at sixteen that it hurt Ana’s heart. And sitting on his other side, watching over his boys with a fatherly smile while his gaze wandered toward Betty Gallifrey’s round ass, that was Viktor Metzger.

Listening to Mike Schmidt recount the old man’s notorious reputation, Ana had wondered how the man had continued raking in the pussy well into his seventies and eighties, but looking at him now, she understood. He had been a neurosurgeon in the war, according to Mike, something that took a certain amount of time and schooling, which meant he could not have possibly been less than fifty in this photo, and yet, he could have easily passed as his son’s slightly older brother. And handsome, if not as preternaturally good-looking as Erik had been. The whole damn family aged like Dorian Grey.

“Register, mother!” Tiny Tim called and across the diner, Lucy hollered, “Just leave it, hon!”

Ana folded her check around four twenties and left it under the Gallifrey family moneyholder—a smooth river rock painted to look like a ladybug. That was leaving a hell of a tip, but whatever, she was still getting off damned light for feeding a hungry construction crew. She stepped aside to let the next customer leave his money, but didn’t go just yet, instead moving around the cashier station to stare at more photos.

She found no more pictures with Fred or Erik in them—none at all, which seemed statistically improbable—but she did discover one photo with two blurry little girls hiding in the background. Their backs were to the camera as they huddled together by the jukebox, but they were the same height, wore the same dress, had the same long fair hair tied up with ribbons. Sisters? Twins, possibly? Was this Marion and Melanie Blaylock, just six or seven years old?

The idea captivated her. What special occasion were they dressed up for? What was the song they were looking to play? Were they holding hands or just standing very close and out of focus? Did they like each other back then? Did they giggle in the back of the classroom and pass notes? Did they cry together when other kids teased them for being the bastard children of Jesselyn, who hadn’t loved them enough to stay after her son vanished at Fredbear’s? Did they whisper under their covers at night, making plans to avenge the brother they could not remember, or did they just close their eyes and pretend to be far away in a house where the bedroom doors had locks?

“Can I get you something else?”
Ana woke as from a dream, blinking around to see Lucy Gallifrey at her elbow, although her arms were laden with plates and customers were waiting. She felt her stomach knot and heat rise in her face, like she’d been caught dipping into the till instead of looking at pictures that were, for God’s sake, hanging on the wall in a public place. But when Ana looked again at the photo with the two little girls in the background by the jukebox, she noticed that in the foreground, the actual subject of the picture was a much younger Tiny Tim in his cook’s whites, grinning that uneasy *this-is-just-a-summer-job-right?* grin as a clearly ailing Joe-Bob handed him an apron. She’d been staring at a picture of another woman’s husband for a good five minutes.

‘Nothing good can come of this,’ Ana thought, but she motioned at the wall of photos and said, “I haven’t seen Iris around since I got back. She still in town?”

Lucy stared at her. In the kitchen, Tiny Tim looked up from his stovetop. At the tables, dining patrons dined on and chatting ones chatted louder.

“Why?” asked Lucy finally. One word, pulled thin and honed sharp.

Nope, this was not going to end well at all. Ana mentally slammed that door and opened the escape hatch with the first lie that came to mind.

“She used to look out for me,” said Ana, thinking of that little girl in her pretty dresses and ribbons, just one more face in a ring of laughing faces, one more voice in a laughing crowd. “When the other kids would tease me. You know how kids are. She was older than me, so when she’d stand up for me, the other kids would back off.”

Lucy’s tight-pressed lips parted slightly. Her cool eyes first thawed, then misted.

“I don’t know if she even remembers, but stuff like that means a lot to a kid who, you know, doesn’t have a lot of friends. I’m not trying to pry,” Ana said, backing up to prove her non-invasive intent. “I just thought if she was around and wasn’t busy, we could catch up. But I guess, um, just tell her I said hi.”

And Lucy said, “I will.”

Ana stopped fading toward the door. “So she’s around? How have I not seen her?”

“She moved away when she married,” Lucy replied like that was the most normal thing in the world, because it was. “But I’m sure she’d like to hear from you.”

Ana stared at her for a moment before belatedly jumping for the register and picking a pen out of the cup providing them. “Yeah, sure,” she said, fighting a surge of inappropriate laughter. Another name to cross off Mike Schmidt’s list. Iris Gallifrey was alive and well and about to receive a pretty confusing phone call from her mom concerning some playground heroics that never happened. “Here’s my cell and my email. So she got married? I don’t know why I’m surprised. Everyone else from back then did but me. Do I know the guy?”

Lucy looked back at the kitchen—Tiny Tim had resumed cooking—then at the customers waiting for their meals, and then at Ana again. “Oh, you know…her and the Ulster boy. She was young and…and he was wild and…I suppose they’d decided they were living in some teenage movie where the parents don’t approve and the only thing to do is run away together and never speak to us again.” She tried to laugh, even as she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of a dish-towel (possibly the same one she’d snapped at Ana when she’d dared to walk in wearing a tight shirt with a low neckline). “Had one of those so-called weddings in Las Vegas. I don’t suppose I can blame her for never coming back.”
This was sounding less and less like Iris Gallifrey could really be crossed off Mike’s list, and then Lucy said, “They’re still in Vegas and still together. They’ve had a lot of hard times, more than their share, but they both work hard. I wish they’d visit, but…I can understand that, too. Certain small-minded people in this town cast her in the role of devil-child when she was growing up and she was having so much fun living up to it, she never stopped to think what would happen when it stopped being fun and all she had was the reputation. She was never bad,” Lucy said quickly. “She just liked acting out. Heavy makeup and earrings everywhere but her ears, tight clothes and…”

“Tattoos?” Ana supplied, crookedly smiling.

A little color appeared in Lucy’s cheeks. She took the paper with Ana’s information on it and slipped it into the pocket of her apron. “I’ll let Iris know you were asking after her. If she calls you, tell her…well, no, I don’t suppose you’d ought to tell her anything, but if you were to ask for a picture or to see her on the Facepage or whatever it’s called, I would…I would so much like to see that. To see what she looks like and if she has children…all of that. Just don’t tell her it’s for me or…or she might not, you know.”

“I will,” Ana promised.

Lucy nodded, turning away with her plates, only to hesitate and turn back. “My Iris was a good girl, no matter how she dressed or the company she kept,” she said huskily, avoiding direct eye contact. “And you’re a good girl, too.”

“Thanks,” said Ana after a startled pause.

Lucy seemed as if she might say more, but in the end, she simply nodded again and sent herself back to work, leaving Ana to push out into the storm with a small, silly smile on her face. Thirty years old—no, thirty-two, as of today, and she was finally someone’s good girl.
CHAPTER THIRTY

The storm slackened some as Ana drove, but if the rain lightened, the wind only grew. When she climbed the last hill before Edge of Nowhere, she reached the top just in time to see one of the dead Joshua trees lining the parking lot of Freddy’s bow over. The wind caught it before it could fall, twisting it free from the ground, roots and all, and twirling it like an Entish ballerina across the broken asphalt until it came too near the edge and dropped abruptly from view. Ana waited and soon saw it again, blowing like a tumbleweed across the desert toward the open, roaring mouth of the quarry, where all the storm’s rivers eventually met.

She could probably get home if she wanted to. The water that washed across the road didn’t look that deep. It was the stuff she couldn’t see that bothered her—all those hairpin turns criss-crossing Coldslip would be transformed into a single waterfall, choked with branches, mud and perhaps the occasional dancing tree. The mountain soil was notoriously loose and stony. If it decided to give way under this deluge, it could easily bury her truck and no one would know. She doubted anyone would look for her right away. Maybe after she’d skipped work a few days, Shelly would send the sheriff up to check on her…or maybe he’d just pocket her pay and tell everyone she must have skipped town. Hers was the only house up there. If the meter reader or the mail truck couldn’t get up the road, they might decide it wasn’t worth the cost to clear it and just close it. After a few years’ worth of unpaid utility bills, the house would go up for auction and she’d just be one more missing person in Mammon.

Unexpected light glimpsed from the corner of her eye distracted her. The pizzeria’s lobby doors were open and Freddy’s eyes were glowing like a beacon through the unnatural twilight of the storm. He’d noticed her truck just perched there on the hill and was coming out to see if she was stuck.

Ana flashed her lights at him and drove on, splashing down into the stormwater and sending up a wide wave as she spun the truck around and onto the access road that brought her to his house. The area in front of her usual place at the loading dock was a lake (or an ocean, seeing as the wind had actually spawned miniature white-capped waves to lap at the wall) that had swallowed the curb and the bottom stair next to the flydock already, so she circled back around and parked at the corner of the building next to the West Hall.

The Emergency Exit didn’t have an exterior knob, just a lockplate. Before she ran all the way to the lobby, she gave it a hopeful knock, on the off-chance that Freddy was still in earshot. She waited and just as she began to jog away, she heard the sound of the deadbolt turning. The door opened and Ana ducked through almost blindly, stumbling in the sudden stillness once the buffeting wind was shut away.

“Yer lucky ye caught me,” Foxy said as he locked up again. “Don’t usually come out this way.”

“You don’t usually come out at all,” she retorted, ignoring Tux as he called her an inquisitive chap. “How’s the roof holding up?”

“I’M SORRY. COULD YOU REPHRASE THE QUESTION?”

“No leaks in the Cove.” Foxy found a place on the wall to lean and watched her peel off her work-
shirt and wring it out onto the floor. “Road washed out?”

“Not yet, but the night’s young. Ow, what the fucking fuck!” she snarled as the security camera snapped on, shining its light like a dagger unerringly into her face. “Someday, you are going to do that to the wrong person,” she told it, glaring at it balefully through her shielding fingers, “and she is going to go at you with a motherfucking hammer.”

The camera remained unimpressed.

“Watch how ye say things like that,” Foxy warned, pretending to examine his hook while glancing at the camera from the side of his eye. “It be against the rules to disable any part o’ the security system, even the bloody annoying ones.”

“I can dream, can’t I? Okay, I’m going to get into dry clothes. Start thinking about what you want to do for fun tonight, Captain.”

“Take ye out o’ the wet ones,” Foxy replied promptly.

“Yeah, yeah, insert virtuous squeak of outrage here,” she said, rolling her eyes. “The rest of us are probably going to watch a movie or maybe fire up the Super Nintendo. If you think you can grow up for one night, you’re welcome to join us.”

“Yer a one, telling me to grow up so’s I can come watch cartoons and play kiddie games with ye,” he said with a snort. “I’ll be in me cabin, luv, but if’n ye cares to come tip a bottle, I’d make meself fair company.”

“I’d better not do any bottle-tipping. If this storm gets any worse, I might get called out.”

“Sounds to me like ye ought to tip it harder, then. They won’t let ye work if’n yer drunk.”

“Good point, but I like money.”

“Sure and yer a pirate,” he agreed, “but a good pirate knows the secret to happiness is moderation. Swag one day, rum the next. Murder, mayhem and swiving, lass, each in their own time.”

“Zen and the Art of Piracy, huh? There’s been altogether too much mayhem in my life lately.”

“Aye, but when was the last time ye done any swiving?” he asked pointedly.

She knew better than to encourage that line of inquiry, but to herself, she thought there were probably enough reward points on her celibacy punch card by now to buy a mechanical bull. At least then she’d have something to ride on the weekends. Aloud, she said only, “Much as I’d love to stand here and talk about my sex life, I’m going to go ahead and get changed now.”

She went to her room, knowing he was watching her go and fairly confident that if she turned, she’d find his eyes considerably south of her belt-line, not ogling her so much as wanting her to catch him ogling so he could laugh at her indignation and walk away. Well, she’d never been one to get bent out of shape by a little mental undressing, and with Foxy, at least she knew it was never going to go any further than some playful catcalling.

The camera followed Ana into the Party Room and watched, unblinking, as she undressed and spread her wet clothes out over the party tables. Naked, she climbed onto the stage, throwing back the purple curtain so she could use the security light to her advantage, for a change. With the camera’s help, she found a cleanish tee absorbent enough to use for a towel and sat on the edge of her bed in the spotlight.
She really didn’t think she was moving enough to keep triggering the camera’s interest, but she must have been, because the camera stayed fixed on her during the long, boring minutes that she dried herself off and brushed her hair. As she got up and found a clean pair of jeans, however, it finally timed out and shut off. She had to finish dressing in the dark and feel her way out of the room, stubbing her toes twice in the process.

She really had to put some new lights up. Which meant putting a ceiling up.

But not tonight.

Foxy was gone when Ana stepped out into the hall, as she’d known he would be, but she guessed Bonnie would be on the show stage in the dining room with his guitar and she was right. The security camera was on, putting him in the spotlight—the lonely musician, playing after the final curtain call.

“Hey,” she said, looking inanely over at Swampy so she wouldn’t get caught staring at him. ‘Just friends’ did not stare.

“Hey. She’s here!” he called, fingers still dancing over the fretboard without touching the strings. As the loading dock door banged down in the other room, he glanced up at her through his ears. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You didn’t come in the usual way and you kind of took your sweet time reaching the dining room.”

“Just getting changed.”

“That’s what I figured. Meanwhile, Freddy thought you drowned in the parking lot,” he added loudly as Freddy limped in from the kitchen.

“A distinct possibility, given the size of some of those potholes,” Freddy grumbled. “Where are you parked?”

“Around the north side,” Ana told him, pointing. “No one’s going to see it unless they’re already coming here, and if they come and they see someone parked here, they’ll turn around and leave. Now relax, bear. No one’s going to be out in this shit anyway.”

“You are.” Freddy moved restlessly into the lobby to crack the doors and peer out at the road.

“He okay?” Ana asked in a low aside.

Bonnie twitched one shoulder, still playing, and murmured, “We had some kids come by earlier. Couldn’t get the doors open, but they sure tried. Spent a good hour throwing rocks at windows and generally being pricks until the sky started shitting lightning and thunder all over. Last thing they did before they left was talk about what they’d need to get in when they came back, so, yeah, he’s a little on edge. He’ll be all right, just let him do his thing.”

Ana nodded, unconvinced, but turned toward the kitchen, calling in a sing-song lilt, “Do I smell cake?”

From the kitchen, came a short clatter and a hesitant: “Um…Freddy said you’d be here all night, so I thought…maybe you’ll be hungry later?”
“Maybe. Let’s see it.”

Chica waddled out into the dining room with a diminutive cake that had been frosted to look like a distorted, discolored bear. With the right colors and slightly better-functioning hands, it could have been a great Freddy. As it was, it looked more like Freddy’s friendly-but-dimwitted cousin, Neddy.

“How cute,” she said, booping the cake’s nose for a taste. “You really put some effort into it.”

Chica winced as if it were criticism. “I know it’s not a special day or anything, but sometimes you just feel like being fancy, you know? And there doesn’t have to be an occasion, does there? Every day’s a great day for cupcakes!”

“I swear to God, Chica,” Bonnie muttered.

“Oh hush, it’s true.”

“You could have made a birthday cake,” said Ana.

“That’s the spirit! It’s always someone’s birthday somewhere in the world.”

“Yeah, several million times over, statistically, but it’s mine today.”

The whine of Bonnie’s ears snapping up was the first answer to this innocuous statement, followed almost immediately by Freddy saying, “No, it isn’t.”

Ana turned to him, laughing. “Excuse me?”

“You told me it was December 8th,” he said, coming out of the lobby to point toward the show stage and the hidden panel that opened the parts room door. “The same as the access code.”

“It is the same, but you have to write it out like day-month-year and not the usual way. I wonder why that’s the usual way,” she remarked, turning back to the cake for another taste. She’d just eaten and wasn’t hungry, but damned if this wasn’t good, for storebought frosting. “I’m not sure, but I think it’s pretty much just America that does the month-day-year thing, and even here, some of the government does day-month-year. Like, the military does day-month-year, but hospitals do month-day-year, but the IRS does day-month-year, but schools do month-day-year…and then everyone wonders why there’s so many filing fuckups.”

“It’s really your birthday?” Bonnie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” He looked at his guitar, then at her. “What did you get?”

She shrugged. “I worked two shifts, so I’ll get overtime pay on my next check. And I took the guys out to dinner afterwards.”

“What, like you took them out? You paid?”

“Yeah.”

Bonnie stared at her for a moment, as if waiting for the punchline, then frowned. “I have been seriously misinformed on how this birthday thing works. Didn’t you get anything?”

“Pfft, all I ever get for my birthday is older. Except for this year, when I got to go to Freddy’s and get a cake—Okay,” she said as Chica snatched the cake back and returned to the kitchen. “Well, I
still got to go to Freddy’s. And I may make you sing the Birthday Bunny song, I haven’t decided yet.”

“If you ask me to sing that stupid song, I swear, I will,” he warned her. “I will follow you around, woo-de-hoo-de-hooing right in your face until you’re begging me to stop.”

“Hit me with your best shot, Mr. The Bunny,” said Ana. “I never beg.”

The camera whined, focusing on her.

Bonnie’s playful grin faded as he glanced at the camera, but it came back as strong as ever when he looked at Ana again. “Tell you what,” he said, putting the guitar aside. “We’ll give the Birthday Bunny song a miss, and go watch a movie. What do you say, Chica? Banana Jones marathon!”

“No, thank you,” Chica called emphatically over the sounds of kitcheny bustling. “I watched one of those yesterday and it was worse than the dinosaur one. He killed half a dozen people in that movie! Easily! And stood there and watched another half-dozen die without lifting a finger to stop it. And who knows how many other people got caught up in explosions and car crashes…and all those people whose faces melted off, although I suppose that wasn’t his fault. And he showed absolutely no remorse or even a moment’s moral indecision about any of it! He’s not an action hero, he’s a sociopath, a womanizer and a terrible archeologist besides.”

“That’s true,” Ana informed Bonnie. “He didn’t document a single find or make any effort to preserve a dig site. He sciences with a bullwhip and a revolver.”

“That’s my kind of sciencing. Now I kind of want to see this movie.”

Chica reappeared, wiping off her fingers on the skirt of her apron. “This is going to take a while,” she said briskly. “Let’s play some skee-ball. First to a thousand points wins. You two start while I finish the cake and I’ll come in and win when I’m done.”

“Hey!” said Ana, laughing but pretty sure she was being insulted.

“No,” Bonnie said seriously, grappling himself onto his feet. “Trust me, she decorates fast and she’s got wicked aim at skee-ball. Freddy? You want in on the fun?”

“Do I look like a masochist?” Freddy shook his head and started walking. “I need to keep watch. It’s good to see you, Ana.”

“Likewise, big bear.” Ana reached thoughtlessly for Bonnie’s hand, pulled it back before he could take it, then offered it again, because whether friends held hands or not, friends did not yank their damn hands away like the other guy was covered in cooties.

He took her hand just long enough to give her a careful squeeze (without working sensors, even his careful squeezes hurt), then released her and smiled like he hadn’t even noticed how awkward she’d just made it. “Tell you what,” he said cheerfully, leading the way down the hall, “I’ll let you have anything you want from the prize corner, since it’s your birthday.”

“There’s nothing in the prize corner,” she reminded him. “It was all moldy and gross, so I threw everything out.”

“Oh yeah. Well, you can have the shelves then.”

“Wow,” Ana drawled, rolling her eyes. “Best birthday ever.”
It really was, at least in the beginning, when there was cake (Chica somehow made a four-layer cake in a frigging Easy Bake Oven, each layer decorated to represent an animatronic—red with frosting starfish and cutlasses, brown with top hats and what was probably microphones since dildoes would have been grossly inappropriate, purple with guitars, and yellow with cupcakes and sprinkles), games (Chica did indeed beat them both at skee-ball, even though she didn’t show up until Ana had amassed nearly seven hundred points), and movies (at the end of Tim Burton’s Batman, Chica stormed out, loudly demanding to know if they even made children’s movies anymore where nobody died). Even after it all went wrong, Ana knew it still wasn’t the worst birthday she’d ever had. And it really could have been the best. She’d been the one who ruined it. And she’d known, from the minute she found that stupid little bottle, she’d known it was a bad idea. And she took it anyway.

Ana had found the bottle only because it was getting late and while she wasn’t sleepy, she still had work in the morning, so it was time to wind down whether she wanted to or not. One joint and a little chit-chat with Captain Fox seemed like the perfect way to close out the perfect day, but in reaching down her dwindling bag of cannabis, she’d managed to knock over an empty box of Pop Tarts, which had bumped something unseen that rolled away with a rattling sound.

When Ana climbed up on the counter to investigate, she found a little plastic bottle in the back of the cupboard, where it had lain undisturbed, probably since the long night with Mike Schmidt, when she’d hurriedly cleaned out her stash to go get blasted and forget everything she’d just been told. Once upon a time, it had held folic acid tablets. Good for blood pressure and pregnant women, according to the label. It had a sticker of a happy, smiling sun on the cap now and a single unevenly-shaped white tablet inside. How odd.

Ana climbed down and rolled her joint, contemplating the sun. Rider had used the fruit sticker system for a few years now and due to the sheer number of pills he dabbled in, sometimes he ran out of fruits and veggies. She knew most of the correlations, even for the more obscure stuff, but a sun was a new one on her.

It didn’t matter, she supposed. She had work in the morning. One joint was about her limit for weekdays.

So she thought and still she pulled out her phone, took a pic, and sent it to Rider, along with a text: *What is this?*

If he hadn’t answered right away, she would have gone to the Cove with one normal joint and maybe things would have been different. But as she was licking the paper to seal it, she got that text back.

*White Light. The fuck did I give U that 4?*

*What is it?* she asked next.

*Mostly fentanyl. Some serotonergic agents. Smidge of this n that to round it out. Good 4 listening 2 tunes or watching fish or w/e.*

Fentanyl, huh? Euphoric, relaxant. Had a tendency to make colors pop for Ana, which would be fun if she was going to be in the Cove anyway, with the glowing octopus. Good stuff for a good night’s sleep.
Her phone buzzed in her hand. Rider, saying, *I remember now. Gave u 1 frm test batch. Ur spozed 2 try it out 4 me 4yr ago. WTH?*

*Dropped it behind the Pop Tarts. Sorry. I’ll try it now if U want. How long does it last?* she asked responsibly, because she had work in the morning.

*Not long. Highest high in frst 20 mins, 1-2 hrs feeling some love. if you take it tonite, should be no res by am. U really gonna try?*

*Maybe*

*U alone?*

*U think I need chaperone?* she typed, only kidding a little, because there was always a reason if Rider was asking.

But he said, *better u alone for this shit. Real easy-going high, can make u a little too easy-going.*

“Jesus Christ, Rider, is this a roofie?” Ana muttered, but she didn’t type it. She knew who he was and what he sold, and who was to say one poison was more unscrupulous than another?

But even if she didn’t say it, Rider must have heard some of it anyway, in that pseudo-telepathy that the long years of association had gifted them both with, and he texted, *Not a roofie. Won’t knock u out and won’t fuck w ur memory. Heavy chill pill, but U can shake it off if u have to. Shit just has a way of making u not think so much about consequences and u do too much of that already.*

*I do not, f u. I’m trying this*, Ana decided, unknowingly proving his point.

*K, stick close to the bathroom. Gonna make you sick af before it kicks in. after that...Several sailboat emojis indicated smooth seas. Just do me a favor and lock down ur phone. I don’t need to be interrupting my night reading a bunch of sappy notes from u telling me how much u love me. *

*Yeah right.*

Ana shook the powdery tablet out into her hand and dry swallowed it, washing it down with a last bite of birthday cake before she put that in the cooler. Tucking her joint behind her ear for safe-keeping, she headed for the bathroom. She still didn’t like that slutty bunny on the door or her stupid name, but she was glad Freddy had made her fix it up so she could christen it with violent purging. Nothing but the best for Lala fricking Loppette. Everything happened for a reason.

The first effects hit about five minutes later. Ten minutes after that, as she sprawled, head spinning, next to the toilet, her phone buzzed with another text. Rider again, wishing her a happy birthday. She could count the number of times he’d ever said those words to her on one finger. She was touched.

As promised, the nausea subsided and the euphoria kicked in. Ana lingered awhile longer in the bathroom, just in case the flushable fun times weren’t over, and felt it seep out through her entire body. A curious feeling. Warm, like opioids, but not heavy or numbing. Light and kind of foamy. Pleasant, especially where her clothes chafed at her skin.

Ana got up, walking without difficulty down the hall to Pirate Cove. She didn’t feel very high, not the way ‘high’ felt for her, but she certainly felt something. Not dulled, not energized, not dazed, not giddy, but something. She felt…like Ana Stark, if Ana Stark came without a past. Or a future. There was only this moment and then this one, and this one, and now this one—an endless cascade
of just one moment, anchored to nothing.

The curtain was down in Pirate Cove and Foxy was somewhere behind it, singing that song that was not part of any act.

“Oh, she ran like a hare, but I chased her down there, and I were the quicker, ‘tis true. When she found herself collared, she fell ’pon her honor. Aye, and I fell on it, too—”

“On it and in it and through,” Ana sang with him. “Ahoy, Captain!”

“Ahoy, lass!” His metal feet scraped on the deckboards and then landed with an absurdly light thump on the padded stage. He came through the curtain and for a moment, Ana experienced an odd twinning sensation: She saw him here and now, his body as badly wrecked as the ship she glimpsed behind him, wearing her old paint-splattered jeans to hide his skinless legs. At the same time, she saw him on some other stage, bright with colored lights, the red feather in his hat dancing as he waved his hook at all the cheering children who filled this empty auditorium.

‘That’s not real,’ she thought, and just like that, it was gone.

Ana had tried a lot of hallucinogens in her time, but that was a new one. She could see it if she wanted to, but she didn’t have to. Why didn’t she know about this stuff?

Foxy was waiting, so she went down and sat on the lowest riser while he hunkered on the stage. She smoked her joint, marveling at the pictures she could sometimes make happen with the smoke, and they talked together about forgettable things until Freddy showed up. He didn’t say anything as he passed through on his infinite patrol, but he grumbled extra loud to let her know what he thought about smoking in the building and pot in general, and if he was going to do that every ten to fifteen minutes all night, that was going to bring her down, so Ana got up and made her next mistake.

“Step aside,” she said, climbing onto the stage. “I’m coming aboard.”

“No stowaways on the Flying Fox,” Foxy said good-naturedly, although he didn’t actually try to stop her.

“I’m no stowaway. I’m a pirate.”

“Yarr, in that case——” He swept the curtain aside for her, and so she went up the gangplank and onto the ship.

It was long after ‘closing’ by now and the animatronic octopus hanging off the side of the door was dark and still. Ana pouted cheerfully, then pointed when Foxy joined her on deck. “You can turn that on, right?”

“Why would I want to?”

“Because it’s my birthday.”

He laughed, then looked at her, his ears pricking up. “Struth?”

“Yup.”

“How old are ye?”

“Nineteen plus none of your business.”

“Old enough, then,” he said with a friendly leer.
“Old enough,” she agreed.

He went to the control panel set in the ship’s wheel and did whatever he did to make the octopus light up. It turned on brilliant red and orange and gold, then slowly shifted to greens and blues, then blues and pinks, then purple.

Ana watched, transfixed, watching colors prism off the surface of the octopus’s rubbery skin, making a game of seeing how high she could make them lift before her internal skeptic involuntarily blinked it all away and she had to start over. The next thing she heard was, “Oi, down in front,” and when she looked back, there was Foxy, sitting in the bow with a bottle on his knee.

He gave his thigh a pat, grinning.

Ana went over and sat on his lap, wiggling around on his awkward, not-Bonnie body until she was as close to comfortable as she was going to get. This was a better vantage point anyway, she decided. At this angle, the colored lights were reflected in the glass of the cabin window, like having two octopuses. Octopi? Maybe it was octopice, like mice. Or maybe just octopus, no matter how many there were, like sheep. Plurals, man. Plurals were wild.

Foxy sat for a long moment with both arms out like a scarecrow’s in an odd, stiff position that he had flinched into when she’d first sat down. Slowly, the bottle came back to rest on his knee. Another moment passed, even longer, and then the weight of his other arm settled around her shoulder. The point of his hook scraped at her arm. The little drop of blood that welled up was the reddest blood she’d ever seen, and she’d seen plenty.

They watched the colors change, and it was a good moment, the best moment, just one.

Foxy took a drink. When he passed the bottle, she took one too. She was working in the morning. That knowledge did not go away, it just…wasn’t attached to anything anymore. The rum was warm and spicy and tasted of things that should not have a taste, of dark stairs and toy doubloons and desperate plots that had never come to fruition.

‘It’s late,’ she thought, but didn’t look at her watch to see how late. It didn’t matter. Lateness had no real meaning. Hours were just numbers and all numbers were variable at the moment. All the threads connecting lateness tonight to going to work tomorrow had been cut. Nevertheless, it was late. Why did she keep thinking this? Was she tired? Was this what tired felt like, once it had been removed from all repercussions? She wasn’t sure. Maybe. She should go to bed. What were beds, after all, but another ship on a sea of dreams filled with more glowy octopuses…octo…squids than could be counted?

She wanted to try counting them before she sobered up.

So thinking, she stood up. Her leg, twisted under her in the uncomfortable knot she’d formed with Foxy, ached somewhere in the world and her foot was a formless ball of nothing. Didn’t matter. She still stood more gracefully and easily than she’d ever in her life stood up. She was a little surprised and kind of proud of herself.

“Yer listing, luv,” Foxy said and nodded at the bottle in his hand. “How many o’ these did ye put away afore ye came to see me?”

“None. Foot’s asleep,” she explained, pointing at it. “I should be, too, I think.”

He shrugged and settled back in the bow, turning his attention to the octopus and its tantalizing flashes and swirls of color. “Off with ye, then. Fair winds and whatever come next.”
‘Following seas,’ she thought and the thought was strangely chilling. Why did the sea follow? What did it want? How far could it chase you? Was the lake that her mother drove into still out there, creeping along the path of Ana’s life, looking for her?

She might have said something or maybe she just stood too still for too long. Foxy’s head cocked, listening to her silence. His left ear, the loose one, hit the end of the runnel and bounced back up, wobbling on its pin. She should fix that. She should fix…all the broken things…like Bonnie. Bonnie and his broken pinky finger…sitting on the stage with the lights off…playing his guitar but not touching the strings…because he’d break them.

God, everything here was broken, except for her.

Everything here was broken, including her.

Everything, everywhere, was broken. So in a way, everything was all right.

“Go on with ye,” Foxy said, taking a swig from his bottle. “Go…or stay.”

She went and she managed to walk just fine all the way to the gangplank, where she took one step across seven leagues of what-the-fuck before her sleeping foot touched down and promptly went out from under her.

She must have tumbled and it must have made a hell of a funny picture, head over heels, all the way down. She could see the world spinning—gangplank, mizzenmast and stage—but she couldn’t feel any of it. She only knew it took a very long time to fall, like Alice through the rabbit hole. She hit the ground butt-first and sat, legs splayed and head only just starting to somersault, more confused than anything else.

Foxy’s head popped up over the deck rails, looking down at her with his glowing eyes, white and yellow streamers floating all around his head. “Ye all right?”

Was she? She was. Huh. That seemed a little unfair. She should have broken her ankle at the very least.

She tried to get up, but although there was no pain, the pins-and-needles sensation of her waking foot made it impossible for it to bear her weight, so she sat back down. It would only take a moment for the discomfort to subside, she knew. An endless cascade of just one moment.

Ana lay down on the ramp to wait, looking at the curtain the surrounded the stage, where the light from the octopus could barely reach, tinting the glittery stars all the colors, but mostly purple.

“Lass?”

“Yeah?”

“I said, ye all right?”

“Yeah. Don’t I look all right?”

He considered his answer, then dug his hook into the deck rails. She knew what was coming, so she raised her head to watch as he jumped over, because he made it look so easy and made it look so good. And then she laughed, because he was Foxy, and that wasn’t right, was it?

“Ye have more than just the one peg?” he asked, nodding in the direction of the amphitheater, where she’d smoked her joint.
“No.”

“Anything in it beyond the usual?”

“No.” It was true, too. Nothing in the joint but pure Black Magic blend. The White Light had been a completely separate thing. “I’m far from wasted, I just don’t want to get up.” That was less true and she knew it, even if he didn’t. “I’m tired,” she said and although she didn’t mean for that to be true, it suddenly was. “I’ve been working so hard and there’s always so much more to do. I just want to lie here for a little while, okay? I’m not hurt. I don’t care if I get hurt anyway. I just want to lie here.”

Foxy tipped his head back to give the ceiling a sour look. “Yer really pushing it tonight,” he said, then looked down at Ana again. Shaking his head, he dropped to one knee and gave her a nudge. “Hold on to me, lass.”

“Why?”

“I’m putting ye to bed.”

A bad feeling tried to register itself in the pit of her stomach, but Ana giggled and said, “Coo.”

He answered her with a roguish chuckle and a wink, but his touch was all business as he slipped his hook-arm carefully under her back. “Just hold on to me and I’ll get ye on yer feet.”

She wanted to tell him she didn’t need his help, but instead, bizarrely, she heard herself say, “Are you sure I’m not going to pull you over on top of me?”


Ana watched as if it was a movie as her arms rose and went around his neck. “Not even if I do this?”

“No even.” He started to pull her up.

She let him, but only as much as it took to bring her close against his chest, close enough to whisper, “Been a long time since I’ve been swived, Captain.”

“Eh?”

She kissed him, or tried to. He wasn’t Bonnie, whose mouth, just as hard and just as immoveable, nevertheless took her kisses and could give them back; Foxy’s muzzle was thin and pointed and lined with jagged teeth, impossible to meet. She was forced to rather ridiculously nuzzle around it, her lips never quite touching down until she gave up and kissed his cheek instead. Really kissed it, though. Mouth open, lightly licking. The idea that ingesting fibrocene flocking was probably a tumor and a half waiting to happen tried to reach her, but she was too high up and it fell away. After a while, it stopped feeling weird on her tongue and she could relax and really make out with it.

He froze, his ears twitching forward while the rest of him stayed very still. He didn’t ask what the hell she was doing. He didn’t tell her to stop. He did not say one word, not even her name. She could hear the cameras behind his eyes working, watching her. He did nothing to encourage her, nothing to discourage her either.

The colors in the air changed from warm pinks and yellows to cool purples and blues, taking whatever impulse had moved her with them. Ana pulled back, disoriented, and at once, Foxy’s grip
tightened, pulling her roughly back to meet his mouth. His teeth scraped across her skin, enough to burn, not quite sharp enough to cut, and that was fine. His kisses should hurt. She tipped her head back, exposing her throat to his bite, watching the colors lift off of the octopus and swirl through the air as the hand that had lifted her now pushed her down.

He lay her back down, right there on the gangplank, and he lay down with her. Foxy. Captain Fox. She could hear his mechanical parts clicking and humming, the steady rhythm of his internal works unchanged even as her heart raced. She could feel his hand under her shirt—rough where the flocking was worn down, smooth where the plastic was bare, and cold, very cold, where the metal was exposed. It was, in its way, a disturbingly mechanical caress, thorough but methodical; it put her oddly in mind of a spaceship in a sci-fi movie, using lasers to scan some unfamiliar ship and learn its defenses. When he reached her breast, his fingers only skimmed across the surface of her bra and then retreated, mapping out unexplored territory elsewhere even as her kisses grew more urgent.

He didn’t talk, so neither did she. Her hands did all the talking for both of them, whispering as they moved over his back, his shoulders, his neck. Everywhere she touched, her fingers touched rough metal, broken plastic, tangled cables, but it was still Foxy. Not Bonnie. She’d thought, with her eyes closed, in the dark, one would be exactly like another, but it wasn’t. He was Foxy and it wasn’t wrong, maybe, but it sure wasn’t right.

Never mind. It was done. The wheel was in motion and couldn’t be turned back. She’d only kissed him, he was doing all the rest. That was his hand, rough and needful, scouring her body as he claimed it. That was his heat bearing down on her, his weight pressing her to the ground. If she didn’t move, it was because she couldn’t. If there’d been a fight, he would have won it, so why not pretend that was how it had gone? She could deal with the consequences when it was over. She’d always been better at living with consequences than making choices.

“Oh, I’ll give ye what ye want, luv,” he growled, shifting over her. His mouth was against her ear, but of course, his speaker was in his throat, disorientating to say the least. “Just tell me how ye want it.”

She scratched at his back; her fingernails slipped into cracks and tore painfully, but she pulled him closer. Her knees bent around him, making a cradle where he imperfectly fit. She arched her neck, bare to his teeth.

He growled again, then pulled away, reaching down between them. She heard a clicking sound.

It was not the same sound as she’d heard when she’d made Bonnie sing or made Freddy and Chica play Simon Says, but it was close enough to pierce the heady arousal fogging out her brain and make her realize where she really had heard it before. Because she had. Not in person, but she’d heard it. On a video.

That click. Foxy and Foxanne in the party room. That flat, dry click. How do ye want it, he’d asked, and oh, the look in his eyes…

Her own eyes dashed open, staring in dismay up at him, into the yellow/white light of his mismatched gaze. What was she doing? What was she doing and how the hell could she do it?

“I’m sorry,” she stammered, her heels and hands skidding over the wooden struts of the gangplank as she scrambled out from under him and fell in an ungainly heap on the stage. “I’m sorry, oh God, oh no, I’m so sorry!”

“Eh?” His hand, still at his loin-plate, at the latch or whatever it was that clicked, that sound, the
sound of his programmed compliance.

She burst into tears. Her Foxy. Her Captain Fox. She was no better than the boys in that video, no better than the who knows how many horrible people had taken him into the party rooms at the Toybox and made him...she’d made him...

Slapping tears from her eyes, she fled.

“Ana!” He tried to run after her, but the fickle whim of Fate had turned, and at his first step, his unfeeling metal toes managed to find a tear in the padding on the stage and slip unnoticed beneath the canvas cover. She heard him yelp as he tripped, heard the heavy, muffled thump and his curses as she fell through the curtain and tumbled up the amphitheater steps. Then she heard his feet hit the ground, hitting the ground as hard as only an animatronic with a 400-plus pound endoskeleton could. Tiles cracked and maybe he did, too, but it didn’t stop him. He came after her.

And he was so much faster.

She ran blindly through the short corridor to the West Hall, past a startled Freddy, past what was left of Tux, to slam up against the emergency exit. She fumbled at the lock (two animatronic bodies crashed together behind her: “Ana, wait! Ana—get yer fucking hand off me and get out of me way! Ana!”), and then she was out into the punishing slap of the storm. She ran for the truck, clawing her keys out of her pocket and dropping them twice, looking back through the rain like the stupid girl in every stupid horror movie ever made, just in time to see Foxy leap out, backlit by sheets of lightning as he skidded to a stop, mismatched eyes blazing as he looked left and right and then at her.

She slammed the door on him a fraction of a second before he reached it. He beat his hook three times on the side of the truck, but had to leap back when she put the engines in reverse and pulled away from the building. She thought he’d retreat then, he had to, surely, but instead, his eyepatch snapped down and when she pulled around him, he suddenly darted out and grabbed the back end of the truck.

And lifted it.

Ana felt the rear wheels leave the ground and still could not quite understand why she all of a sudden wasn’t going anywhere. She stomped desperately on the gas pedal, but heard only the revving of an engine, followed by Foxy’s roar: “I can hold this all night, but I’m warning ye now, I won’t!”

She put her hand on the lever that would switch the truck from rear- to all-wheel drive, but didn’t use it. She wanted to get away, just not enough to rip his arms off. What option did that leave her? She was trapped.

Panting, shivering, she peeked in the rearview mirror and saw his one eye blazing back at her, just a thin ring of fiery yellow around a furious black hole. Beyond him, light suddenly cut an angle through the night; around the corner, where she couldn’t see him, someone had opened the door.

“Shut it off!” Foxy snapped. “Keys out! Throw ‘em on the ground! I’ll flip it on its nose, see if I don’t!”

The rumble of Freddy’s voice, indistinct through the rain on the truck’s roof.

“None of yer fucking business!” Foxy snarled. “Leave us alone! Ana, keys!”

Ana waited, watching in the mirror, ears straining.
Freddy spoke again. She couldn’t hear what he said that time either, but he wasn’t saying it to her. He said it to Foxy. And whatever it was, it ended with, ‘That’s an order.’

The truck rocked gently with the violence of Foxy’s spasms as he fought it, but in the end, he had to obey. His eye burned in the rearview mirror, holding her gaze as he lowered the truck. The rain was getting under his skin, turning to steam on the hot box of his battery case and hissing out through the cracks in his chest, his sharp teeth, his furious eyes.

The tires settled.

Foxy stepped back, snarling, “Now don’t ye dare—”

She stomped on the gas.

Foxy roared and swung his hook, no doubt leaving a hell of a gash across the back of the truck as she sped off, but that was all he could do as Ana escaped.

* * *

Foxy could only stand and watch as the truck splashed down into the frothy river that the storm had made of the road. It seemed to struggle against the current, but it pulled through and soon all he could see was the tail-lights growing every more distant. Somewhere in the world, Freddy was asking what had happened. Somewhere, Bonnie was demanding to know what he’d said, what he’d done. Somewhere, Chica was pleading for him to come back inside. Somewhere. But right here, right now, the world was only those tail-lights, and now they were gone.

Foxy tipped his head back, letting the rain wash his open eyes, thinking. At length, he turned around and went around the corner of the building into the light of all their stares (all but Bonnie’s, whose eyes were mostly black and lightless). He took the door that Freddy held open and gave Freddy himself a shove.

“I needs a minute,” he said, and heaved at the door until the jobby that kept it from slamming broke and he was able to bang it properly shut. He paced a little, giving Freddy a chance to come out and shut him down if that was happening, but from the sounds of it, Freddy was having his own time dealing with Bonnie.

Foxy started running.

There might be some who remembered Foxy at High Street and Mulholland, and in particular, the little game of chase that developed among them what tried to pocket a gold-painted doubloon rather than hand it over for their prize from the Captain’s treasure hoard. Much to Foxy’s annoyance, there were even a few who’d made it out the doors, coin in hand, to prove that it could be done. He’d had to suffer their bragging from time to time over the years, but even that always came with a warning to those who might want to give it a go: Foxy was fast.

Foxy was fast. And that was indoors on slick floors in tiny rooms with tables and chairs and bruisable babbies clotting up the place. Out here, even with the rain and the storm water flooding out the road, Foxy was faster.

He’d never been further than the quarry before and had no idea and no curiosity about what lay up the mountain road, so inasmuch as he was thinking anything, he thought there might be some trouble finding Ana’s house. There was not. In fact, he passed no driveway at all until he came to the very top of the mountain and the very end of the road, where there was a single, long, tree-lined
gravel-path with Ana’s truck parked at the end of it, in front of a big, gloomy-looking house.

Of all that house, only the front room was lit, so that Foxy could see the girl sitting in the corner with her head in her hands, next to her spread-out sleeping bag and a few small stacks of neatly-folded clothing. More to the point, he could see there was only one way in or out of the room and no door to slam on him. The porch would be problematic, wood slats over an empty space, sure to amplify his already heavy steps, but if he waited for thunder—

The lightning came first, lighting up the whole sky above and the earth below, including the little patch of grass on which Foxy stood. And Ana, sitting unmoving all this while, chose that moment to uncover her eyes. And saw him.

Well, Foxy had never been one for sneakery anyway.

He ran for the door, ready to bash it open, and nearly fell on his face when it opened right away. Unlocked. He recovered his footing just as Ana came scrambling out of the other room, sprinting for the back of the house. He hooked her through her braid, reeled her back into the grip of his good hand, flung her into the wall and there he pinned her, chest to chest.

“Don’t ye ever run from me again,” he snarled, forcing her head up so she couldn’t look at anything but him. She squeezed her eyes shut; he pried one open, switching on the lights of his own to see how her pupils responded. “Are ye high?”

“Get off me!” she shouted, shoving at him.

He reeled back just enough to put some spring in it when he shoved her back, giving the wall a good crunch in the bargain. “Ye want a fist-fight with me, girl, ye best take a good look at the fists I’ll be using,” he warned her, shaking his hook in front of her sullen face. “Now I asked ye a question and I’ll have it answered. Are ye high?”

“No.”

“Are ye?”

“No!”

It may have even been the truth. Her eyes maybe were a bit off, but only a bit and that may be nerves as much as anything. What did Foxy know from nerves?

He leaned back a little and eased up on his grip, although he kept on glaring at her while she stared off over his left shoulder at the sad little room where she’d made her rough bed here in this great house.

“Is…Hell,” he muttered and then, in an angry rush, not looking at her, spat out the thought that had fueled his mad run up the mountain. “Were ye playing with me, is that it? Cozy up to me to make Bon jealous, only he didn’t walk in?”

“What? No!”

“Because if that were it, all ye had to do was say so!” he snapped. “Sure, and I’d have gladly played along if that’s what ye wanted, but dassn’t ye flit on me as if I were some…some drunken ravager when ye started it! Aye, ye did!” he snarled as she squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head in mute denial. “Ye cuddled up on me and made eyes at me and all but tried to suck me bleeding face off, but I puts me hand on ye two seconds and yer away like yer hair caught fire! What the hell, woman?”
“I don’t know.”

“Oh piss on that and piss ye for saying it like ye think it’s an answer! Ye didn’t tear ass out o’ the building and up the bloody road in yer sleep! Ye know damn well why ye did it! So let’s have it! Did I hurt ye?”

She shook her head, tight-lipped, for all the answer that was. He looked her over himself, finding old bruises and new ones and a few fresh-looking scrapes and scratches, but nothing that should have sent her hurtling out of his arms.

“What was it then?” he asked, making an effort just to say it this time. “What did I do to set ye off?”

“Nothing,” she whispered.

Foxy blew rude noise through this speaker. “I know what nothing looks like on a woman when she’s under me!”

She tried to break away; he caught her and pushed her back into the wall.

“And I know what wanting looks like,” he told her, again forcing her to meet his gaze. “Ye wanted me! Say it!”

She didn’t. She said nothing, looked at nothing, did nothing.

“No, eh? Then I’ll say it. Ye came to me. Ye put yer hand on me—” He caught her wrist and yanked it against his chest, ignoring her twisting efforts to free herself. “—and ye told me ye ain’t been proper swived in a while and then ye kissed me. Any of this ringing yer bells?”

She shook her head, but couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Mayhap I’ll ring ‘em for ye.” His foot hooked her ankle and suddenly she was on her back on her new kitchen tiles. Before she could scramble up, he was atop her, his immense weight braced mainly on his knees as he straddled her hips, with just enough crushing down on her to let her know he would not be moved. “How’s that?” he growled, forcing her head back where his stare would be unavoidable just as soon as she opened her eyes. “Coming back to ye at all?”

The storm howled; she was silent.

“What are ye thinking?” he asked, annoyed. “That if ye stays still and quiet enough, I’ll leave? Eh? Like one o’ the rubber lizards in yer stupid movie? Ye has something to say to me, girl, ye best get to saying it, because me patience for listening be fast running out.”

She did not react. But for the throbbing of the vein in her neck and the slight tremor of her lips, she could have passed for one dead.

“Never ye fear, luv, ye don’t need to say a word. I know what ye want,” he told her, low and angry, like the threat it was. “Ye want me to leave.”

Her lashes fluttered. She stole a peek at him through their fringe—just a flash of blue, like lightning—and shut them fast again.

“Ain’t that right? I said me piece and now I should bow meself out so’s ye can make up yer mind? Eh? Be a gentleman who’ll do the gentlemanly thing and let a lady flutter until she can come to him with her pride…or never come to him at all. Is that what ye want?”
She nodded once, a movement little more noticeable than her small shivering as she lay silent, barely breathing beneath him.

“Well, that ain’t too damn likely, is it?” he said and snapped his eyepatch down over his glaring yellow eye. “They didn’t make me to be a gentleman. They made me to be a pirate. And I mean to finish what ye started.”

She didn’t fight him off. She couldn’t have if she’d tried, but if she’d tried, would that have stopped him? He didn’t think about that then. He didn’t think about it much later, either.

He seized a fisthold of her shirt, yanking it away from her body so his hook could punch through, and she didn’t flinch. He ripped it open from neck to nethers, and she did not shout. After he grappled her jeans off, she didn’t try to bring her naked thighs together, but he wedged his knee roughly between them and forced them apart just as if she had. She turned her face away again when he popped his loin plate open, but even as she did, she raised her trembling arm and put it around him. Her neck arched, opening to his rough kiss. She let him in. He would have been sure about that if he’d ever stopped to ask himself. If it was a mistake, they made it together. If it was wrong, they shared the sin. If…but ‘if’ was a silly, pointless word. It was what it was and it couldn’t be undone now.

He might have hurt her in that first piercing. Her face twisted as with pain, although she didn’t cry out, and if it was pain, she didn’t let it hold her back. And she was no giggling girl, exploring sensations she didn’t dare chase after if it came with a reputation and flesh-and-blood consequences. No, Ana was a woman-grown, accustomed to doing the fucking and disinclined to lie quiet and be fucked. She knew what she wanted and how to take it for herself, and that was good, because those first moments where impressions mattered most were almost entirely taken up by Foxy booting up processes and initializing applications that had not been used in more than a decade.

The rhythm she set was one a human would consider ‘rough,’ absent all petting and nuzzling, let alone little things like looking your partner in the eye. But that was it, wasn’t it? She didn’t want a partner. She just wanted to get there, perhaps under the mistaken impression that the sooner she struck, the sooner this would all be over. He let her have her delusion for now, as it gave him the golden opportunity to study her responses before she thought to suppress them.

And oh, she was responsive. She’d said it had been a while for her and it surely must have been. He activated none of his party processes and employed no special technique, so for all intents and purposes, she might have been fucking a man, and yet she fucked him like it was all that was keeping her alive. She was there in two minutes, or thought she was, and, as anticipated, immediately after her stiff, silent shivers had subsided, she tried to push him off.

‘Tried’ being the operative word. Foxy’s endoskeleton had been trimmed down to Toy-size for his installation at Mulholland and had never been restored. This gave him nearly a man’s dimensions, albeit a largish-man, but even if he was the smallest of the animatronics, he was still three times heavier than Ana herself and just because he chose not to crush her did not mean he had to let her push him around.

She pushed again, then looked at him, eyes snapping, angry.

“Did ye think we were done?” he asked and switched on a few of his stimulation mods—pulse, oscillation, vibration, and heat, set pleasantly warm because he was nice like that. As Ana gasped and tried to kick away the unexpected sensations, Foxy popped his hip extenders, worked his knees under her thighs and swept her legs up, pinning and supporting them at an angle that would have been, if not impossible for a human to emulate, damned uncomfortable.
He went to work, giving her no choice but to feel him, and, having no choice, she again gave in and opened herself to all of it.

She didn’t look at him, and that was fine. He didn’t need to be seen. Some things were better done in the dark. She didn’t embrace or kiss him, and that was fine. He’d rather have the scratching of her little claws and see the biting of her lip than have a thousand limp caresses and kissing he couldn’t feel anyway. She didn’t talk to him, and that was fine. He didn’t need words when he could make her hiss and gasp and moan.

She cried when the end came for her—the true end, and not the scornful little shivers she only thought was the end until he proved her wrong—and the tears were so sudden and violent that Foxy actually stopped.

“I’m fine,” she said, but whether she was or wasn’t, this little pause had let enough unwelcome clarity into the moment that he just couldn’t continue. As soon as his weight was gone, she rolled over and showed him her shaking, scarred back while she composed herself.

“Ye all right?” he asked.

“Get over yourself, it’s nothing to do with you,” she said hoarsely, slapping at her leaking eyes. “It happens sometimes. I don’t know why. Some girls piss the bed, I cry. Fuck off and quit staring at me, it’s embarrassing enough.”

Foxy accepted that, put himself right and zipped up his jeans, keenly aware that he was leaving her in the tatters he’d made of hers. “Ye have something to wear?”

“Yeah. My aunt left some stuff. Don’t worry about it.” She pushed herself into a sitting position, rubbing now at her chest and stomach, as if trying to wipe away the feel of his touch. “You can go now.”

In retrospect, that was almost certainly what he would have done next anyway, but hearing her say it—just toss it off, emotionless, preoccupied, like it was hardly worth saying at all—hooked at him.

“Ye want me to go?”

She huffed without much humor and glared up at him through the tangled strands of hair that had escaped her braid. “What the hell else do you want to do, cuddle? I have work in the morning. You want to go another round, let’s do that. Otherwise, go home and let me get some sleep.” She pulled the shreds of her t-shirt over her chest and tied them into a sort of working top, found her torn panties, tied them on too. “You want a ride? Give me two minutes to find some pants.”

Foxy threaded his hook through one of the belt loops on his jeans, but didn’t offer them. He wasn’t completely indifferent to her situation, but he didn’t want to explain how he ran out of the building in jeans and came back to it without them either. “Ye needn’t trouble yerself. I’ll walk.”

“You sure? It’s brutal out there.”

“Didn’t stop me getting here, did it?” He headed for the door, only to stop just outside the kitchen and take a good look at the floor he’d come charging across.

Specifically, at the deep radiating cracks in the fancy stone tiles, not quite in a straight line, evenly spaced at what appeared uncomfortably close to an animatronic’s stride.

“Did I do that?” he asked, uncomfortably aware that this was not what he ought to be feeling guilty about.
Ana stirred herself, kicked off the unanchored legs of her ruined jeans and came to stand beside him, not quite close enough to touch. “No, that was already there.” She paused, then said in a voice strained by hidden meaning, “You ever been here before?”

Foxy shook his head, but shrugged at the same time. “Don’t recall, but that don’t mean it never happened. Made a few house-calls in me time, but I don’t recollect this’n and I should think I would.” A deeply unsettling and much delayed thought suddenly struck him: This was Ana’s house, which made it her aunt’s house first, which made it Marion Blaylock’s, which made it the Purple Man’s. “Oh, I’m sure I would.”

He looked around, impossible chills creeping over skin he didn’t have, just like he thought he’d see blood dripping down the walls and trophies made of children’s bones strung up and around like Christmas lights, but there was nothing here to see. The house was just as she’d described it: broken, empty rooms, mopped and still a mess, with nothing to fill it but shadows and ghosts.

Ana was watching him, a bit too close.

“Not much of yer personality hereabouts,” he said, then nodded toward a massive clock standing against the wall, carved all over with scenes from fairy tales. “Save that.”

She looked at it.

As if all it had been waiting for was an audience, the clock struck midnight. With the first chimes, two little doors opened high on the tower of the clock. Two figurines emerged at opposite ends of a curved track—a small hooded girl and a wolf on two legs. They both swept forward, meeting in the middle, and then turned around and went their separate ways. The chimes chimed on; the doors stayed open. Now the wolf emerged alone and went completely around the track and through the other door. The chimes kept playing. The little girl appeared alone and also went around the track to the other door, but reappeared at once and tried to go back, only now the wolf chased her. When she reached the mid-point of the track, the wolf fell on her, stuttering back and forth in a way that could have suggested devouring or...something else. The chimes finally came to the end of their fourth bar of incessant chiming, and as they did so, a third figure appeared on the track—the woodcutter. He swept forward, axe raised, just as the ringing of the hours began, and for each of the twelve hours tolled, the tiny metal axe lifted and swung. At the very end, the woodcutter simply turned around and rolled away on the track, leaving the body of the wolf atop the body of the girl. A few seconds later, both bodies jerked upright, aligning their limbs and awkwardly staring at each other before retreating through opposite ends of the track. The doors closed.

Silence and the ticking of the clock.

“What,” said Foxy, “the bloody fuck, girl?”

“You should see the other shows,” she said. “So much rape and incest and murder in the old fairy tales, I had no idea. Grim is fucking right.”

“Did ye know it did that when ye bought it?”

“It came with the house.”

Naturally.

“Why did ye keep it?” he asked.

She shook her head, gazing at the now innocent seeming clock as it counted out the seconds. “It was broken when I was a kid. I can remember it, but it was just this thing in the background, part of
everything else that made this place…what I remember it being.” Now she looked around, seeing more than what was there, more than he could even guess at. “I didn’t know how awful it was until I fixed it.”

He shouldn’t have asked. He shouldn’t have said anything. Why was he still here?

Because he didn’t want to leave.

But that wasn’t quite true, was it? He did want to leave. He just…didn’t want to leave her behind.

That was not a feeling he was comfortable stomaching and nothing he knew how to say, but he tried. “I don’t know how the hell ye can sleep here,” he grumbled, working himself up to offering the use of his cabin, back at the restaurant.

“As opposed to Freddy’s, right?” she threw back at him. “Because nothing bad ever happened there.”

The clock hammered at the space between them.

“Forget I said that,” she said, shaking her head at the ceiling. “I’m being a bitch. I just…I didn’t mean for this to happen. It shouldn’t have happened.” The last word cracked, and he caught a glimpse of jarring misery beneath the stoic mask she wore. “I’m so sorry I made this happen.”

Before he could say anything—he had no idea what to say—he went to the door and opened it. The storm blew in at once, slapping her with rain; she did not react.

This was no good way to leave her, but there were no good ways, so he went.

It was the same distance and downhill besides, but it seemed a much longer run this time with nothing but his running feet, the rain and his thoughts to keep him company. He kept his eyes dark, in case Fred were watching, as indeed he was, but he didn’t share Foxy’s caution and so Foxy was able to approach without being seen, circling wide around the building as Freddy paced around the parking lot, so that Foxy was ‘caught’ climbing up from out of the desert.

“Where the hell have you been?” Freddy bellowed, not fighting the storm as much as part of it, thunder and lightning both.

“Quarry,” Foxy snapped, and before Freddy could say the magic words that make a bigger muck of this whole mess, added, “I hope yer happy now.”

Freddy blinked, the thinnest part of his anger slanting off into confusion. “What? About what?”

“Asked her about her cousin, didn’t I? Could have spent the night friendly-like—” Images from the kitchen floor briefly distracted him, laying his ears flat for him. He recovered, but left them there. Let Freddy read that how he will. “—and instead I raked up all her past and made her chew on the bones, all so’s ye could be satisfied with who done her cousin in.”

Freddy was quiet for a moment, or as quiet as he could be with the rain beating on his casing. “And?” he said at last. “Which one of us was it?”

“None,” Foxy said. “The boy was taken away, all right. By the law, after it come to light that his mum were doing things she oughtn’t do. Apparently, there were papers at the house what laid the whole sordid story out. Ana found ‘em a while back, got an eyeful of just who her beloved Aunt Easter really was. He has another family now and she ain’t part of it. Nor does she think she should be.”
Freddy swore low in his speaker and stared up the empty road at the mountain. “She shouldn’t be alone with that tonight. I wish she hadn’t left.”

“Yer telling me?! I tried to stop her! You threw the bloody rules at me!”

Freddy took that with nothing but a nod, shouldering the blame without argument or resentment. “And her aunt? Did she find out what happened there?”

“Still missing. Ana thinks she probably got herself a new bloke and lit out o’ town.” Foxy started walking toward the building. “Either that, or pitched herself into the quarry.”

“And Ana probably doesn’t even know which to hope for,” Freddy continued glumly, falling into step beside him. “Thank you, Foxy. That must have been difficult, but it needed to be done. At least we know now. I’ll speak to the others and make sure no one asks any more unpleasant questions when she comes back.”

That settled that. Foxy had already assured that Ana would never ask about Marion Blaylock and now he’d seen to it that Freddy would never ask about Aunt Easter. At least something good had come of this night’s work.

…but why didn’t he feel better?
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The next day was no longer than any other day. Even if Foxy didn’t have an internal clock he could watch, he had the restaurant’s rhythms, heartlessly counting out time one joke, one song, one crowish laughing caw at a time. Nevertheless, after years...decades...damn near half a bloody century of waiting, that was the longest day Foxy had ever had to wait out.

Night came eventually. Ana never did.

Well, it was a Thursday. No reason to think she would. But along about midnight, Foxy did receive a visitor.

He recognized the footsteps when they limped into the Cove from the West Hall. He had been expecting them and long before now, if it came to that. Still he waited, listening to the silence on the other side of the curtain, until at last:

“You there?” Bonnie asked.

“Aye. Come to ask me to the movies?”

“I’m not here to pick a fight,” said Bonnie through just a tickle of static, “but I’m not in the mood to joke around.”

“What do ye want then?”

Silence.

“I don’t know.” A wheeze of vented air. Bonnie’s footsteps limped a little closer, descended a few stairs. Boards creaked as he took a seat on one of the benches in the amphitheater. “She’s not here, if you care.”

Foxy found a clearish space on his stomach and started scratching.

“She’s always here by now, if she’s coming, so...she’s not coming.”

“So what do ye want me to do about it? If you’re worried about her, have Fred give her a call,” Foxy said neutrally.

“He tried. She left her phone in her room.” A pause. “She left her bag, too.”

“Did she now?”

“She left her boots.” Static swelled and died back. “Freddy told me what you guys were talking about that night, but...was there anything you didn’t tell him that I should maybe know?”

Foxy looked sharply around, even if all he could see was the back of the purple curtain that closed off the stage. “Like what?”

“Like...I don’t know. Something. This isn’t like her,” Bonnie said in a heated rush. “She never goes anywhere without that bag. She takes it to work, she takes it to the store...sometimes she
takes it just to go out on the dock and smoke. Something’s wrong.”

“Ye know her better than anyone, mate. Ye know how she’s like. She gets spooked, she runs. She’ll come back when she’s ready.”

“This shouldn’t have spooked her this bad.”

“What?” Foxy drawled, narrowing his eyes at the curtain. “Having to listen to me clumsy questions about her cousin, having to admit he were molested by the aunt she all but worshipped, having to accept that he had another family now and she weren’t welcome to be part of it, and all on her birthday? Which part o’ that was she supposed to handle with poise and grace, mate?”

“I didn’t think of it like that,” Bonnie said after a moment. “Sorry, I’m…I’m just worried about her. And I know you’re rolling your eyes at me. I know she can take care of herself. It’s just…even if we’re not…you know, together anymore, I still care.”

Foxy’s ears flattened, but if there was anger behind it, it wasn’t directed at Bonnie. “I know,” he said and cut a little deeper. “Ye need to work on that, mate. Come on now, how long are ye going to mope around after her? She ain’t even here to see it, and if she were, I doubt like hell it’s the sort of thing that would make her swoon back into yer arms.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” Bonnie said with fresh anger in his voice.

“Sure and yer a liar.” Foxy stabbed his hook in over his heavy guts and twisted. “Ye think I don’t see the way ye look at her? Ye say yer quit and it’s fine, but yer still right there whenever she comes over, wanting to be the first face she ever sees, carrying her kit and asking about her day and doing everything ye can to remind her that ye exist.”

“I’m her friend, Foxy. Friends talk to each other and help each other carry heavy shit without getting skeevy about it.”

“Aye, friends talk to each other. And friends talk to other folk too, eh? Friends find out exactly what were said to make t’other friend run off so’s ye can be the friend that knows just what to say to make it all right again when she comes back. And ye don’t call that skeevy.”

“Hey, that is not what I’m doing!”

“Sure it ain’t.”

“It’s not! Yeah, I still love her, but that doesn’t mean I’m looking for another way to get at her all the time. What…What do you think love is, anyway?”

“What do ye think it is, that’s the question.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s an arcade where you play different machines until you have enough nice-guy tickets to buy the girl, that’s for goddamn sure.” Bonnie’s cooling system vented again. Bare plastic scraped on bare plastic as Bonnie raked a hand over the top of his head. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, but still tight and jagged around the edges. “When you care about someone, you find out that when they hurt, you hurt, whether or not you ‘get’ anything out of it. Go on and sneer at me all you want. I don’t want her to be here so I can parade my concern in front of her and score points. I want her to be here so she’s not dealing with this shit on her own!”

“Proper white rabbit, ain’t ye? But if she should happen to decide she’d deal with it better by cuddling up on ye, why, ye’d be right happy to oblige her.”
“The hell I would. Ana’s going through some serious shit here. She doesn’t need some smarmy dickbag trying to convince her all she really needs is a hot injection of vitamin Me.”

Foxy snorted to show what he thought of that, but like an echo, or a ghost, Ana’s own voice came back at him: *Unless I’m sad because I haven’t gotten laid in a long time, you are not going to solve any problems and it is a huge, I mean huge, fucking insult to act like all any girl needs to feel better is a good dicking.*

“I’ll have ye know, skirts love a good deep cleaning,” Foxy said loudly, but whether he was talking to Bonnie or Ana’s memory or his own self, he did not know. “Cheer’s ‘em up.”

“Damn it, Foxy…no. It’d just be one more thing for her to regret in the morning.”

Foxy showed the curtain some teeth. “And what can ye do that’s so much better, eh? Even if she were here, how can ye possibly help her?”

“I don’t know. I keep thinking of all the times I heard Ana say these were the only two people who ever loved her.” Bonnie was quiet for a moment, then went on in a lower voice, “And now one of them’s a monster and the other one doesn’t want anything to do with her. And I sure know how that feels. Don’t you?”

Foxy did not reply.

“Maybe her cousin blames her for not helping him back then. And even if he doesn’t, what do you want to bet she thinks he does? That’s what she’s alone with right now. Those aren’t the kind of problems you can just fuck away. Or drink away, which she’s a hell of a lot more likely to try. Especially if she’s alone.”

Foxy went back to cutting on himself, really putting some wrist into it, gouging out thick curls of red plastic with every scrape. “She’s fine,” he said curtly. “She’ll turn up tomorrow, most likely.”

No answer but the scuffing sound as Bonnie kicked morosely at the floor.

“Ye’ll see. She’ll stay the weekend just like always. Work too hard, drink too much, and act like nothing happened. And she’ll be all right. Just leave her alone and let her deal with it her own way.”

“That’s what Freddy says and he’s wrong, too.”

“Do what I did, then,” Foxy said with artificial nonchalance. “Chase her out in tears. See how that works out for ye.” A little bitter humor twisted up through the cracks in his words. “Worked out great for me.”

“Yeah, right.” Old gears ground and old pumps hissed as Bonnie heaved himself onto his feet. “Sorry to bother you.”

“No bother,” said Foxy, finally breaking through his casing. He studied his new scar, observing the way the light of his eyes glinted on his exposed rib, then found a new place and started scratching. “No bother a’ tall.”

* * *

The only spare clothes Ana kept at the house were the ones she wore for renovating—stained, torn,
jeans too baggy and shirt too tight—so she went to work on Thursday dressed in Aunt Easter’s gardening clothes, which, outdated and probably unwashed as they were, were still notably nicer than Ana’s usual style. A number of comments were muttered behind her back, but Ana chose to take them as compliments. The only person who remarked on it to her face was Hageman, who pointed out that Aunt Easter’s old sneakers were not safe on-site and if anyone ought to know better, it was her. She fed him some line about leaving them outside because they were muddy and waking to find a skunk had sprayed the porch, boots included. Hageman commiserated and left it at that, but when lunch-hour rolled around, she drove to Hurricane and bought a pair of decent steel-toes, so that when they went back to the office to clock out and Bisano inevitably tried to rat her out to Shelly, she could point at her regulation protective footwear and ask him what the hell he was talking about.

Her boots weren’t the only things she left behind at Freddy’s. She also left her day-pack and her phone, which she didn’t really miss until Friday, when she wanted desperately to call and tell Freddy she couldn’t come this weekend for reasons she hadn’t figured out yet. If she could have mapped out an Mission Impossible-style plan to break into the pizzeria, collect her stuff and break out again without being seen, she’d have done it, but she didn’t want to get caught trying, so in the end, she just picked up the rest of the stuff for the bathroom and went over like nothing was wrong.

Freddy met her at the loading dock, but his only comment was to ask if she needed help carrying anything in. She didn’t, but she let him help anyway, giving him the opening to ask the questions she’d been dreading. She wasn’t even sure what to say. She’d had all this time and hadn’t even come prepared with lies.

But he didn’t ask. He carried what she gave him to carry and put it where she told him to put it, saying only, “Let us know if we can help,” as he went on his way.

There was little enough left to do in the bathroom—just paint, trim, install lights and fixtures, lay out soap and all the rest of the finishing touches, and then just clean up—but she managed to stretch it out for three hours and no one interrupted her. Not even Bonnie. She expected to hear his footsteps in the hall, pacing restlessly outside the door, kept at bay only by that stupid rule, but he wasn’t. Did that mean something? Was he avoiding her? Should she go look for him? Did she even want to find him? Was she really in that much of a hurry to face the hurt and anger and accusations? Was the guilt any easier to live with?

She had nothing to feel guilty about. It wasn’t like she’d cheated on anyone. She and Bonnie were not a ‘thing’. The whole reason she’d broken up with him was because she knew he deserved better than her, even if he didn’t.

She felt sick.

She must have stood in the finished bathroom half an hour at least, just staring at herself in the mirror over the newly-installed sink, until the soft knock finally sounded.

‘Just get it over with,’ she told herself. Turning away from her empty-eyed reflection, she opened the door, hard and fast, like ripping a bandage off a still-bleeding wound.

Chica stepped back, plainly startled by the violence of her sudden appearance, and began tapping her fingers together. “Um, hi. I thought…you might be getting hungry.”

“I ate before I came here,” Ana lied.

“That was a while ago.”
“It was a big dinner.”

“Well…would you like to play some skee-ball? Or watch a movie?”

Ana’s frayed nerves snapped a few more threads. ‘Just say it,’ she thought, locking her jaws against the urge to say it, shout it. ‘Quit dancing around with all this fucking fake sympathy and bitch-slap me down for breaking your ex-boyfriend’s heart by fucking the guy I told him not three nights ago I could never be interested in. I’m ready. I deserve it. I’m tired of fucking waiting for it. Just do it.’

But Chica didn’t, and as the anticipation pounding behind Ana’s eyes like a hangover slowly eased up, Ana got a good enough look at her to realize the sympathy in Chica’s pale pink eyes seemed genuine, unstained by recriminations of any kind.

She didn’t know.

How could she not know?

“We could go for a walk,” Chica suggested tentatively. “Just around the building, or in the parking lot when it gets a little darker.”

“Not tonight. I’m kind of tired. In fact, I’m just going to call it an early night.” Ugh, she couldn’t leave it like that. “But assuming Boss Bear signs off on the john, you and me will get a good start on the Reading Room tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Oh. Okay.” Chica backed up another step, still tapping her fingertips. “Is there anything I can do to help tonight? I could…clear the shelves or…?”

“That’s a lot of bending and moving. I don’t want to risk you getting hurt. Why don’t you sit this one out?”

Chica nodded, dropping her gaze. She turned around, hesitated, and looked back. “If you want to talk, I’m a good listener.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” said Ana.

Chica nodded again, but not because she believed her. “I’ll be in the arcade if you change your mind,” she said and toddled away.

Ana watched her go, then looked back down the hall at the closed door to the dining room. After a long indecisive moment, she went over and pushed it cautiously open.

From this angle, she could see only the curved wall of the show stage, with Bonnie’s bad leg resting on the floor, but between the rusty hinges and the swollen door scraping at the tiles, she made enough noise that he leaned out and looked back at her.

His ears went up. Up, not down. His eyes, when he lit them, showed her nothing but concern. What were hers showing him?

“Hey, wait,” he said as she started to duck away again. He got up, fell back down, punched his knee and got up again. “You need something?” he asked, limping toward her.

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes. “Just going to bed and thought I’d say…goodnight.”

“Already?”
“Yeah. Been a long day.”

“Oh.” He stopped coming toward her, just out of arm’s reach. Now his ears fell, but only far enough to show uncertainty. “Well…goodnight. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow. Maybe we can hang out or…something.”

“Maybe,” Ana said, mustering up all her acting abilities to show him a shred of enthusiasm.

His answering smile was just as fake, but he was trying.

Ana went to her room. No one followed her, except the stupid camera. She drew the curtain to block its light and sat on her bed in the purple shadows for what her heart told her was an hour and her watch insisted wasn’t even ten minutes before she got up again. She opened the prop wardrobe door and stepped inside, found the secret panel by feel and pushed it open. The buttons lit, helping her punch in the access code to the backstage area. The metal door slid up, releasing a puff of warm air that still smelled a little of cleanser and a little of death.

In a few careful steps, she was at another door. No need for a code on this side, just a simple grey button. The door whooshed up and she stepped out of the Parts Room into the dark cabin of the Flying Fox. The last time she’d come here, she’d been pissed, careless, and he’d gotten the drop on her. This time, she listened, but heard nothing—no hum of a cooling fan, no whine of servos, no tip-tip-tap of a doubloon rolling across Foxy’s metal knuckles or the scratch-scritch-scratch of his hook moving back and forth over his casing.

Ana found the wall and followed it to the door. She moved as quietly as she could in her workboots on the wooden floor, but not quietly enough. Before her hand touched the latch, the door opened and there was Foxy, hook at the ready and ears flat to the top of his head. He blinked some of the fire out of his eye when he saw her, but only some, and after a moment’s stillness, released the door to give her a hard shove with his open hand, moving her back into the cabin, where he joined her and shut the door behind him.

“What did you tell them?” she asked before he could say anything.

“That I worked ye up asking questions about yer aunt and cousin,” he told her curtly. “Ye ain’t likely to be bothered on that account again. Yer welcome.”

Ana felt herself blush. “You didn’t tell them—”

“Course not. None o’ their bloody business.”

“You had to have told them something.”

“Why?” he countered. “Cut across the desert on return, so Fred saw me come up from the rocks where I likes to walk about sometimes. So far as any of ‘em knows, I never went no further.”

“How did you go further, since you bring it up?” she demanded. “How the hell did you follow me home when it’s supposed to go further than the boundaries of the restaurant? How did you even find my house?”

“That weren’t hard. Yers were the only house up there and yer truck were parked out front. As to the t’other, as I told ye, me homing protocols were lifted so’s I could…” His jaw clenched, then popped off its left spring and dropped. He snapped it back into place and finished, “…could be rented out,” in a growl. “But that were a long time ago, in Mulholland, and if Fred’s forgotten, I’d just as soon not remind him. It ain’t a part o’ me past I’m proud of.”
And there it was again, the ghost of the Toybox and all the ways she’d reminded him of it.

She didn’t say this, but he heard it anyway. Scratching at his muzzle, Foxy glanced at his bunk (Ana looked quickly at the wall, into the empty sockets of the goofy plastic mask hanging there, one of the many piratical trophies appointed around the tiny room), then went and opened the cupboard over it. He offered her a bottle and just kept holding it out and staring her down when she shook her head, until she took it.

Rum was never going to be her favorite drink, but it was strong stuff and a deep swallow made her feel a bit more ready for whatever was coming next.

“So,” he said.

Ana took another, deeper swallow, keeping her eyes fixed on the wall. “So what?”

“We ever going to talk about it?”

“Maybe I’ve got nothing to say.”

“And mayhap I do,” he retorted. “I could start with why ye went running off in the first place!”

“I didn’t run! I just…I don’t live here. I was just going home. I have to work during the week, remember?”

“Without yer kit?” he said scornfully. “Without yer phone? Without yer bleeding boots? Ye ran, girl.” His eyes narrowed. He folded his arms and cocked his head (his left ear flopped, loose in its socket) and said, “And I ran after ye. I ran ye right down, eh? To ground, as some might say, and once I had ye there—”

“I remember!” Ana snapped. She faced him, giving up the last pretense of indifference in favor of a fight, but it all felt wrong. Her heart was pounding, just like it knew she’d already lost. Her head felt heavy and too big; her throat, too tight. “You didn’t take anything I wasn’t giving, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He huffed as if the very notion of the intrepid Captain Fox worrying about anything were a joke told in extremely bad taste, but took the sarcastic tilt out of his neck. “Nor ye,” he said and reached for her.

She backed up at once, hit the wall and slapped at him when he tried to steady her.

He retreated a step, staring at her while she stared at the wall. “Did I hurt ye?” he asked suddenly.

“No.”

“T’other night, I mean. Did I—”

“No! But that was…that was one time! Understand? The only time! We’re not making that a habit.”

“Why not? I lit yer powder, didn’t I? Three times, by me own reckoning. Four, if’n ye count the feeble squirming ye did at the start.”

“Okay, stop! Just…” She turned her back on him again and went to the door set in the back wall. “I can’t do this if you’re going to talk like a pirate.”

He grabbed her and swung her around, his grip too tight and too strong around her arm. “I can’t
help the way I talk, damn it!” he snarled. His eyes irised halfway to full black in an instant and slowly, slowly opened back to white. “I can’t help the way I look,” he said, not calmly, but quiet at least.

“The way you look? I don’t care what you look like! This was never about your looks!”

He snapped his ears irritably. There was a tired spronging sound and the one on the left flipped over and fell out of his head to the ground. He kicked it away with a curse and glared at her. “Go on, then. What’s it about?”

“Nothing! It was nothing! It wasn’t real,” she said, pushing the words like knives into her own heart. “I know you were programmed to respond and I… I knew it and I did what I did anyway, and I’ll never be sorry enough for that,” she said in an angry rush as his eyes narrowed and his single surviving ear slowly rotated on its pin until it was flat as an angry cat’s. “But it was wrong, whether you’re allowed to know it or not. It was wrong and the best I can do for you is never to do it again.”

“Is that really what ye think? Ye pressed me buttons and I went into party-mode and whatever I feel about that night is just, what? Me programming?” He showed her some teeth, shook his head. “There’s a difference betwixt doing something yer made to do… and doing something ye want to do. I had a choice and we can talk all night about whether I made the right’un or the wrong’un, but I had a choice! I knew what I was doing and I wanted it just as much as ye.”

“Yeah, you say that, but you can’t! How could you, when it’s the program that tells you what’s real?”

“Oh ho, luv,” he said drolly, glaring. “Ye don’t know the first fucking thing about me programming. Don’t be telling me what I knows or what I feels.”

“Bonnie said—”

“And I will tell ye right now,” he interrupted with a harsh robotic laugh, underscored with a snarl. “Ye will never win this or any other argument with anything Bonnie said.”

Ana’s voice failed her. She breathed it back to life, unflinching in the steady light of Foxy’s eyes, and finally said, “Bonnie told me Autonomous is just a word, not a magic spell. It’s just a label that tells dumb people like me what button to press.”

“Aye, and I’m bound at times by processes o’ operation, but not by feelings. The man who made us didn’t even know there would be feelings. The man who did, didn’t care what they were, so long as we—” Foxy jerked back hard, his eyes filling up with black. He stumbled away from her, snapping his patch down and covering his other eye with his skinless hand, closing himself in darkness, shivering.

Against every self-defensive instinct, she took a step toward him, but stopped before she could touch him. Touching him was what got her into this mess.

“As long as we done what we were made to do,” Foxy concluded at last and swung around, his eyes once more his own and burning with yellow fire. “The point I’m making here is, I always knew when what I was doing was wrong! I knew what I was feeling all those times in the party rooms! I know the difference between pushing me buttons and being with me, truly with me. As ye were.” He glared at her a moment more, then caught her by the arm and pulled her roughly to him. “And I were with ye,” he growled. “So if it wasn’t what ye wanted or it was just a passing curiosity for ye, then tell me that, but don’t tell me I didn’t mean it! I can’t always stop meself, but I always
know what I’m feeling.”

“I made you,” she insisted, but didn’t fight him off, didn’t even try. “I did, I made you do it!”

“Aye. Ye made me.” All his features relaxed in their rigid way, his eyelids angling from an angry slant to one of exasperation as his voice lowered and roughened. “Ye made me want to see ye when I was ready to never see another human face again. Ye made me want yer kisses when I can’t feel ‘em, nor kiss ye back. Ye made me want this—” He unfastened the front of his jeans in a brisk, angry movement, caught her hand and brought it to his hip plate without ever breaking his burning stare. He helped her find the hidden catch and pressed down on her fingers until she heard that flat clicking sound and felt the plate swing open on its hinges. “—when I never dreamed I could ever want it. Ye made me, all right. Ah, lass…ye made me want ye.”

Now she tried to free herself, but it was halfhearted effort at best, little more than a twist of her wrist and a trembling of her fingers just before he brought her to him.

“And I’ve wanted ye a long time now,” he said quietly, folding her hand around his shaft. Steel bands, overlapping so perfectly they nearly formed a single smooth surface. Nearly. She remembered too well how those bands had felt moving inside her. It was cold, but warmed quickly in her grip; she remembered that too.

Her knuckles scraped the underside of his hip plate when she stroked him. She unthinkingly pushed it all the way down until it caught and stayed down, then closed her fist around him and lightly squeezed, shivering just like it was that night all over again.

“I can’t do this to you,” she whispered, but it wasn’t entirely him she was telling.

“Oh aye? Well, yer hand says yer mouth’s a liar. And yer head ain’t involved at all if you really think I couldn’t stop ye.”

“Then why don’t you?” she asked, not a challenge as much as a plea.

“Why in blazes would I?”

“You can’t feel it. What…What could you possibly be getting out of this?”

“I could ask ye the same,” he countered, reaching up with his hook to carefully push her hair back over her shoulder and show him all her face. “If what ye got in yer hand is all ye wanted, ye don’t need to get it from me. But ye came to me. Ye put yer hands on me.”

And she still wasn’t taking them off, either.

“I was yer first crush,” he said, startling her. “Ye remember telling me that?”

She did, sort of. The words drifted like a memory of a dream through her mind, shot through with a tangle of images—Foxy striding up and down the stage, his singing voice diminished by having to watch it on her well-worn tape; Foxy leaning out over one bent knee to tell her Ana was no kind of name for a pirate; Foxy in the rearview mirror, holding up the back end of her truck and shouting at Freddy—at the world—to leave them alone; Foxy, no more than a blur of red through the drift of her hair, the kitchen tiles cold on her back and the heat of him pressed to her bare chest. Foxy was in every thought, every memory, and, cast like a shadow beneath every single one, Bonnie.

“And ye looked at me with those eyes the very first night ye came here,” he murmured, stroking the curved end of his hook carefully along her cheek. “Ye let me see meself the way ye still saw
me, as that dashing, dangerous pirate the girl ye were fluttered at all those years ago, and that was
good, but then ye talked to me and that was better, because ye weren’t talking to a pirate and ye
weren’t asking me to play one for ye. ‘Aren’t ye tired of it?’ ye asked, because ye knew I was. Ye
talked to me and I could just be a man…the man I might have been, if…if I’d been made a man.
That’s all I want from ye, lass. To be yer man. In the dark, aye, if that’s the only way ye’ll have it,
so long as I’m a man in yer arms.”

He switched his eyes off and, in the dark, began to undress her. She did nothing to stop it. When he
pulled her shirt over her head, she raised her arms for him to make it easier.

“Nothing has to change, lass,” he growled, unbuckling her belt. “Sure and don’t every pirate know
 treasure is best when it’s buried? Ye don’t need me and won’t be needed by me and that’s fine. If
 ye’ll only have me as a secret, I’ll help ye keep it. Nobody else has to know and nothing has to
 change.” He picked her up, skinning her out of her jeans with a sweep of his hook and flicking
 them unimportantly away as he carried her to the wall, two short steps, and pinned her there. The
 polished boards were cold against her bare back and he, hot against her chest. “This is all I need.”

“I can’t do this,” she whispered, but that was a lie and worse still was the one she kept locked
 inside. *I can’t do this to him. I can’t. I can’t. But she could.*

*And she did.*
Chapter 32

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The world did not stop turning. The heavens did not fall. The sun kept rising and falling as it had done all the years that eyes had existed to see by its light. Everything was different, but no one else knew, and so nothing changed.

Ana worked for Shelly during the weekdays and on Aunt Easter’s house during the weeknights and Freddy’s on the weekends and that was how the time passed. When she wasn’t working, she played Mario Kart or skee-ball with Chica, watched movies with Bonnie, fucked Foxy, and nodded at Freddy when she passed him in the halls. She may have drank too much—okay, she definitely drank too much, but she wasn’t an alcoholic. When Freddy told her to stop, she could and usually did. She might have lost a little weight during that first week, but she put it back on soon enough. If she lay awake some nights, it was only for an extra hour or two at most, and then she slept just fine. She never tried to kid herself that what she was doing wasn’t wrong, but…she’d never been a good person and she knew she could live with that.

So she did.

August bled away and with the last of the summer heat came the first of the autumn storms. If the weather was at all tolerable, she made the walk up Faust’s long driveway and let herself into his house to look for the Hand Unit. She didn’t find it. Room by room, night after night, she searched, only to leave empty-handed. She did get stupid lucky on one account, though; she was never caught, although as September slouched on, there were more and more nights when she hiked up the long driveway only to find lights on in the great glass house or Chad’s car parked in front.

Time was getting away from her. She finished the kitchen at Aunt Easter’s house and moved on to the sagging front porch before it completely caved in on her. At Freddy’s, she finished Lala’s bathroom and moved on to the kitchen. At her actual job, progress was much slower, but she stayed on target despite Ana losing half her crew seemingly every other shift so that the town could be dressed, undressed and dressed again for Mammon’s never-ending chain of festivals. First it was the End of Summer Craft Fair occupying the entire downtown area (Ana did her civic duty and bought an overpriced quilt, since temperatures had dropped overnight from the high nineties to the mid-sixties and would probably be in the low forties by the end of September), then the Labor Day Celebrations at Jewel Lake (which came to an early end when some drunken jackhat’s BBQ got out of control and set fire to a picnic table), and even the Canyon Days Chili Cook-Off (an early snow swept through town that day, so only a few die-hard celebrants showed up for that one).

Still, Ana managed to keep on schedule and under budget, for all the good it did her. As the job was entering it’s so-called ‘final phase’ (constructing the office and showroom, and how the hell she was going to stretch that out over the four months Shelly wanted to get paid for it, she had no idea), the guy who owned the business dropped face-first into his chicken-fried steak at Gallifrey’s diner during a particularly heated town commissioner’s lunchtime meeting. Ana and her crew happened to be there, drawing out the last minutes of their lunch hour by eavesdropping on all the ways the town’s budget was being frittered away and exchanging speculative glances on just what that might mean to their workload, when the alarm was raised, first with gasps, then concerned voices, and finally a half-hearted scream.

The scream got Ana’s attention at last, and once she’d identified the situation, she was over there,
plucking the old man out of his lunch and wiping gravy off his face so she could see if he was breathing. He wasn’t, and the pupil of the eye that wasn’t full of gravy was full of burst blood vessels. She went through the motions anyway, laying him out on the floor with Tiny Tim’s help and doing chest compressions while he breathed until the ambulance showed up eight minutes later. Ana found out from Hageman that Green was pronounced dead at Mercy General, that he’d probably been dead even before his face hit his plate, and Ana had done nothing wrong. “CPR don’t work like it does in the movies,” he told her, clasping her shoulder while she stood in line waiting to clock out, staring out the window at the equipment shed. “Most of the time, they don’t come back.”

Ana understood that. She knew how death worked. What she didn’t know was whether or not to get the painter out and get it ready to put lines down on that giant parking lot she’d busted her balls repaving. And now, looking into Hageman’s concerned face, she didn’t know if that was even her biggest problem anymore.

She went to Freddy’s that night, frustrated and restless, worked until Boss Bear told her to stop, made herself an uncomfortably large snack with Chica’s enthusiastic help, and retired to the show stage to watch *Aliens* with Bonnie (“We already saw this one, didn’t we?” “That ‘S’ is significant, Bon.”). He could read her moods like no one else on Earth, and it wasn’t long before he causally asked how things had gone at work.

“Saw a guy die,” she replied, watching space marines get tore the fuck up by an alien dick-monster.

The camera on the wall turned toward the sound of her voice and whined, focusing.

“For real?”

“Yeah.”

“At work?”

“At the diner, actually. In the middle of the lunch-time rush. God help the first witty jackass who says it was the food, because Lucy will set fire to her own hand just to punch him in the face with a flaming fist of fury.”

“Friend of yours?” Bonnie asked.

“Naw, never met him. Well, I may have seen him around town,” she amended. “Small town, you know how it is. Everyone knows everyone.” She thought about it, huffed out a laugh and added, “You know him.”

“No doubt. If he’s older than this building, I’ve probably been to at least one of his birthday parties, but that doesn’t mean I know him.”

“I told you about him once, I think.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Eustace Green. The guy who owns the dealership we’re building. The guy who got Big Paulie’s house taken away.”

Bonnie had no eyebrows, but the pins that used to move them shifted inside his head and one forward-folding ear twitched up.
“Yeah,” said Ana. “Small town.”

“Does…Does that mean his house…I mean, obviously he doesn’t get it, but does his family or whoever win it back or what?”

“No. It’s still going to be torn down. So is the dealership, probably,” she added glumly. “No winners, Bon. Everyone loses. And on that note, I expect to get a visit from the sheriff tomorrow. I hear Bisano’s telling people I broke the guy’s ribs doing CPR.”

“Did you?” Bonnie asked after a long minute.

“Probably. CPR is no joke. If you don’t hear a crack, you’re not doing it right. But as for ripping up his lungs or whatever Bisano’s barking on about, no. And if I seriously get splashback over that, I’ll just make it known that if I need to call a lawyer in to defend me against that horseshit, he’s staying for a harassment suit. That’ll shut ‘em up.”

Bonnie nodded, but his ears continued to project his concern.

“I’m fine,” she said and leaned against his shoulder, watching sci-fi carnage unfold in flames through tired eyes. “It was just a sucky day and I don’t know what’s coming next. I can deal with whatever it is, but not knowing is the worst.”

“Can I help?”

She took his hand. “You are,” she said, and she meant it then, but later that night, when she rose from her sleepless bed, it wasn’t Bonnie she went looking for when she stepped inside the prop cupboard, through the Parts Room and into the cabin of the Flying Fox.

“I can’t sleep,” she said, and he didn’t ask why not or what was wrong and for sure not if he could help. He just shut his eyes off and found her in the dark.

Why did she do it? She could as easily ask why she drank too much when she knew she’d have a hangover or why she skipped meals when she got stressed even though she knew her mother was dead and she bought all her own goddamn food anyway. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t good for her, and there’d be hell to pay eventually, but she’d paid before and survived it, so why not add to the tab?

And he made it easy. Hell, if she hadn’t gone to him, he’d have come to get her. More than once, he’d crept out of her closet in the middle of the night, awakened her with a metal hand over her mouth to smother the screams she never made, and carried her out of her safe bed to his cabin. She never fought him. If she fought, he’d win, so why bother?

She had no weapons in this fight anyway. He wasn’t human. He had no stamina to exhaust, no weakness to exploit, no passion of his own to tease out and turn against him. Everything he did was for her, only her, which should have been the very definition of a selfless lover, but he wasn’t. He took. He took everything, everything. Her pride, her strength, her resolve—stripped away with her clothes. What followed was never about love, only about finding her limits and breaking them, just to prove that he could. And the heat was real, yeah, sure it was. Fire, in its purest and most destructive form, filling her, consuming her, and then dying and leaving her empty, like a burned-out building.

But when it was over, she went back to her room and fell almost instantly asleep, and that helped.

In the morning, she got up and went to work, where talk around the coffee pot was that Green’s widow was planning to keep the business running. This cheered everyone for two weeks, after which Shelly opened up the Monday meeting by telling them to stop work and clear out of the job...
Faust had bought the Widow Green out, and it might be weeks, months or even years before he decided to do anything with the property.

And it might. Damn town was full of empty buildings and empty lots where buildings used to be, but while the matter was up in the air, Ana was once again relegated to landscaping, with Wright, now that Jimmy had turned in his papers and flown off to sunny Finland. And there was plenty of landscaping work to do, pulling out all the summer annuals and laying in fall flowers in the vain effort to make the town look like autumn meant more than rain and rotting leaves.

So September passed much the same as August, and a gloomy October began. The dealership stood like a gravestone where the old mall had been, unfinished, unpainted, with chains securing the doors that no one but Ana and her crew had ever passed through. The last hardy flowers died with the first overenthusiastic snow mid-month, followed by a blistering heat wave that lasted one week and ended with another of Mammon’s trademark storms. Smiling scarecrows started popping up on lawns and porches toward the end of the month and pumpkin pie spice began to appear as options for donuts, pancakes, candles and car fresheners soon afterward. There was some speculation in town that the empty dealership would be repurposed as a haunted house Halloween attraction, but Ana doubted it. It hadn’t been wired or plumbed and half the walls were only framed in. The kids would have to go somewhere else for their Halloween spooks, and they did.

Door rattling and young voices outside Freddy’s went from a weekly occurrence to a nightly one, forcing Ana to park at the bottom of Coldslip, just where the trees grew thick and the road leveled out, and walk the rest of the way to Edge of Nowhere rather than leave her truck outside the loading dock as a shining beacon of proof that you could in fact get in if you were just determined enough. She expected every Monday morning to find a ticket for an abandoned vehicle on her windshield, but she guessed Zabrinsky had better things to do these days than drive all the way out to Coldslip on the chance that she was illegally parked.

But the week before Halloween, there was Founder’s Day, and for the first time in God knew how many years, Mr. Faust would not be headlining the parade. Ana heard through Mammon’s grapevine that his grandson, Chad, would be doing his waving for him from the back of the Founder’s float, since Mammon’s Scouts had already done all the work of decorating it. She thought about going to see it, maybe walk alongside the route and stare him down, see if she couldn’t get a reaction out of him for other people to wonder about, but when Saturday morning dawned, it was cold and raining and she was too hungover from Friday night’s drinking to care.

So she went back to sleep and did not wake up again until after the parade had already begun its slow crawl from the Mammon courthouse to the Mammon Pioneer History Museum. She could have gone to see the end of it, maybe hit the food-stalls and see if she couldn’t appease her hangover with a deep-fried candy bar and a corndog, but that was a lot of effort and she had plenty of shit to do here.

She worked until Freddy told her to stop, then drove out to the Lowe’s to pick up more materials for the work she intended to do tomorrow, and since she was already out, kept right on driving until she arrived at the Tranquility Recovery Center to pay Mr. Faust a visit. And as Fate would have it, she got the chance to have that stare-down after all, because who should walk out as Ana was walking in but Chad himself.

He pretended not to see her as they passed, but she saw him sneak a peek back over his shoulder in the tinted glass of the front doors. Smiling, she went on inside.

Faust seemed surprised and pleased to see her, as he always did, even though she had been visiting almost every week. He wasted no time asking after her health, her work and her weekend.
Immediately after this last, he frowned and said, “That was a foolish question. I suppose you were at the festival.”

“Gave it a miss. Last couple of times I showed up at a town thing, Shelly threw an orange vest at me and I ended up dumping trash cans and emptying porta-johns. I have better things to do with my day.”

“Understood. I wouldn’t attend them either, were I not so often an honoree.”

“If you don’t like them, why are you funding them?” Ana asked.

He looked at her, all innocent eyes through his dark lenses. “Whatever do you mean?”

“As you say, you are so often an honoree. Like, way too often. Come on, you know you’re bankrolling these things.”

“Bread and circuses, Miss Stark,” he said with a dismissive wave.

Ana, who had once been far better read than her school record and present circumstances would ever suggest, smiled crookedly and said, “The policy of bread and circuses wasn’t about making the Romans happy, just keeping them distracted and docile so the Emperor could get away with murder.”

“Yes, I know.” But he looked at her with a new interest. “Should I stop then?”

“It’s your money. Do what you want with it.”

“And what would you do,” he pressed, “if it was yours?”

She shrugged, but thought about it—seeing fireworks and rubber duck races and parades through a child’s eyes, feeling all the wonder and excitement of a little girl who had known so few happy days. And thinking about it, she realized that it was mostly kids who went to these things, sometimes with their parents or with their friends or just on their own. Because the town was dying. A lot of Mammon’s moms and dads were dealing with grown-up problems of paying bills with a low-paying job, or no job at all, or even facing the prospect of selling the family home and striking out into the unknown in search of a better life that might never offer itself up. Those were the sorts of problems that kids could sense, hovering low and dark as thunderswells over the family home, even if their parents weren’t, as Ana’s own mother had been, in the habit of letting her problems rain down as fists. Either way, sometimes a kid just wanted to get out and what else were you going to do in a town like Mammon? Go out to the old base and look for snakes? Throw rocks at the quarry? Break into Freddy’s?

Or you could go to the park and see the fireworks, put down a dollar on the rubber duck races and maybe win a prize, eat a deep-fried candy bar, watch the parade, get your face painted like Spiderman or a unicorn or both. Be a kid.

“I’d keep doing it,” she said.

“Would you?”

“Yeah. Hell, there’s worse ways to spend money.”

He seemed darkly amused by that remark. “Are there really? No matter. Better things to do, you said. Such as?”
“Helping a friend in the kitchen.”

“More baking?” he asked with interest.

“Not this time, just a few renovations. No structural stuff, just replaced the walls and ceiling, laid in a new floor, replaced the cabinets, replumbed the sink and put in some new appliances. Oh, and fixed the oven,” she said with a playful scowl. “That was a bitch and a half.”

It was, too. The pizza oven was, like all Fazbear Entertainment products, made with proprietary parts, so it wasn’t as simple as a trip to the hardware store. However, it was just an oven, not an animatronic, so Ana was able to take a trip down the road to a likely-looking scrapyard and repurpose some junk she picked up there. Chica told her not to bother and Ana had already installed a regular stovetop, but having the broken pizza oven slouched in the middle of the damn floor like a dead dinosaur bothered Ana too much to just let it lie. It took two weeks to get it working, but by God, she did, and had even made herself a celebratory pizza to prove it worked just fine.

“Quite an undertaking,” Faust said now, raising her from these thoughts.

“Not really. I could have done it in a week, if the home-owner wasn’t such a hardass about what he considers reasonable working hours.”

“And are you done now?”

“With the kitchen. Now I move on to the library.”

“Take care you don’t overextend yourself.”

“Sheesh, you sound like—like the home-owner. ‘Library’ makes it sound a lot more impressive than it is. Small room, you know the kind: four walls, one door, no windows, big square floor. Shelves are the biggest part of the job and shelves are kind of my thing. I might actually get the whole thing done before the weekend even rolls around, just whistling at it after work.”

“And what of your own home’s renovations?”

“What about them?” she said sourly and laughed. “I don’t give it the time that I should. I just…I don’t know. Making that house mine is a lot harder than I thought it would be. It’s not the work, it’s just finding a good time to do it. Because it’s never a good time,” she said. “Like…I tore up the kitchen last month and the whole time I was doing it, I just felt sick. It was September and everywhere I looked, I saw me and David. Sitting at the table putting our back-to-school bags together, covering our textbooks, putting stickers on our binders, you know? Now it’s gone. That table, the window behind it, the whole room—gone. I’ve got to do the front porch soon, because it leaks and the deck is going soft, but not now, you know? I can’t now. I look at that porch and I don’t even see sagging eaves and rotting boards. Legit all I see is where we used to hang paper bats and cheesecloth ghosts and the steps where we put our jack-o-lanterns. I’m destroying that. Destroying it. What’s next? The dining room where we used to have our Thanksgiving dinner? The front parlor where we used to open Christmas presents? There’s always something, you know. New Years and Valentines…and Easter. There is no good time,” she said again, “but man, I am really dreading Easter. That was our special day, you know?”

“Yes,” he said simply. He offered no sympathy, although he could probably relate, and somehow his quiet, unvarnished acknowledgement was the perfect thing to say.

“Most of the time, I still think I’m doing the right thing. The only thing, if I’m ever going to really
live in that house. But some nights, it feels like I’m not just tearing up the floors there, I’m...tearing up the past. My past. I don’t know,” she said again. “I probably shouldn’t have started with the rooms where I had the most history, but I’ve always been one of those people who wants to rip the bandage off all at once, you know?”

He coughed out a short laugh. “So am I.”

“Yeah? So...does it get any easier?”

“In a sense,” he said. “The bleeding stops. Wounds heal. Yet the scars are always with us, and they do tend to ache on cold nights, especially when we’re alone.” He studied her as she looked out the window, then softly said, “Are you alone?”

There were a thousand things she could have said to that. For some reason, what popped out of her unthinking mouth was, “I don’t know.”

He didn’t seem to find that an odd answer at all, just nodded and frowned out the window.

“I’m okay,” she assured him.

He nodded again, but said, “You are not okay and I rather think that you must be extremely not-okay if even I can tell. It’s in your eyes,” he went on, interrupting her laughing protest, and looked at her, leaning close so that she could see his own, pale behind his dark lenses. He wasn’t wearing his contacts today. “I’ve never been good at reading people, but I’ve seen that look in the mirror too many times to mistake it. Someone you love has hurt you.”

Ana shook her head, wearing a smile like a shield over her heart, thinking, ‘He didn’t hurt me. I hurt him…and he doesn’t even know how bad yet.’

“It’s nothing like that,” she said. “I’m just tired. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.” And knowing he wasn’t buying that, she added, “Maybe you can help.”

“Anything,” he said at once. “What do you need?”

“The situation at work is kind of tense right now,” said Ana. The best lies always began with the truth. “We got nothing on the docket but town maintenance until next summer’s downtown refurb. The dealership was supposed to get us through until then and now it’s just a giant question mark.”

“You would like to know my plans?” he asked uncertainly.

“Oh,” he said, looking pleased at this confirmation of his improving people-reading skills. In the same tone, he went on, “I plan to demolish it.”

It wasn’t exactly a surprise, but it sure wasn’t good news either.

“For real?” Ana asked, knowing full well he wouldn’t have said it if he didn’t mean it.

“Oh yes. I’m only waiting for the right time. It would be insensitive to tear down the man’s life’s work while his widow is here to watch, I think. She knows I’ll buy if she wishes to sell her home, but so far, she has only approached me about her husband’s businesses. Nevertheless, she’s not in good health. Even if she chooses not to leave Mammon, I don’t imagine it will a long wait before she’s gone.”
Ana sighed and rubbed at her face.

He watched her, frowning. “Was that inappropriate?”

“No,” she said sourly, still rubbing. “I mean, yeah, probably, but whatever, she’s not here to get her feelings hurt. It’s just…You do know I’ve been busting my ass to put that thing up, right?”

His face changed slightly behind the glasses. “No, I did not. I thought that job was going up under Mr. Trammel’s supervision.”

“Yeah, well, Big Paulie fucked it over left and right before he had his meltdown and I’ve had it ever since.”

“Meltdown?”

She blinked and looked at him through her fingers. “Dude, you haven’t heard? Oh wait, I forgot. The city took his house, not you.”

“I admit, the distinction is rather blurry,” he said. “To answer your question, I’ve heard only that Mr. Trammel’s estate was seized as scheduled. I assumed that to mean without incident. I’m mistaken, clearly. What happened?”

“He had some kind of psychotic episode a couple months back. Trashed Shelly’s office, got fired, went home and beat his wife, and then she had her own episode and killed him.”

“Good gracious,” he said after a long, expressionless silence.

“Yeah, it kind of shook the whole town for a few days.” As soon as the words were out, she had a strange moment of her own, thinking how unconsciously true that was: It had shaken the town…for a few days. And then nothing more was really said about it until Little Paulie showed up to make arrangements for the bodies. That warranted a little more conversation for an afternoon and since then, nothing.

Most towns probably took more than a few days to get over something like that.

“But I’ve got to be honest,” she went on, hopefully before her awkward pause was too noticeable, “I didn’t like the guy and he really did not like me, so it’s not that I want the dealership as a shrine to his memory or anything. It’s just...you know, it’s my job. I can count on the fingers of one hand—” She held one up, splayed; he looked at it, frowning. “—how many times I didn’t finish a job I started.”

“Mr. Trammel started this one.”

“Yeah, well, all due respect to the dead and all that, but that job was a clusterfuck of deliberate sabotage when I got a hold of it. It took some serious effort to build a castle in that sandbox and now that it’s finally taking shape, you not only want it knocked down, you want me to do it. I mean, it’s your sandbox now,” she said again, grimacing to show him there were no hard feelings, “and it’s a paycheck either way, and I guess that’s what should matter to me.”

“Doesn’t it?”

Ana rolled her shoulders, more a stretch than a shrug. “I’ve had money, I’ve had no money. Of the two, I prefer to have money, so I’ll do the job I’m paid to do and my professional pride can take a back seat. It just sucks, that’s all.”
“I understand your feelings. Do try to understand mine. I have no interest in owning a car dealership, particularly as I happen to know I would have to sell a luxury vehicle every six months to keep it in operation.”

“Well…it doesn’t have to be a dealership, does it? Look, the building’s set up for an office, a couple restrooms and a showroom. You could convert that showroom to literally anything else. It’s the perfect size for a little retail store or a…well, not a coffee shop,” she corrected before she could even suggest it. “Even if I could find enough coffee-drinkers in this town to keep it afloat, Gallifrey’s is right across the lot, selling bottomless cups for eighty cents. What you really want is something like a hobby shop or a toy store.”

“Oh? And why do I want that?”

“To bring the kids in. There’s more kids in town than grown-ups at this point, and they’re all bored as hell.”

“Really? When there are so many parks and playgrounds?”

“Which are great on the six days out of the year when the weather is nice enough to want to be outside,” she countered. “Kids don’t just want a place to go, they want something to do. You could expand out into that giant parking lot and you could have a laser-tag arena or trampoline rooms or, shit, mini-golf. It shouldn’t be too tough to find someone to run that for you, and you might actually make some money instead of losing it for a change.”

He leaned back in the bed, mulling that over. “There has been a distinct increase in hooligans since the mall closed,” he said at last. “An arcade or activity center might help contain some of the abundance of youthful energy that appears to be stagnating in Mammon.”

“You are only the second person in my life I have ever heard use the word ‘hooligan’ non-ironically,” Ana remarked.

He seemed surprised. “Who was the other?”

Freddy Fazbear…but he’d never said it as part of his act. “Some hipster in California,” Ana lied. “Not to change the subject, but your face is looking a little fuller. How are you doing on the diet front?”

“Protein drinks at every meal and butter on every muffin,” he promised her. “I have gained seventeen pounds and received a metaphorical stamp of approval from my nutritionist. I am officially cleared to feed myself when I am released next week.”

“Next week?” Ana tried and probably failed to keep the alarm from showing on her face. “So soon?”

“It’s been quite long enough for me, I assure you,” he said dryly.

“Well, yeah, but…” But I haven’t had found the user interface to your machining room yet. Ana indicated the medical exoskeleton surrounding his leg. “…but you’re still a little non-functional.”

“I’ll have a chair. And a live-in home health care assistant. And Chad will no doubt make his presence felt. He has already expressed grave misgivings over the woman’s physical capabilities and financial motivations.”

“That’s rich, coming from him.”
Mr. Faust grunted one of Freddy’s own I-agree grunts, then slid her a small, sly smile. “He also attempted to warn me away from you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He claims you are mentally unbalanced, manipulative and dangerous to know.”

Ana uttered an affable huff of humor. “Well, he’s not wrong.”

“He also claims you threatened him.”

“Did he take it seriously?”

“It’s difficult to say. I’m not good at reading people, as a rule, and the boy has some considerable talent at hiding his true thoughts. Not as well as some I have known…but well enough to deceive me, upon occasion. However, I think I can say with certainty that he did not think I took it seriously.”

“You should,” Ana said mildly.

“Oh, I believe you can and will do whatever it was you told him. I suppose he mistook my lack of astonishment for skepticism, but you may rest assured, it was not. The boy has lived most of his life without ever being forced to learn that actions have consequences. I think this will be quite an enlightening experience for him.”

“One he’ll remember for the rest of his life,” Ana agreed. “All two minutes of it, if anything else happens to you.”

He coughed up another laugh, nodding once. “I thought it might have been something like that.”

“You upset?” Ana asked, because she honestly couldn’t tell with this man. Even at his most emotive, she never knew what he was thinking. “I know you wanted to handle him yourself.”

“Money was his sole motive. Once he learned how his fortune favored my good health, he was managed. Your further influence was unnecessary, but no, I am not upset with you. It is true, I should be sorry to see the boy unmade by his poor choices, but if you were forced to make good your threat, I would likely be dead and therefore not able to see anything nor feel any particular feelings. You must do what you think is best.”

“You’re awfully cavalier about the prospect of being murdered.”

“Oh, I’ve long ago come to terms with that prospect.” He paused, gazing out the window as a child walked by, holding hands with both his parents and jumping over each crack in the pavement. “I never thought I’d live this long.”

“Don’t say it like that,” said Ana.

He looked back at her with mild surprise. “Like what?”

“Like you’re sorry.” She pointed at him with a sternness that was only half-feigned. “You’re not going anywhere, old man.”

He offered her a small, tired smile. “Never fear, Miss Stark. I’ve miles to go yet. Miles and miles…but the road ends for all of us, no matter how well or how less traveled. I don’t feel that I have time to be coy any longer.”
“That’s good, though, isn’t it? Being coy…that’s just a cute term for lying.”

“You would prefer honesty?” he asked cautiously and, at her nod, followed up with, “Who or what is upsetting you?”

“No one,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “Nothing. I’m not upset.”

He furrowed his. “I see. You would prefer honesty…in other people.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, a little too loudly.

“Something is wrong,” he said. “I see it in your eyes. Ana, please. For all the times I did nothing, let me help you now, if I can.”

She held the mask up for a moment longer, then let it drop. “You can’t. It’s not the sort of thing that anyone can…I mean, seriously, it’s stupid. It’s the stupidest…It’s…”

He touched her hand.

She looked at it forever, then dully said, “You ever…look at the guy you’re with and just…you know he’s the wrong guy, he’s so wrong, but you just…can’t…”

“Yes,” he said simply.

The clock on the wall ticked away the time. She listened to the rain and let her eyes travel the roads and channels of his hand. He did not dispense wise counsel or press her with questions. He just sat with her and silently understood.

“Why am I doing this?” she asked at last. “This doesn’t feel good. Nothing about this is good. I just…I…” She pushed her shoulders up against the enormous weight of the guilt and let them drop again. “What do I do?”

“Evidence would suggest that, to begin with, you should not come to me for advice.” His cool fingers wrapped her hand for a soft squeeze. “However, I shall make an observation. Knowing what one should do is seldom the difficulty in these situations. If you know to ask the question, you know the answer. Yes?”

Ana dropped her eyes even further, from his hand to the floor. She nodded. “I told you it was stupid.”

“I would never say so. Never. Pop songs and sitcoms have trivialized the notion of a broken heart until it has become a joke to those who have never experienced it and an embarrassment to those of us who have, but when it was me…” His thin hand trembled. He released her and moved his hand away. “My heart didn’t break,” he said with a deceptive lack of emotion and expression. “My world did. And what little I’ve managed to rebuild remains cracked and colorless to this day. You will survive this, Ana, I promise you. You will know joy again. You may even know love. But you will never feel either with the same ease and innocence.”

This grim pronouncement settled on her like a hug. She first smiled, then laughed, then impulsively got up and dropped a kiss on his forehead instead of their usual handshake goodbye. “Thanks,” she said.

“You’re very welcome,” he replied, looking faintly confused. “For what?”

“Telling the truth, even if it isn’t pretty.”
“Truth seldom is. I suppose that’s why we tend to avoid it. There is so much ugliness to find in the
world that, oftentimes, our only defense against it is just to stop looking at it.”

“Shit, that should be engraved on the plaque on the Founding Memorial in Mammon.”

“Or on its tombstone,” he agreed, not smiling. “And mine.”
The following Saturday, Halloween, Ana woke up for the second time to find that she’d been tucked into her bed on the Party Room stage. This was somewhere between a trick and a treat, because the first time she’d awakened, she’d been curled up on the bathroom floor with just enough presence of mind to think it probably wasn’t smart to leave just yet before she passed out again. She had a hangover. Not the worst she’d ever had, not even as bad as the one she’d woken up with yesterday, but bad enough that she considered closing her eyes again and trying to sleep just a little more of it off.

She was cursed with practicality. What she needed was to rehydrate, not sleep.

Groaning, she dragged off the sandpapery sheet and leaden blanket she’d been wrapped in and got up. She was still wearing yesterday’s clothes, which would have been rank enough from a full shift under Shelly and another four hours working here at Freddy’s, but the addition of booze and bile made it intolerable even if she was the only one who could smell it. The simple act of changing into clean clothes took all the energy a full night’s sleep had given her and as she sat on the edge of her bed, resting up for the long hike to the kitchen, she realized she still stank. Her hair, her breath, her skin—like the quarry, the stink was not just on and around her, but in her.

It made her feel something, something more than just the headache and sour stomach, but it was such a physical feeling that it took her a moment to pin it down.

This was not how she wanted to live.

“You don’t get what you want,” she reminded herself. “You get what you get.”

‘You are one hundred percent in control of the way you smell,’ her practical brain shot back in Rider’s no-horseshit voice. ‘Get up and get your goddamn act together.’

Ana picked up her day-pack with a loud sigh that no one was there to hear and trudged to Lala’s bathroom to wash up.

The smell hit her as soon as she opened the door, ten times worse than it had been in her bedroom. She could remember passing out practically hugging the damn toilet and apparently that still wasn’t close enough or maybe she’d just been so comfortable on the floor that she couldn’t be bothered to get all the way up on her knees to puke into the bowl. Ana glanced at her reflection in the mirror, seeing disgust even in those bloodshot eyes.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked herself, but she had no good answer. It wasn’t like she’d been upset or depressed or had any kind of a reason to tie one on like that. Her last clear memory of the night before had been a vague sense of pride of accomplishment as she surveyed the dining room. A little sore, sure, and maybe it had started there, to celebrate being able to tick another box on the checklist and numb some of the hurt that accompanied all her best work, but no more than that. Nothing that should have led to this.

She looked at herself in the mirror again, a good long look this time. She didn’t recognize the face looking back at her, not as her own, not even as her mother’s. In fact, she could go out exactly as she looked right now and she was dead sure at least one person she met today would think she was
in costume; it wasn’t politically correct to dress up as a bum anymore, but it wouldn’t take much to pass herself off as a zombie.

‘I can’t keep doing this,’ she thought. ‘I need to stop. Or at least cut back. No more drinking on weeknights, or if I do, just the one and no pills. Unless I need them.’

And so decided, she put her pack down, picked up a towel, got it wet and got to work. After the floor, sink and the freaking wall was wiped off, it was her turn. Her hair took the longest time. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been lying in her own puke before Freddy found her, but it was long enough.

As if the thought had summoned him, when Ana emerged, still braiding her damp hair, Freddy was right there, catching the bathroom door before it could whap him in the face and then glaring at her as he closed it like she’d done it on purpose.

“Morning,” muttered Ana.

“Afternoon,” he corrected. “Twenty minutes after noon, in fact.”

“Aren’t you the one who’s always bitching about how I don’t get enough sleep? And for the love of God, don’t answer that. I cannot take your voice right now.”

“What is that phrase of yours…? Oh yes. That sounds like a you-problem,” he rumbled, moving ahead of her to open the dining room door.

“Oh for the halcyon days of yore when you actually cared whether or not I had a hangover,” she said caustically.

“Oh for the halcyon days of yore when you didn’t have them every morning,” he shot back, then put out an arm and blocked her way, and if the annoyance had not entirely left his voice, at least he lowered it. “Ana, I’m worried about you.”

She did not back off and, although it was a struggle, she didn’t drop her gaze. She stepped up instead, lifting her chin and spreading her arms so he got the full picture. “I told you I was a trash-fire of poor judgment. Did you think I was kidding?”

“I don’t believe that and neither do you. You know this isn’t good for you. You know you can’t keep living like this.”

He wasn’t saying anything she hadn’t just been thinking to herself, and somehow, that made hearing it worse. It was one thing to realize you were a complete waste of a human being; it was something else to know your friends had realized it too.

So instead of accepting his words, which she knew damned well came from a place of concern, or worse, agreeing with them, she just said, “Why not?”

Freddy’s face shifted back into a scowl. “Because you know how that life ends.”

“Oh sure, like it was ever going to end differently. Who the hell do you even think I am? People like me never end in good places, bear.” She ducked under his arm and stalked off to the kitchen, muttering without looking at him, “They end up in places like this with people like you.”

The dining room door closed quietly with Freddy still on the other side of it. Bonnie, watching wide-eyed from the stage where he’d been sitting with his guitar, said, “Wow. Harsh.”
“Sorry,” she said and she was, but she still qualified it with, “He needs to learn not to get on my fucking case first thing after I wake up. And what are you doing in here anyway?”

“Uh, I live here?”

“I mean here,” Ana emphasized, pointing at the floor. “I thought I told you to stay out of here until I said it was okay!”

“Yeah, so the floor could set or whatever. I came in through the Parts Room,” Bonnie said, thumbing at the stage wall behind him. “I haven’t touched the floor.”

“You’re not supposed to go back there!” she said accusingly.

His ears folded forward at stiff right angles, slapping the challenge right back at her, along with a, “No, you’re not supposed to go back there. I repeat, I live here. I can go pretty much anywhere.”

‘He isn’t doing anything and you’re being a dick,’ Ana’s reasonable side warned her.

She knew, but she still stopped and rubbed her foot across the floor as if checking for damage. This had been last night’s project—framing in the dining room into manageable blocks, then mixing five bags of heavy-traffic rubber flooring and filling in the grid she’d made, then scattering the special non-skid texturing flakes, and finally removing the framing lumber so it would level out as it set up. The result was a smooth, hard surface that wouldn’t turn into slippery death the second it got wet and wouldn’t break under an animatronic’s unpadded feet. She had to admit, the room lost a lot of its iconic Fazbear brand without those black-and-white checkerboard tiles. On the other hand, this stuff would never crack and even if someone took a chisel and gouged a chunk out, it could be repaired with a scoop of powder, a cup of water and a pallet knife. As a bonus, the worst any hyper little kid who unexpectedly face-planted could do was split his lip, not his skull. Not that that was ever going to be an issue again, but Ana Stark did not half-ass a job, even if no one knew she was doing it.

“Everything okay?” Bonnie asked. Although his tone was as neutral as a beige carpet and he gave his fake strumming his full attention, his ears betrayed a certain amount of well-deserved annoyance.

Ana shook her head, but not at him. “Yeah. Of course it is. Shit, man, I’m sorry. I woke up on the bitch side of the bed this morning.”

Bonnie’s ears slid out of irritation into empathy. “It’s okay to not be okay all the time. It’s slightly less okay to take it out on other people, but hey, we’ve all done it.” He hesitated, then set his guitar aside. “Freddy’s not mad at you, you know. He sounds like it, but that’s just how he is. He’s——”

“Worried about me. Yeah. I heard. And I got to be honest with you, my man, I am not in the mood to hear it again.”

“I’ll be quick then.”

“Bonnie,” she groaned.

“Look, I know you’re working through some stuff. I’m not even going to say you’re doing it wrong. In fact, I think I can almost guarantee I’d handle whatever it is a hell of a lot worse. And I know it doesn’t help to say I want to help when we both know I can’t. Hell, we’re part of it,” he said glumly. “No, come on, I know we are. Hopefully, we’re not the worst part, but still…My point is, just because I don’t talk about it doesn’t mean I don’t see you struggling——”
“I’m fine.”

“—or that I don’t care,” he said, putting his ears flat like this was a fight they were having, even though his voice remained low and troubled. “It just means I don’t know what to say. But if you ever want to talk, believe me, I want to listen.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” And in a spate of unexpected honesty brought on by the hangover, she added, “Or maybe there is, but I don’t know how and I don’t want to try. What good does talking do anyway? I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want advice, I don’t want to deal with anything that’s going on out there. When I’m here, I just want to be here, is that okay? Be here and just...just fucking fix something. And if it’s hard or I get hurt, then so fucking what? At the end of the day, I can be hurt and tired and still see that something got fixed and it’s getting better, one piece at a time, and that’s something I’ll never have out there—” Her voice had been steadily rising, feeding and fueling her headache. Now it cracked, and now, damn it, she was crying. Why the fuck was she crying? Where was all this coming from? “—no matter how hard I try or how much it hurts, nothing will never get better! This is it. This is it! This is all I fucking get!”

Bonnie started to get up, looked at the floor he’d been told not to step on, and awkwardly clambered to his feet on the stage, where he stood looking helplessly at her, just out of reach.

She started to stumble blindly toward the kitchen, slapping at her eyes to punish them for leaking, but her feet turned her back around and the next thing she knew, Bonnie was lifting her up and into his arms. He held her too tight against the hot plate of his chest, and she gave in to a storm of nearly silent sobs that did absolutely nothing except relieve the pressure of misery that was always building in her these days and make her headache worse.

She had no idea how long she might have stood there, not holding him, but letting him hold her, but the camera came on and its light, even filtered through her eyelids, was just too much. She pulled away and Bonnie let her go without resistance. Maybe he even knew why, because he moved around to stand between her and the piercing spotlight, blocking most of its direct light.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, wiping at her face. “I don’t know where any of that came from. I got to get some coffee in me and try to clear my fucking head so I can get some work done. I need to get the old stage out and at least start to frame the new one in and the day’s half-gone already.” She hesitated, then offered up a half-hearted, “You want to help?”

“Hell, yeah. Let me talk to Freddy and get that stupid rule redacted.”

“Which one?”

“I know, right?” he said dryly. “Specifically, I meant Rule Thirty-Five: No one is allowed in the room where Ana is working.”

“Freddy actually wrote that into your program?”

“Everything Freddy calls a rule is written into our program, no matter how dumb it is.”

“Wow,” Ana said after a moment. “You gotta give the bear respect for his self-restraint, because I would abuse the almighty fuck out of that power if I had it.”

“Same.”

“Can I help too?”

Ana swung around in time to see Chica shuffle into view on the other side of the tray return
window, looking even more embarrassed than Ana herself felt.

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop,” Chica said before Ana could speak. “I was already in here and there didn’t seem like a good time to say anything, so I thought I’d…” Her aimless gesture perfectly summed up the complete nothing that could be done in the situation Ana had unknowingly created for her. “Can I help, though?”

“Um…” How could she put this without hurting her feelings? “It’s not that big a job. Why don’t you sit this one out?”

“I’m not as fragile as you think I am,” Chica protested. “I can at least carry things or run and get you tools when you need them. If you tell me where they are. And what they look like.”

“We’re trying to keep you from moving around as much as possible, remember?”

“For how long?” Chica asked. “My pumps aren’t sore muscles or broken bones. ‘Resting’ isn’t going to help. They could blow out right now, just standing here.”

“I know. Believe me, that thought is never far from my mind. And I know I can’t keep you in bubble wrap all the time, but we both know moving parts fail a lot faster when they’re moving, so please don’t ask me to pretend like that doesn’t matter just because you want to—” Ana managed to stop herself before the words ‘feel useful’ made it out of her mouth, but her lame substitution of “—help,” wasn’t much better. “All I’m saying is, there are things you can do that don’t involve fetching and carrying.”

Chica nodded, tapping her fingertips. “Like what?”

Shit.

“Let me set you up with my tablet,” Ana stalled, doing her best to think fast under some extremely difficult circumstances. “And…And you can use the roombuilder to get estimates on the materials we’ll need to finish the walls and ceiling.” That sounded good. “I’ve got some stuff in the other room, so I’ll need you to figure out what I’ve got and then go over to the Lowe’s website and order anything I don’t have. I’ll show you how.” That was even better. “And maybe pick out some lights and paint and all that stuff so I can pick it up when I go to town.”

Chica visibly brightened. “I can do that!”

“Great. So you and Bon go talk to Freddy about Rule Thirty-Five and we’ll get on it just as soon as I finish waking up.”

Chica waddled off at once and Bonnie followed, giving Ana a silent thumbs-up for her tact as he went. Ana finally made it into the kitchen and got some coffee going, helping herself to a Monster Rehab while she waited. She thought about taking a swallow or two of something stronger, just to take the edge off this godawful headache, but remembered she was cutting back before she turned her stupid self into an alcoholic. She settled for taking a couple ibuprofen instead, sourly congratulating herself for her sobriety. If she made it through the whole day without cheating, she could have a couple beers when she settled in with Bonnie tonight to platonically watch a movie. She did not consciously think of Foxy, who was always free with his rum and not at all platonic, but the thought was there somewhere, rooting itself in the darkest soil of her heart. All she let herself think right now was that she was two hours behind on the day’s schedule and if she was going to get the stage built in the little time she had left, she was going to have to go at it hard.

“At least I got the worst part of my day out of the way early,” she muttered, rubbing at her
throbbing head, completely unaware of just how bad her day was about to get.

* * *

The job of breaking down and removing the old stage took just a few minutes, with Bonnie doing all the demolition and most of the removal while Ana just cleaned up. Beneath the rotting padding and splintered boards, the support structure was surprisingly intact and needed only a few struts and braces to ensure its stability. She had enough lumber on hand to lay in the new deck and as soon as that was done—at a time when she probably would have still been lugging debris around if she’d been going at it alone—she opened a can of surface primer, handed Chica the broom-brush, and took her first break before Freddy could order her to do it.

She had done good work. Not her best ever and she owed too much of it to Bonnie (and Chica, because taking inventory and ordering supplies took a serious chunk of time, and it was more liberating than she would have ever thought to have someone else do it for her whose math Ana could trust), but good enough that she could actually enjoy a cold Monster instead of compulsively double-checking her figures and counting down the minutes until she could get back to work.

“Are we done?” Bonnie asked as Ana shook the last drops of caffeinated sugar from the can into her waiting mouth.

“We’re about halfway there,” she told him. “Why? Getting bored?”

“Are you kidding? I’m actually doing a thing for the first time in I don’t even know how long. I’m having a blast. What comes next?”

She scowled good-naturedly. “Walls. Which I am not pulling down until I get a hazard suit, which I knew last night, which is when I should have done my inventory and gone to Lowes, but then I forgot and didn’t remember until after I’d, uh, had a drink, and I never drink and drive, so I was going to get up extra-early this morning, but we all know how that worked out, so here we are.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my own fault. Anyway, there’s plenty of penny-ante shit I could waste my time with until Boss Bear makes me clock out, but if I want to get some significant work done, I need to go to Lowes. Unfortunately, when you add the time it takes me to hike out to my truck, do the driving, load up in Lowes, do more driving, drop everything off here, stash my truck down the road and walk back, I’m hardly going to have any time to work before Boss Bear makes me clock out. This is why I was supposed to do this shit yesterday,” she said emphatically. “I knew there was a reason and even if I couldn’t remember what it was, I know every goddamn time I procrastinate, it bounces back and hits me in the tits. Maybe I can sweet-talk the bear into letting me have a few extra hours tonight—”

A passing grunt emanated from the East Hall to let her know her chances on that account were slim.

“—just so I can pull the walls down,” she continued, a little louder, “and at least see what I’m going to be dealing with—”

Freddy didn’t even bother to poke his head in and say no, he just boomed a laugh back at her as he continued on his way, unseen.

Ana cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, “—so I can make a plan for rebuilding my
friend’s house before it falls on his fat bear head!”

“Be nice,” said Chica, touching up a thin spot with the primer.

Ana rolled her eyes, but cupped her hands again and yelled, “Freddy!”

Distantly: “What?”

“Sorry I said your head was fat! You have a very handsome head!”

“Apology accepted,” he called.

“Can I—”

“No!”

“So that’s that.” Ana tossed her empty can through the tray return window into the garbage box on the other side. “Well, fuck it, I can at least get the stage done. I can work on the walls a bit at a time over the week and I might be back on schedule by next Friday,” she concluded, unaware that next Friday would find her a hundred miles away, giving absolutely zero fucks about the walls of the pizzeria she’d left untouched.

“What’s left to do on the stage?” Chica asked.

“I’m going to surface it with this stuff.” Ana kicked the heel of her boot against the new rubber floor. “And I picked up some old opera house boxes at the salvage place in Warren. I was going to break them down and use the panels to face the stage-front and the wings there. Thinking I might paint the rest of the walls deep red or something.”

“Won’t that be kind of dark?” Chica asked. “There aren’t any windows in here.”

Ana rolled her shoulders in half a shrug, half a squirm. “I guess I was thinking…you know, kind of class it up a little. Give it a vintage Muppet Show vibe as opposed to this fifties diner checkerboard theme you’ve been living in.”

“You’re going to class it up,” Bonnie echoed, letting his ears slant off at an angle, “like the Muppet Show.”

Ana gave him a teasing slap on the arm before turning back to Chica. “I’m not married to the idea. If you’ve got something else in mind…?”

“I liked the Muppet Show,” Chica said dubiously.

“But you like the checkerboard stuff more,” Ana guessed.

Chica shook her head, looking slowly around the room. “I don’t know if I like it or if I’m just used to it. Every time we moved, no matter what else was different, it always looked like home. Different building, but the same walls and floors…the same stage,” she said, looking at it, then at the brush mop in her hand. “Where we sang all the same songs…and played all the same games…and nothing really changed.”

Ana shifted uncomfortably. “I can always—”

“No,” said Chica and then said it again, decisively. “No. This is different and that’s okay. Things have changed. Things have finally changed.”
The camera, forever watching, swiveled away from Ana to look at Chica.

Chica, no doubt accustomed to living under its mindless scrutiny, didn’t even seem to notice. “And I’ll probably hardly even use the stage anyway. It’s Bonnie you should be asking.”

“Bonnie doesn’t care,” said Bonnie, shrugging with his ears. “You can do whatever you want. Hell, leave it just like it is right now and it’s still better than the one I’ve been using all these years. Although I’m really glad you’re putting this floor stuff on the stage.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. I got to be honest with you, baby, I thought the whole reason you did it like this was because it was easier to mix up a floor-shake and pour it out than glue down fifty thousand individual tiles.”

Ana laughed. “Oh my God, you thought that was easier?”

“Yeah, what the hell do I know?” Bonnie said agreeably. “But even with most of my sensors out, I can tell there’s a difference between this stuff and the old floor. I’d have given my left ear to have had this on the stage when this place was open. Check it out,” he said, stepping away from the wall and into the middle of his *Everybunny Needs Somebunny* dance routine in one almost-seamless movement. “I don’t even have footpads anymore and I’ve got 77% stability.”

It alarmed her how he made that sound like a vast improvement.

“Does that mean you’ve got a 23% chance of falling down?” she asked.

“I’m a glass-half-full kind of bunny. Come on, Chica,” he called, twisting at the waist to extend his arm in her direction. “Let’s show her how it’s done!”

Chica hesitated, her hands flexing on the handle of the brush mop before turning briskly away and slapping more primer on the stage. “She’s seen us do it. She knows how it’s done. And you shouldn’t be playing around on that knee.”

“You really shouldn’t,” Ana said.

“Yeah, yeah. I know what this knee can handle.” He looked back at her curiously. “Do you?”

“Do I what? Know what your knee can handle?”

“Know how it’s done.”


“Well then?” He offered her his hand.

The camera turned its spotlight on him, and Ana, motionless before him with her hands at her sides.

“You could fall,” said Ana.

“*Everybunny needs somebunny,*” sang Bonnie, “*to take them by the hand.*”

“I’m not doing this,” Ana told him, the severity of her words somewhat undermined by the twitching of a smile on her lips.
“Everybunny needs to know that somebunny understands.”

“Nope.”

“No matter how hard it rains, you know the rain is gonna end.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“But the sun is always shining when you’re with your best friend!”

“That is so cheesy.”

“It’s a pizza parlor, what do you expect?” He wiggled his fingers.

Ana looked at them, sighed, and took his hand.

“Everybunny needs somebunny to be the cheese in their fondue,” Bonnie sang, leading her out into the middle of the floor. “Everybunny needs somebunny to be the glitter in their glue. Come on now, sing it with me. I know you know the words. Everybunny needs somebunny to be…?”

“The suds in their shampoo,” Ana said flatly.

“Come on, do it right.”

Ana laughed, sighed, then sang, “The suds in their shampoo!” with extra warbles on the ooo’s.

“That’s my girl,” said Bonnie, dancing from her left side to her right while she stood still, and if he wasn’t quite as light on his feet as he used to be on Aunt Easter’s tapes, he still made it look easy. “And I’m the lucky bunny who has you!”

“I thought you said you were never going to sing any of your old songs again.”

“Just the nursery rhymes and the ones about pizza. I kind of like this one. Don’t just stand there, pick up your feet a little.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Everybody dances,” Bonnie said blithely, lifting her hand in his and kicking out one leg, holding the pose until she reluctantly mimicked it before continuing the dance. “Moms and dads dance their babies to sleep against their shoulders. Toddlers dance before they even know how to walk. Kids dance every chance they get until someone teaches them to be embarrassed. Even after that, they still nod their heads and tap their fingers and their feet. Everybody dances because music is awesome.”

“As good as the cheese in your fondue?”

“Full disclosure, I barely know what that is, but it’s better than the suds in my shampoo, especially when it gets in my ears.”

She laughed.

“There it is,” said Bonnie and this time, when he twirled her around, she put a little spin in it. “Okay, don’t leave me hanging now, this part’s the duet. Everybunny’s got those days when they’re feeling down—”

“—but if you only call on me, you know I’ll come around! And when I’m sad and lonely and crying
—I’ll be there to pick you up and chase away your frown. You gonna let me lift you for the big finish?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so. How about a dip?”

“Uh-uh.”

“You’re no fun. Okay, last verse. *Everybunny needs somebunny who’s helpful, kind and true.*”

“*Everybunny needs somebunny who cheers them up when things are blue.* I feel silly.”

“You look silly, too, but guess what? No one’s watching. So who gives a shit? Sing it out, baby girl.”

Laughing, Ana tipped her head back and sang, “*Everybunny needs somebunny who does all those things you do,*” and Bonnie joined in on the last line with, “And I’m the lucky bunny who has you! Take a bow with me.”

That, she could do and did, both of them bowing in unison into the spotlight. The camera stayed on them until they straightened up, still holding hands and grinning at each other like a couple of kids, and then shut itself off and moved on to another room.

“Tough crowd,” teased Ana, but with the spotlight out of her eyes, she noticed the brush mop leaning up against the wall by the empty stage. Her broad, blushing smile went crooked. “Where’s Chica?”

Bonnie switched his eyes on and looked around, then let go Ana’s hand and went to the kitchen. “Uh, I don’t know. Chica?”

No answer.

Bonnie looked back at her, his ears lowering. “Is she upset?”

Ana looked at the brush mop with primer drying in its fibers. Her heart sank. “Yeah.”

“But why? We weren’t…I mean, we were just having fun! I’ve danced like that with her a thousand times! It doesn’t mean anything! It wasn’t like we were…you know…and me and her aren’t even…It wasn’t like that!” he insisted, but his ears were all the way down his back.

He was right, of course. It hadn’t been ‘like that’. It was just a silly kids’ song, a silly little two-step dance. It hadn’t meant anything.

“Should we look for her?” Bonnie asked after a moment.

“Oh God,” Ana sighed, rubbing at her face. “Yeah, probably. Where does she go when she gets upset?”

“I don’t know. She’s the one who never gets upset.” Bonnie looked around the kitchen some more and came back to the dining room, shaking his head. “The Reading Room is pretty much ‘her’ room. Maybe there?”

They looked at each other.
“Um, I’m pretty sure this is a girl-talk thing,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a best-friends thing.”

“You’re her friend.”

“You’ve known her longer.”

“She likes you.”

“She’s liked you longer.”

“Seriously, Ana, I’m not good at this sort of thing.”

“And you think I am?” she asked incredulously. “Before I came here, the only guy I could call my best friend solved problems by shooting them and I’ve never had ‘girl-talk’ ever in my damn life! Come on, man, you know I’m going to fuck this up.”

“Better you than me, again,” he said, but sighed and trudged away.

As soon as he was gone, Ana made a hasty escape down the East Hall, on the pretense of searching for her friend so she wouldn’t be there to ask to step in if Bonnie’s efforts fell flat. She went to the arcade, which she could honestly say was one of Chica’s known haunts, even if it was the least likely place for her to be if she really was upset.

So naturally, she was there.

Ana couldn’t see her, but the trouble with big, largely empty rooms was that they caught and amplified sounds really, really well. The labored wheezing of Chica’s fan and the slight grinding of her gears as she fidgeted made it impossible not to know she was there, somewhere.

It was hard to hide in this place. It didn’t happen by accident.

Ana tipped her head back, searching the ceiling for answers. She’d never had friends, never learned how to deal with shit like this. She only knew that what she wanted to do—leave now, both of them pretending Ana had not known Chica was there—was probably the wrong thing. She mentally reversed their roles, but her instincts remained unchanged. She was not a good friend.

“You want to be alone?” she asked finally, wincing.

That fan let out an extra-loud wheeze. With a lot of clanking, Chica stepped out from behind the Polybius machine and into view, rubbing at her elbow and avoiding Ana’s eyes. “Not really,” she said. “I don’t know. I just…I don’t know.”

Ana nodded lamely, as Chica’s obvious unhappiness were something to agree with, and turned awkwardly around.

“It used to be me.”

Ana closed her eyes, opened them, and turned back.

“I know,” said Chica, trying to laugh as she stared into the darkest corner of the arcade and rubbed the flocking off her well-worn joint. “I thought I’d made peace with that years ago. I really did. I thought I was fine and then I saw you two together and suddenly, all I could think was…that used to be me.”
“Oh.” Ana wracked her brain for something better to say and could only manage, “Wow. I’m sorry.”

“No!” Chica turned at once, her eyes wide open and impossibly full of pain. “No, don’t be. You looked so happy, both of you, you really did. And I wish…I wish I could be the sort of person who could just…just want you to be happy and not think about myself, but I guess I’m not. I do want you to be happy, I do, but…it used to be me. I’m sorry I keep saying that,” she said, clapping both broken hands to the sides of her beak and shaking her head. “I keep thinking it! It used to be me. It doesn’t even feel like it was that long ago, even though I know it was. Once the doors close, you know, it’s like time doesn’t even…I don’t know…happen. All the years go by when the restaurant is open and they can be,” she interrupted herself with an eye-roll and an unhappy laugh, “so long. So long. But when the doors are closed and the lights are off and it’s all quiet and just the four of us…it’s like it’s the same night over and over. So it was just the other night, you know? When it was me.”

“So…maybe it still could be,” Ana said, cursing internally. She didn’t even know how to manage her own relationships. She had no business dispensing advice to other people. “It’s never too late to start over. He still cares about you.”

“I know and I care about him, too, but…gosh, at times like this, I really regret not having more than a pre-teen vocabulary for the emotional stuff,” Chica remarked, then spread her arms slightly and said, “I love him, but I don’t love-love him. I never did, really. And he didn’t love-love me, either. It was nice, so we tried for a while, but it was never going to be what you have.”

“We don’t have anything anymore,” Ana said at once.

Chica sighed and smiled at her. “Okay,” she said, plainly meaning, ‘Lie to yourself, honey, you ain’t fooling me.’ ‘I’m only trying to say that there’s a reason it’s over. It was never going to work and to tell you the truth, I don’t even think that’s what I want. I just…I miss how we were together, when we were trying. I miss how that felt, when it was me. I suppose I don’t miss ‘us’ as much as I miss…” Chica picked at her feathers. One of them snapped off in her hand. She looked at it with sad eyes. “…me,” she finished softly. “I miss the way I used to be.”

Into the awkward quiet came the sound of Freddy’s heavy footsteps as his endless patrol brought him around through the security office to check the emergency exit and then come into the arcade. He saw them, grunted a distracted greeting, then took a closer look and seemed to realize he’d interrupted something. He halted, ears twitching, obviously wondering whether to keep moving and pretend he hadn’t noticed or turn around and give them privacy.

“Good timing, bear,” Ana called, a bit too heartily. She heard it and wanted to wince. She was the goddamn textbook definition of inscrutable everywhere else in the world but here. What was it about this place and these people that made her suddenly such a lousy liar? “Chica just kicked my ass at skee-ball and you get to play the winner.”

“I’ll advance you the first five hundred points,” Chica offered, toddling over to pick up one of the heavy padded balls.

“Some other time,” Freddy said, lurching back into motion. “It’s Halloween and almost dark. We’re bound to have company tonight. I need to keep mov—”

Something inside him gave out with an unfairly soft, almost playful pop, like bubblegum. His hips dropped abruptly sideways on a steep slant. Before Ana could blink, before he could even finish the word he’d started, Freddy’s entire right leg just seemed to explode. Plastic blew outward, metal screamed and Freddy hit the floor face-first with an almighty crash and the last cheerful honking
sound his hated squeaky nose would ever make.

Ana darted forward, only for Chica to catch her and yank her back, her yellow hand covering most of Ana’s face in the effort to cover her mouth. “Wait,” Chica whispered, her own eyes huge and distressed. “Be quiet and wait.”

“I’m all right,” said Freddy, sounding encouragingly embarrassed. Through the dissipating smoke, she saw him raise his head. Most of his head. His muzzle had smashed apart, although some shards still clung to the now-warped frame. His lower jaw dangled from one spring and even as she watched, that spring snapped and let his jaw fall. His hat had fallen off; he groped for it, put it securely back on his head, and then braced his hands on the ground and tried to stand.

The grinding of gears rose to an ear-piercing whine that ended in a flash of blinding white-blue light, an electric buzzing snap and a huge plume of greasy, pungent smoke.

“Stop!” Ana shouted, slipping out of Chica’s clumsy grip to run to him. “Whatever you’re doing, just stop! Don’t move! Chica, go get Bonnie and Foxy!”

“I can’t find my legs,” Freddy said, attempting to furrow his brows. One of them broke off and fell to the floor amid the pieces of his muzzle. “I can’t see anything through my error log. Everything’s red. I think this may be bad, Ana.”

“And I think I just heard a contender for the Understatement of the Year award. Don’t move,” Ana ordered, kneeling beside him.

“I think I have to. I’m going to try and roll over now and I may need your help.”

“Freddy, no!”

“I have to,” he said again, with static in his voice. “I need you to open my chest and check my battery. I can’t…I can’t lock down my error log and I need to know if my battery is still intact or if…it’s not. Do you understand?”

She was horribly afraid that she did, but this was not the time for assumptions. “Are you dying?” she asked, amazed at how calm she sounded.

“I don’t know yet,” he replied, also calm. “I need you to look. None of the others can open me. It has to be you.”

Freddy lowered himself carefully to rest on his stomach. Reluctantly, Ana picked up one of his heavy legs and lifted it, one over the other, just as he had done that night that he’d tucked her in, thinking she was asleep. With her guidance and a little help from gravity, Freddy rolled onto his side (something in there rattled) and then his back.

She reached for his chest.

He caught her wrist. She could feel a tremor in his bruising grip, but she didn’t know if it was because he was touching her or…or some other instability brought on by the fall…or just fear. “If my battery is broken, don’t bother closing me up. Just let it happen…and let me sleep through it. It’ll be quick.”

Ana’s heart sank and turned from fire to ice. She nodded. “You got anything you want me to say to the others?”

“Too much and I have no time. Just take care of them as long as you can. And when it’s over, you
make certain we are never found, and then—” The naked pins in his shattered face moved around and set with grim determination. “—you need to leave. This town is not safe and will never be safe. Understand? You get in your truck and go as far away as you can from this godforsaken place, and you never ever come back. Do you hear me?”

She nodded again.

He released her, placed his hands carefully palm-down on the tiles and shifted his eyes to stare up at the ceiling. “On the off-chance that my battery is intact, remember to stand well back and keep very quiet and still until I’m fully awake. I can be dangerous when I am rebooting. I don’t want to hurt you. Be quick now, and know that I love you.”

“Love you too, big bear,” she said. There was more she wanted to tell him—apologies and explanations and the sort of perfect heartfelt prose that would work equally well as affirmation of feeling or last words—but there wasn’t time, so that was all she said and then she opened him.

He went dark immediately, sleeping. Ana picked some of his keepsakes out of his chest cavity until she had exposed the glass case protecting his heart. The ambient light in the arcade wasn’t the best and at first, she thought the glint of a reflected recessed bulb was a crack, but after that heart-stopping mistake, she was left with a clear view of his undamaged battery, delicate gears spinning in perfect synchrony.

Some of the tightness in her own chest eased, enough to let her examine his other internal systems. Cooling fan and heat sink seemed to be working. Spine looked good. Pelvic girdle was not. Half a dozen cracks radiated from both hip sockets, leaking smoke in thin wisps. His right femur had broken loose and the left had warped. She carefully unplugged it and probed into the hollow bone. Her finger came away smudged with black residue. The microcircuitry imbedded in his endoskeleton had fried. Even if it hadn’t, his right femur had split open from the ball clear down to the mounting bracket where the pneumatic pump that had operated the flexion of his knee had been. ‘Had’ being the keyword. It was in pieces now.

Ana let her physical eyes unfocus, looking at the damage with her other-vision, watching the pump collapse, bringing all Freddy’s weight down on the knee, splitting the shock-absorber there and ejecting the knee-cap so that Freddy’s weight fell again, rupturing his shin-pump and then his ankle, snapping the ball out of the socket of his hip, twisting the pelvic girdle, creating a chain-reaction of physical collapse and electrical overload, culminating in the surge that had burned out his circuits, and now here he lay, completely dead from the waist down.

But his battery was intact. So he was alive.

She could hear Foxy’s feet running up the hall as she closed Freddy up and scooted back out of swinging range. He shuddered to life, speaker blatting out a metallic shriek of sound wrapped around a distorted, stuttering, “Father, where are you?” and then his huge fist swung, smashing right through the base of the Midnight Motorist game.

Foxy’s metal hand closed over Ana’s arm, yanking her back and behind him just as Freddy opened his eyes, but Freddy’s eyes were blue and his own.

“It’s okay,” said Ana, crawling back to sit beside him. “You’re okay, big bear. Battery’s good. Not even a crack on the case.”

“Oh thank God.” He paused, his eyes flicking back and forth as if reading. His exposed muzzle-pins shifting, trying to frown without a face. “I still can’t find my legs.”
“Your pelvis took a lot of sudden stress and I’m guessing your system burned out everything below your waist as a kind of fail-safe, so...so you can’t find your legs because they’re not part of you anymore.”

His eyes stopped ‘reading’. He looked at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Your walking days are done.”

Freddy lay very quiet as his cooling system gasped and wheezed in regular cycles. “I really didn’t think it would be me,” he said at last. “First, I mean.”

“Ye ain’t dead yet,” Foxy told him, then moved out of the doorway as Bonnie limped in. “She’ll rig ye up somehow.”

“Holy shit,” Bonnie breathed, huge-eyed, staring at Freddy on the floor.

“Can the two of you get him up?” Ana asked. “Don’t try to grab him by the legs, they’re hanging from the proverbial thread. I need you to make a fireman’s cradle, that’s your right arm and your left behind his back, and use your free hands to get under his ass—sorry, big bear,” she said in answer to his wordless grumble. “Your dignity is kind of a secondary priority to me tonight.”

“Understood,” Freddy said, getting a grip on Foxy’s and Bonnie’s shoulders as they lifted him between them. His right leg stayed on the floor. His left leg dangled awkwardly out of its socket for a moment before separating entirely and dropping with a thump across the pieces of his face. Staring at it, Freddy stoically said, “There are bigger problems to think about now.”

They carried him away while Ana stood, trying to think through the numbness that wanted to seize her brain now that the initial shock of the moment was fading, but there wasn’t that much to think about. Her options had always been limited and now she no longer had the luxury of time to wait for a better one. When Chica appeared tentatively in the doorway, she had her plan.

“I need your help,” Ana said.

Chica nodded, her shoulders slumping, no doubt expecting that her ‘help’ was intended mainly to keep her out of the way.

“Meet me in the kitchen,” ordered Ana and went to her room to get her daypack and keys. She reached the kitchen at about the same time as Chica, and went directly to her cupboard to have a good look at what she had left in her stash. She took one dusty tablet from the bottle with the eggplant sticker and one from the bottle from with the grapes. After some thought and not without some misgivings, she added one from the bottle with the carrot.

“What are you doing?” Chica asked with obvious unease.

“I’m going to get my truck. I need you to make me two cakes and put these—” Ana showed Chica the three pills and put them on the counter next to the Easy Bake oven. “—in one of them. And make sure you know which one’s got the buttons and which one doesn’t. Like, make them both nice, but maybe smoosh the clean one so I have an excuse to offer the dirty one, got it?”

Chica began slowly to gather her baking things. “What is it going to do?”

“Nothing serious,” Ana told her, once more rummaging through the cupboard. “It’s just going to make him really relaxed and fuck with his head a little bit. Then he’ll take a nice long nap and when he wakes up, he won’t even remember what he told me. He may know something happened, but he won’t even question it.” Ana shook out a joint from the big vitamin bottle and tucked it
grimly into the front pocket of her daypack. “He’ll just blame it on the pot. Can you do that?”

Chica nodded and wordlessly tore open a packet of cake mix.

“It’s not going to hurt him,” Ana promised, telling herself as much as Chica. “I’d never hurt the guy. This is the only way to get a straight answer out of him without him wondering why I asked, that’s all. It won’t hurt him, I swear.”

“That’s okay, Ana,” Chica said, giving each tiny pan a spritz of nonstick oil. “If it helps Freddy, I don’t really mind if it hurts him. I try to be a good person as much as I can, but you know…” She shrugged, sweeping the pills off the counter into the mixing bowl and beginning to crush them together with the back of a spoon. “…everyone has a limit.”
Chica had the cakes ready when Ana returned to the pizzeria with her truck and she wasted no more time, not even to change her clothes. A little sawdust and primer wasn’t infectious and was a perfectly normal thing for someone to be wearing on a weekend. She drove to St. George, careful not to let her nerves push on the pedal, because the only thing that could make this day any worse was a speeding ticket.

This was a naïve thought. Things could, and would, get so much worse.

She’d forgotten it was Halloween until she arrived at the Tranquility Recovery Center, where garlands of fake autumn leaves dusted with black and gold glitter ran along the walls and cotton webs full of friendly spiders hung in every ceiling corner. The reception desk had been trimmed with decorative gourds and a bowl filled with brand-name candy, spooky stickers and glowsticks. Kids in costumes chased each other up and down the halls. The cafeteria had ‘yummy mummies’ and ‘bat wings’ on the menu. The casual bongo elevator music had been traded out for the Monster Mash and the car itself decorated with a friendly Dr. Frankenstein tightening the bolts on his smiling monster’s neck.

Faust was not expecting to see her, but seemed pleased and agreed without hesitation to her suggestion of a walk around the landscaped gardens as the autumn sun set. She walked, anyway. An orderly brought him a chair rigged up for his leg and helped him into it. She supposed that must hurt, although he didn’t show it. Even when he’d been lying broken at the bottom of the stairs, he’d shown only the most peripheral signs of strain, but she shouldn’t kid herself. His face was pale and there were beads of sweat on his brow in this cool room; he smiled and his tone as he chatted with her in the elevator was pleasant, but he was hurting.

She was hurting him.

If she was a little too quiet as she wheeled him around, he didn’t comment on it. He asked her what she was working on at home and she lied to him about the long-completed renovations to Aunt Easter’s kitchen, keeping the conversation rolling while she scanned their surroundings for a particular object and at last, on the southern side of the building, she found it.

An ashcan, accompanied by a bench and a noticeboard politely informing readers to extinguish cigarettes fully and dispose of butts properly, and not to smoke at all if they were on or around oxygen devices.

“You mind?” Ana asked, pulling out the joint and her Zippo.

“Not at all.”

She parked him next to the bench and sat down beside him, lit up, and passed the love.

He accepted it without hesitation, coughing out the first drag but holding the next for a few easy seconds before sighing it out. “That takes me back,” he remarked.

“It’s a little stale,” she apologized, pretending to take a hit. “I brought way more than I thought I’d need, just in case I stayed longer than I was planning. And now here I am, looking at the last of it.
Hope it’s not too harsh for you.” She passed it again.

“The youth of today have no idea what ‘harsh’ is. I grew up with army-issue leaf. Strong stuff, but like smoking with a scouring pad.”

“You actually smoked it on the base?”

“Dear child, we grew it on the base. An entire department was dedicated to the cultivation of various strains, in search of a product that would render its user relaxed and suggestible without sedating him.”

“Seriously?”

“We called it Project Ground Support, not to be confused with Project Booster Shot, which was heroin.”

They talked about his time on the base, the various highly classified projects he had been involved with, and on any other occasion, it would have been a good time. She let him smoke, believing they were sharing the joint just as he believed she was here for a friendly visit, and eventually he said the magic words: “I do believe I’ve discovered an appetite. Shall we see what the cafeteria has available?”

Ana unzipped her daypack and brought out a small plastic tub with two Easy Bake cakes inside, both expertly decorated, one artfully smooshed. “Whoops,” she said, feigning apologetic surprise. “Looks like I banged it around some. Here. You can have the good one.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind, although I don’t suppose you want to hear that right now.”

Ana froze in the act of picking up her own crumpled cake. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m a bit blitzed.” He ate like a stoner, three big bites and questing fingers to catch the crumbs. Ana offered him her cake after one token, tasteless bite, and he made that disappear too, then sat with a syrupy smile pouring itself slowly across his face as he gazed off into the colorful sky.

She talked—about the weather, about her job, how was his physical therapy going and what was he looking forward to the most about finally going home—but mostly she listened. Not to what he said as much as how he said it. In a very short time, he began to ramble, repeat himself, trail off and fade out.

“So,” said Ana. “I was thinking about Freddy’s.”

He roused from staring contemplation of the blue mist shrub in the bed on his left and tried to focus on her, but could not seem to muster more than a vague curiosity…which for him, didn’t necessarily mean much. “Oh? To what…to what…Why?”

“I was just thinking…whatever else they are, they’re machines, right?”

“Yes,” he said after a long, foggy moment. “Machines. Unliving…undying…machines.”

“And if they’re doing something…wrong…then they can be fixed, right?”

“Yes,” he said and then frowned and said, “No. No, it’s not…not a fault in their code. It’s a deliberate…deliberateness. You don’t understand. Monsters…Monsters don’t just die.”
“But machines,” Ana said, gently steering him back on track, “can be reprogrammed.” With the same device that could activate the Press.

But Faust was already shaking his head. “I can’t. I never could. Erik…Erik made the programs. We…We play to our strengths, he said…he said we were greater together…than the sum of our parts. And I was, you know. I was so much greater…when I was with him.”

“But they are just programs. And there are other programmers. Yes,” she said as he began to shake his head. “Erik was the kind of computer genius that comes along once in a lifetime, sure he was, but that lifetime is over and computers have moved on. There could be a hundred guys now who can do what he did. Thousands. In another ten years, they’ll be teaching it to eight year-olds. How do we reprogram them?”

He wasn’t getting it, but at least he seemed to be trying to think. Ana took him by the hand and led him a little closer.

“Is there some kind of device,” she stressed, “that would let us reprogram them?”

“Oh that,” he said, brow furrowed. “Yes. No.”

Ana sighed, rubbing in frustration at her temples. “Sir, which is it? Yes or no?”

“Yes, there is. I don’t have it anymore.”

So there it was, confirmation of the pessimistic whisper that had been slithering through her heart since her first invasion of his house. It hit hard, but was more of a slap in the face than a kick to the nuts. Holding on to the last sliver of hope, she asked, “Where is it?”

“It fell,” he said, rubbing behind his glasses at his bleary eyes. “Into…the wrong hands. I had to…let it go…leave it…where it fell. It can do no more harm there…no more harm.”

She wasn’t sure what that meant, but it sounded like either the military had collected it or he thought they might with enough certainty that he himself chucked it in the quarry.

Without much hope, she asked, “Can you make another one?”

“I doubt it. Even if I had the heart, I’ve lost my eyes, my hands…I’m not what I once was.”

“Do you still have the plans or—”

“For the Hand Unit?” he interrupted, as if the very idea were ludicrous. “No. No, it was developed for the Thor’s Hammer project. The military kept the plans and the prototype I made for them. I made mine from memory and if they knew I had done that…but that was fifty years ago. I don’t remember now. I couldn’t begin to…no.”

His denial had restored him to a certain degree of lucidity. Ana allowed it to wane before she tried again, one last hail-Mary so she could say she’d tried everything: “Mr. Faust, is there any way to reprogram those animatronics or manufacture new parts for them without the Hand Unit?”

“None,” he said with sleepy pride. “If I cannot kill the monsters, I can at least hobble them. I shall erase Mammon from around them and when I am gone, their last lairs will collapse atop them and become their tombs. They may crawl out…monsters tend not to die…but he cannot rebuild what I have unmade. Their bodies will break away, piece by piece, and the desert will bury them where they lie. They will never harm another living person again.”
This time, it didn’t even slap her. She merely nodded and when he groped for her hand, she took his and held it warm in her own.

He watched the cold October sun set, and when it was down, he was sleeping. She took him back inside, helped the nurses return him to his bed, and left.

She sat in the parking lot for several minutes, gripping the steering wheel in both hands with the engine off, until she had swallowed every last bitter drop of the truth: The manufactory in Faust’s basement was never going to work again. The only parts available for his animatronics were the ones he’d already made. Okay, so…where were they?

There were none at the Old Quarry pizzeria. As for Circle Drive, whatever trespassers hadn’t looted, Uncle Chuck had stolen to use for his macabre funhouse. He’d even managed to get into the secret room where Springtrap Bonnie had been sealed off, and if there had been any spare parts sealed up with it, they had been removed as part of the criminal investigation after the Fazfright Attraction burned down with Uncle Chuck and his three sons inside. The Parts and Services room at Mulholland Drive was also picked clean to its proverbial bones; she’d seen that for herself when Mike Schmidt took her on his midnight tour of the Fazbear Entertainment Empire. There was nothing left in there but some rusting industrial shelves bolted to the walls and a work table too cumbersome to be moved or smashed apart. So what did that leave?

High Street. The flagship of Faust’s pizzeria fleet. The one he’d built like a military bunker, complete with solid steel shutters over the windows and doors. Mike Schmidt claimed they weighed a thousand pounds and maybe they did. Even Uncle Chuck hadn’t been able to get through them. Which meant that whatever had not been removed prior to its closing was still in there, undisturbed.

Ana started the truck and drove.

Back to Freddy’s first, to pick up her ‘keys’ to the long-locked doors of High Street’s pizzeria. Not unexpectedly, Chica was waiting for her, all anxious eyes and tapping fingers. She asked no questions, but she deserved an answer, even if Ana didn’t have time to give her one.

“Plan B,” was all Ana said, gathering her tools and throwing them into the back of the truck. “I’ll be back.”

She left Chica on the loading dock and sped away, from Cawthon to Main Street, through town and off on ‘scenic’ Sidewinder Boulevard, then north on High Street, where she drove three miles seemingly out of 2015 and into a post-apocalyptic future that knew no human life and certainly no road maintenance. Years of Mammon’s weathering had completely erased the lane lines and broken up the asphalt. She only knew where the road was at all by the clumps of tough grass growing in the potholes and the crooked metal posts that were the skeletal remains of signposts. At the end of this dubious path stood a single building, stained almost black by time and neglect, sharing an overgrown parking lot with a few young Joshua trees and clumps of dead grass.

Ana wasted no time. Her prybar took care of the boards that had been nailed up over the front doors. Her bolt-cutters took care of the chain keeping those together. Behind them was the real door—a slab of steel, rust like mold growing through its military gray paint, dull in the moonlight.

Attempts had been made to get through this tantalizing barricade in the past. The door’s face bore the scars of countless cherry-bombs, makeshift battering rams and at least one blowtorch inadequate to the cause, and it was still standing. But it had never had to face a freestanding pneumatic manipulator arm.
Ana pulled it out of the pickup and planted it firmly on the threshold. It powered up with the push of a button, humming under her hand, although the touch-screen monitor stayed dark until it completed its initialization process. Then it lit, sort of. Still a dark screen with no icons or tiles, only white lettering in ugly Courier font informing her of the device’s operational indicators. The battery was fully charged. Structure, stability and sensory feedback were all at 100%. It told her in one blinking word that it was READY.

When Ana gave the screen a tap, all this information vanished, apart from a segmented battery icon in the upper left corner to keep her apprised of the power situation, allowing her to select an operations mode. Not from a list, oh no, that was would be too easy and efficient. She had to cycle through the options one by one, and as each new option came up, the arm’s head changed—dozens of parts opening, realigning, and setting again in a wondrous display of mechanical grace. The first time she’d seen it, she’d cycled through the four options until the battery ran dry, fascinated by its precision; now, the eight seconds it took to finesse a hundred delicate variations was too damn long, and the one she knew she needed was the last of four, because of course it was.

First option: Scoop. The arm’s head spun open and slowly shut in the form of a narrow, deep wedge, something like a cereal box cut in half diagonally. Ana could not imagine what work this shape was possibly best suited to do and the screen was no help at all, telling her only that no target could be identified.

After that came the Extraction mode, when the head transformed itself into a tapered cylinder sort of like a long funnel or a terrifyingly huge hypodermic needle. Again, Ana had no idea what that was about, but presumably it had something to do with extracting materials used in creating the unique alloy that the animatronics were made of. The screen only told her the storage capacity was at a blinking red 0%, with no canister loaded and no target found.

With another tap, the head opened like a spiny alien flower for Transfer mode. From the name alone, Ana would guess this mod had something to do with loading or transporting, except that the head’s delicate configuration made that logical assumption seem damned unlikely. The screen offered a few clues in the form of three indicators, blinking red and unready: Master, not connected; Slave, not found; Canister, not loaded. Ominous words, but Ana knew Master and Slave were programming terms for operating systems, so she was probably looking at the world’s first wireless uploader—a device predating public introduction of wireless internet by thirty or forty years.

Little Freddy Faust, man. What do you do when present-day reel-to-reel computer systems don’t have the memory or the processing power to do what you want? Do you talk to the military about updating their systems? No, too much red tape, too many restrictions and distractions, and you’d only be put in charge of the project, which would take you away from what you really want to do. Intolerable. Instead, you invent wifi, because to little Freddy Faust, that was easier than dealing with the chain of command and the frustrating delays that came with it.

She caught herself smiling, reminded herself that she’d roofied the man to interrogate him and as such, forfeited her right to call herself his friend or have small, warmhearted smiles at his expense. She put her head back in the game, toggled over into Work mode. As the arm’s head assumed its final utilitarian form, Ana brought up the Manual interface and took the metaphorical wheel.

The controls took a lot of getting used to—the touch-screen was not a large one and she didn’t have enough fingers to manage all the sliders and virtual dials necessary to direct the machine with precision—but the renovations at Freddy’s gave her plenty of opportunities to familiarize herself with them, and she felt confident enough as she manipulated the head into something that could first scrape away the years of accumulated debris around the base of the door, then chip out the
crumbling threshold. With that done, she made the head into a wide, flat fork and wedged it into the space she’d made under the door. She dialed up the force, increased the tension, and lifted.

Old steel groaned. Old masonry cracked. Somewhere inside the walls, a long-bound cable snapped and a heavy pulley fell from its moorings.

Ana increased the tension, her mind leaping ahead past the inevitable defeat of this obstacle to the next step and the next. Find the Parts and Services room. If there were no parts, don’t panic, just find the basement. The Parts room was more for cosmetic repairs; if an animatronic fell and cracked a casing or a kid pulled an ear off, this was where they came to be patched up so they could be back on the floor before the next set started. The basement was where the good stuff was kept, the stuff no ordinary employee was allowed to see or even know about.

The door stuttered up an inch, two inches, six, before catching on something and going no further. Ana’s fingertips brushed at the virtual dial, keeping one eye on the resistance gauge and one on the empty road behind her, teasing a little more pressure into the arm…a little more…until with a sudden hawk-like scream, the door surrendered and slammed open.

She smelled it before she saw it. In retrospect, she had been smelling it since she had first climbed out of the truck, but she’d given it no thought. The smell of the quarry permeated every inch of Mammon—sometimes strong and sometimes faint, but ever-present, reeking of stagnant water and the slimy vegetation that either learns to drink it or dies trying. Even here, miles away, that stink was as strong as if she stood at the very lip of the quarry itself.

In a way, she did.

At some point in the last forty years, the roof had caved in. And at some point after that, the floor had collapsed. The very first Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria had become nothing but four walls around a pit filled with ceiling beams, rotten plaster, broken tables and pizza boxes. Decades of weathering had fused it together into a kind of garbage island growing out of a black ocean of storm run-off. Seeds carried in birdshit had sprouted here and there, creating little forests of weeds and scrub and even a few hardy little trees, their trunks like so many Js, seeking the light above their prison walls while their roots knotted around rebar and rusted lighting fixtures to the ground. She was no less sure that animatronic parts existed somewhere at the bottom of that mess, but there was no getting to them and no hope in hell that they’d be functional even if she could.

* * *

It had been a long time since the last time Ana had felt so perfectly helpless. Her life was an uncertain one and she was comfortable in that uncertainty. She had plans in place for what to do when things were out of her control and they had always worked for her. Not now. Now, for the first time in memory, perhaps for the first time ever, there was nothing she could do except swallow the fact that things were not going to get better and were bound to get worse.

She didn’t know what else to do except pack up and go back to Freddy’s, so that was what she did. Chica was still waiting, and although one look at Ana must have telegraphed everything there was to say, Chica simply nodded and said, “What’s Plan C?”

“I don’t know,” said Ana, trudging on through the kitchen without stopping.

She wandered through the pizzeria’s halls in the hopes that activity would generate some sliver of an idea, but all it did was remind her how big the building was and how empty. She sat for a while
in the security office, away from the cameras, which only emphasized Freddy’s absence from his regular patrols. She went to her room, first pacing on the stage, then sitting on her bed, and finally putting herself in the wardrobe. She did not go through it and into the Parts Room, but just sat with her knees up and her shoulders pinched in the tight space, breathing in the smothering darkness, like the child she used to be, locked away and powerless, waiting for someone else to release her.

No one came.

At length, she went to see Freddy. She told herself he might have some plan of his own. He was and had always been indisputably the leader of the band. If anyone knew what to do in the worst situation, it was him. And if it really was hopeless, he could tell her that and maybe that would make it real.

The other three were in the dining room, close together, but not talking, at least not when Ana came in. She shook her head when Bonnie moved to make room for her in their small circle, glanced at the empty stage, and said, “Where is he?”

Bonnie exchanged a troubled glance with the others before answering, “In the gym, but he said he wanted to be alone.”

“Did he mean it?”

“The man said leave him alone, leave him alone,” said Foxy with a shrug.

Bonnie reluctantly nodded. “He’s not, um…not really a talker even at the best of times.”

Chica said, “No one should deal with something like this alone.”

“You all know who I’m going to listen to, right?” said Ana and started walking again.

During the day, the gym’s only source of light was whatever the sun could push through the thick panels of glass that made up the south and west walls. Once there had been some mood lighting disguised as icicles overhanging the yeti caves or dangling vines over the monkey pyramid, but Ana had removed those along with the rest of the gym’s playthings. Now, after dark, the only light came from the security camera mounted over the door and the only thing it showed her was Freddy himself, slumped in the far corner where he could watch the road, although he wasn’t at the moment. He just sat there beside his legs, head down, showing her nothing but his broad, cracked back.

The door had made some noise when she’d opened it, but he hadn’t moved. Now, as she stood awkwardly in the doorway, his ears twitched and he looked around, right at her, more or less forcing her to raise one hand in a weak wave. “Hey,” she said.

Ana wasn’t sure what was keeping the camera fixed on Freddy, he sat so still and quiet, but it immediately reacted to the sound of her voice. It couldn’t angle itself down enough to ‘see’ her, but it tried.

Freddy grunted a greeting, eyeing the camera’s struggles briefly before he turned his gaze back on the floor in front of him. Servos whined as his arm moved. She heard a distinctive flicking sound, that of a playing card being set down. “Is there another reason for your long face, or it is me?”

“I just wanted to see how you were holding together,” she said without thinking, and immediately felt herself blanch.

He chuckled and set down another card. “Not very well, I’m afraid.”
“Sorry. I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“I know. It’s all right, Ana. Believe it or not, I find that I actually have something of a sense of humor about this whole situation. The worst has finally happened…well, not the very worst, but the worst thing that can happen to me, personally, and I find that I feel…I’m not sure. I’m almost…”

“Relieved,” said Ana and came a few steps closer, letting the door groan softly shut behind her. “You don’t have to wait for it anymore. Waiting is always worse than whatever ‘it’ is.”

“Spoken like someone who knows.”

“I’ve had my ‘it’ moments.”

“I’m sure you have, but as you told me once, it’ll be okay in the end. If it’s not okay”— He put another card down, then leaned back to rub what was left of his muzzle and contemplate his next move. “—it’s not the end,” he murmured.

Ana moved to get a better look. It wasn’t any kind of solitaire she recognized. The cards were spread out in three uneven rows, or maybe a rough kind of circle, but there didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to how the game was played.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He glanced at her, then scooped up the cards and tapped them together. “Keeping watch,” he said, indicating the window beside him as he shuffled the deck one-handed. “It’s still Halloween, which seems strange to me. Have you ever had one of those nights that just feels…long? Far too long.”

Thinking of Mike Schmidt and his show-and-tell tour of Mammon, Ana huffed out a laugh. “Yeah. I’ve had a few.”

“And what do you do to make time pass?”

Ana raised both arms in an expansive shrug. “I usually fall back on the three Ms.”

His next grunt had more humor in it. “Unfortunately, I lack the capacity for one, the apparatus for the other, and while I appear to have ‘broken machine’ covered, I’ve no talent for fixing them.”

“I shouldn’t be anyone’s role model anyway.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.” He shuffled the deck once more—cards breaking, fanning and folding effortlessly together again—and tucked them away inside his wrist compartment. “Come. Sit with me.”

The camera whined as it tracked her, throwing her shadow huge across the windows, growing smaller as she neared him. She sat beside him, careful not to touch him or his legs, and looked out where she knew the road to be, although the camera’s light behind them turned the glass from a window into a black mirror. “I hope your eyes are better than mine,” she remarked, booping her reflection on the nose. “All I see is us.”

“They aren’t, but we’ll be able to see headlights, if there are any.” He was quiet a moment, scanning the place where the road presumably lay, then said, “I saw your truck leave some time ago. And come back. And leave again.”

“And come back again,” Ana sighed. “Yeah.”
“Some time ago,” he repeated. “And as you did not come rushing in flushed with victory, I can only assume whatever you had planned—”

“Didn’t pan out,” she finished for him. “Sorry.”

He grunted, nodding, impassive. “Thank you for trying.”

“No. Don’t. I didn’t do anything anybody should thank me for. Even if it had worked.”

He nodded again and asked no questions.

They stared at themselves in the dark window glass. A girl and her teddy bear. Or, given the difference in their respective sizes, a bear and his teddy girl. Neither moved, neither spoke, and yet the camera stayed right on them, minute by slow heavy minute.

“I’m sorry,” Ana said suddenly.

“You did all you could, more than anyone could ask of you.”

“Not for that. I’m sorry for what I said this morning.”

He grunted, then glanced at her with the faintest hint of good-humored reproach and said, “Afternoon.”

“Yeah. Afternoon. Because I slept all morning and was still hungover and…that’s no excuse to snap at you like that. I…hate the thought that those could have been my last words to you.”

“They weren’t.”

“But they could have been!” she insisted. “And it’s not true, you know. People like me…we don’t end up with people like you. We end up in meth dens and back alleys and street corners—”

“Ana, hush.”

“—but we don’t end up with people like you,” she said stubbornly. “I don’t deserve you. I have done nothing in my life to deserve you. People like me don’t get friends. We get drinking buddies and drug dealers and pimps and tricks and probation officers, and the rest of the time, we live alone. So no one can see the mess we’ve made…the mess I’ve made of my life.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“You don’t know me,” she said, shaking her head. “You have no idea the things I’ve done. I don’t deserve you.”

The camera whined, a small sound made huge in the echoing, empty gym. They both glanced back at it, then went back to looking at the window.

“And you don’t deserve me,” she went on. “But not in the good way.”

“That’s enough,” he said, gently but firmly.

“You took me into your home and made me welcome and you never asked me for anything in return. You’re a good man, Freddy.”

He grunted, facing into the dark glass. “I can think of two things wrong with that statement, but thank you all the same.”
“I don’t know why I pick so many fights with you. I don’t mean to be such a huge bitch all the time.”

“Families fight sometimes,” he said simply. “It doesn’t mean we don’t love each other. Those would have been your last words to me,” he reminded her, indicating his chest, “if things had gone badly in the fall. And what would have been doesn’t matter anyhow. I don’t believe in dwelling on the past. I believe in looking forward.”

“Believe whatever you want, bear, but I’m the one who’s got to make it happen, so you’ll excuse me if I don’t share your optimism.” At his gently censuring glance, she added, “I haven’t given up, I swear I haven’t, but… I don’t know what else to do. And I don’t want to stir up more bad memories for you, but if you can think of anything, any place I haven’t looked, any possible lead, please, Freddy, you have got to tell me!”

Freddy looked at his leg, then down at the broken nub of his pelvis where it peeked through the shattered plastic that used to be his hip casing. “I assume you’ve been looking for replacement parts more or less since the day you met us, and if you can’t find them, I can only deduce they don’t exist yet. That means Father’s Press is the only source of compatible parts and without the Hand Unit, the Press doesn’t work.”

“Did he ever outsource production, even for simple things like pumps or servos?”

“Not to my knowledge. He found it difficult to speak to people, much less express his inventive vision, and the Press was right there, after all, able to stamp out anything he might require. He was apt to print out screws and wire rather than inconvenience himself with a trip to the hardware store.”

“Wasn’t there anyone, anyone at all, who might have some idea how you guys are put together?”

Freddy considered the question and at last said, “I understand that he was connected in some way to the government. It was before my time, but there remained a great interest in his work after he left them, and some controversy concerning whether or not he used technology they now ‘owned’ to create us. Shortly after my awakening, he was compelled to give me over to them for examination. They had me for…”

He lapsed into a short silence. Even if he’d had a face, she had the feeling his expression would have been inscrutable, but he couldn’t completely suppress the tremoring at his joints.

“For some time,” he finished at last. “They dissembled me, but they didn’t follow the protocol. You’re supposed to depress the button and wait until you hear the beep signaling the part is safe to disconnect. They didn’t do that. Father told them and they promised, and then they made him leave and they just…just pulled me apart. I could feel myself separating…distance like static between all the pieces of myself until there was nothing left of me, only that static and the incompleteness I had become. And then they—”

“Don’t,” she said. “You lived through that once, you don’t have to go through it again.”

He nodded once, staring at the window. “I mention them only because I know they documented their findings thoroughly, so some written record of our composition must exist somewhere in the world, for what that is worth. However, they frequently expressed their frustration at their complete inability to replicate, or even fully comprehend, Father’s design. I don’t believe any of them could help you, or would, except under the greatest duress, and I don’t recall any names in any case. I’m sorry. It would appear hopeless. Still,” he said in what he probably thought was a cheerful tone that only underscored the bleakness of the whole situation, “I’ve never counted being
able to walk as one of my defining traits before and I don’t see why I should start now. All I need is a way to move around. I’ve seen pictures of…I don’t know what they’d be called, but they have them in hospitals, at least in the children’s books where I’ve seen them, and they look like chairs only with wheels. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. They’re called wheelchairs,” Ana said.

He rolled his eyes. “Of course they are. The way you people name things here in the future, it’s either something impossibly obscure or stupidly obvious and I always seem to be guessing the wrong way.” Shaking his head, he went on, “I suppose they’re considered specialized medical equipment, and I certainly wouldn’t advocate stealing one, especially from a hospital, but I also wouldn’t ask questions if you happened to turn up with one.”

“Relax, bear. Any idiot can buy a wheelchair. They even have motorized ones.”

The relief that passed over his face at this news was painful to see. “So no one would have to push me?”

Ana’s mouth made a smile while her heart bled. “Nope. You may have to change your name to Freddy Fazmobile, but that’s about the worst of it.”

“I can live with that,” he said, but that shadow crept back into his eyes. “I’m coming to discover that I can live with a lot of things I once would have thought intolerable. But I suppose—”

He stopped mid-word, ears swiveling, and looked sharply around.

Ana had heard nothing, but she looked back, too, following his gaze high up what used to be the rock-climbing wall to the vents that were one of the building’s access points to the crawlway. Looking at it, Ana couldn’t help but remember the stifling heat and the pervading stink of the place…and the scratches she’d seen throughout the maze-like shafts and corridors as she ignorantly (and stupidly, so stupidly) explored Foxanne’s prison. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Freddy said, but not right away. “I thought I heard something moving in the crawlway.”

“You probably did. There were a lot of dead rats up there, not to mention the raccoons and cats and whatever I found backstage. I closed off all the big points of access I found when I was doing the roof, but you know it doesn’t take much of a hole for critters to get in. Don’t let it keep you up at night, bear,” she said lightly. “I welded all the hatches shut when I bug-bombed. I might not be able to keep all the wildlife out of the ventilation system, but nothing bigger than a rat is getting in and nothing bigger than a spider is ever going to crawl out.”

“That’s good to know,” Freddy said, still looking at the narrow slats of the vent-cover. His frown was mostly in his eyes, but the remaining pins and bent strips of metal that used to support his muzzle moved around in brooding ways.

Looking at him, Ana got a twinge of deja-vu. She thought of Bonnie, whose face had been broken when she’d first met him, because at first she thought the spidery skittering sounds of Freddy’s facial mechanisms was at the root of this eerie familiarity, but that didn’t feel right. She tried to tie it in somehow with Faust next, because Freddy’s voice, even his words, reminded her so much of the way the old man spoke, but no, that wasn’t it. Not this time. As she tried to chase the nagging feeling down, a fuzzy memory bounced back on her—a dark room, a flashlight aimed at a vent-cover very much like this one…and a man’s voice.

There were only so many men in her life. In another moment, she had it: Mike Schmidt, in the Parts
and Services Room at Mulholland Drive, talking to her about the aptly-named Malice McGee’s unhappy demise. Ate a shotgun, if she recalled correctly. Bankrupt and despised and maybe wearing a knock-off Fredbear suit, although Mike had thought that was a little too good to be true.

Funny, now that she was thinking about it, he’d had plenty to say about McGee’s sleazy attempts to cash in on Faust’s inventions, and about the lawsuits and the tragedy that had closed McGee’s diner and led eventually to his suicide, but not much at all about the Parts Room. He’d had stories and videos to go with every other room in the building, but not that one.

But then again, why would he? According to Mike, the Toy animatronics had not been built very well. Constantly breaking down, said Mike, and Erik didn’t have the parts to fix them because Faust refused to have anything to do with the Mulholland pizzeria. Erik had kept the old animatronics in the Parts Room, salvaging their bodies for the odds and ends to keep his Toys running, at least until Faust showed up with an axe and closed the Toybox for good.

The rambling flow of these thoughts came to an abrupt halt, rewound a few beats, and played two points back again in sharp focus.

The first thought, a fact: Erik kept the real animatronics at Mulholland and used their parts to fix his Toys. She didn’t have to take Mike’s word for that. She’d seen the photos and videos of Toy Bonnie herself, and the way he always carried his guitar with him, even when not performing, so he had a reason to keep his left arm bent, trying to disguise how much bigger it was compared to his right. Erik didn’t have Faust’s fix-it know-how; he’d just ripped Bonnie’s arm off and plugged it into the Toy. The Toys might be a little smaller than the real animatronics, but their parts appeared to be compatible.

The second, a question: What happened to the Toys after Faust killed them with an axe? Faust had reclaimed his original animatronics, and others had found their way to Circle Drive’s secret basement, but not all of them. She knew that because she’d seen the video of the Springtrap Bonnie suit (and whatever was inside it) slither-stagger into the office at the Fazfright Attraction and pull the broken Puppet and Balloon Boy’s head out of a box of Fazbear relics before slithering out again. There had been other props and body parts among the items in the box, but the suit hadn’t bothered with them, and although the tape’s quality had been poor, Ana could recall seeing one of them crumple when the Springtrap suit had shoved it aside to get at the Puppet; not a real head at all, but just paper and poster paint. Despite tape recordings made by one of the sons asserting that they had found ‘a real one,’ no stolen animatronics had been recovered from the ashes after the Fazfright Attraction burned down. And although Ana might be reading too much into that quote, the tape said ‘a’ real one, not ‘another’.

If the Toy animatronics weren’t at Circle Drive, then where were they? Faust might have taken them home and put them in the vault in his basement, but they sure hadn’t been there when Ana had been poking around. That could mean they were at the bottom of the quarry with the Hand Unit to his Press…or it could mean they were still at Mulholland, in that secret basement that supposedly every Freddy’s had.

And there might actually be one, Ana realized. Mike couldn’t find it. Even Uncle Chuck hadn’t been able to find it. But a very young Jimmy Morehead had.

Maybe. Even the most persistent nightmares can sometimes just be dreams.

“This is no time to be sensible,” Ana told herself, unaware she spoke out loud.

“I beg your pardon?” said Freddy, blinking around at her in bewilderment that swiftly became a wary squint. “What is it?”
“Nothing,” she lied, because as desperate as he was, there was no way he’d agree to the idea birthing itself into terrible life in her mind. Too risky, he’d tell her, even if it wasn’t dangerous, which it probably was. All old buildings were dangerous, even the empty ones. The one she was thinking of was definitely dangerous…but hopefully not empty.

“I’ve got to go,” Ana said, climbing to her feet.

“Now?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve got an idea and if I’m right, there’s some stuff I’ve got to do before it gets too late.”

“All right,” he said. “Is there something else you want to tell me?”

“Nope,” she said, with feeling. “But don’t worry, bear, I’ll be fine. And with a little luck…so will you.”

She left him there, walking fast and immediately heading for her truck. Low conversation at the stage stopped at once and all three animatronics turned toward her.

“What’s wrong?” Bonnie asked.

“Back off her,” Foxy told him and when Ana spun around to stare at him, gruffly added, “They had a fight,” while looking at his hook.

“No, we didn’t,” said Ana and got moving again, her mind leaping ahead to the task at hand. She had the prybar and the pneumatic arm already in the truck…and damned little room left over to carry out busted-up Toys. She needed a bigger truck. The U-Haul place had been closed for hours by now. Should she swing by Shelton Contractors and use her supervisor’s keys to help herself to a company truck? Ugh, no, that was just begging to be fired. Fuck it, she’d buy something. For all the money she’d been spending on rentals, she should have bought one months ago. What else? “We’re good, I just have to go.”

“Plan C?” Chica called hopefully.

“Plan Z,” Ana corrected. “This is it, sister. End of the alphabet.”

Chica didn’t press her, but Bonnie appeared as she was struggling to get the generator out of the corner where she’d pinned it in without moving every goddamn thing in the universe and, after a moment to contemplate the scene before him, wordlessly picked it up and heaved it onto his shoulder. “Where do you want it?” he asked.

“In the truck,” she told him, squeezing by to get the handcart.

“Do I want to know what you’re doing with this stuff?”

“I don’t know, my man. Do you? Because I’ll tell you if you ask.”

He didn’t ask. He carried the generator carefully down the dock’s stairs and loaded it, taking a long look at the pneumatic arm that was already there while Ana passed down the jerry cans. She sprinted back inside for her day pack (and by extension, her wallet, not so much for what little money she was holding as for her ID, which she’d need if things went south tonight), and the only thing he said when she came back to the dock was, “Do you need anything else?”

Without thinking (or at least without admitting to any thought), she said, “Just a kiss for luck.”
Bonnie reached up. Ana stepped off the dock and into his open hands. He lifted her down into his kiss and held her there for a while, so easily, suspended between the limitless sky and the hard reality of earth. And in that first bittersweet moment, it was like none of the rest of it had ever happened, none of it. Not just Freddy waiting broken on the gym floor or the difference between day and night mode, but none of it, like she was newborn right here in his hands and anything was possible.

“Be careful,” he said softly, the words coming from his speaker without breaking the kiss.

“I can’t,” she murmured and kissed him again, or tried to.

He pulled away and shook his head, ears low. “Not goodbye,” he said and set her on the ground. “You just go. Go and come back, okay?”

“As soon as I can, but it’s going to take a while and some of it is pretty sketchy. Try to get the phone away from Freddy and make sure it’s charged up. I’ll call if I’m arrested.”

He still didn’t ask. “Okay.”

She touched his cracked face, made smooth with a little glue and a lot of shellac. He took her hand and gave it a careful squeeze, then let her go. She opened the driver’s door and swung herself up into the truck.

It was half past six now and in late October, that was long past dark. Ana was a cautious driver and under normal circumstances, she would have switched on her lights immediately after turning the key in the ignition, but with everything else on her mind (she should get the transportation situation taken care of first and fast, because it was already so late, which would put a hell of a crunch on her when she went for the money and God help her if Chad was there, because she was going in anyway), she didn’t think of it at all until she was zipping through town and a helpful driver flashed their own brights as a reminder. If she hadn’t been so distracted, if she’d switched them on right away, she would have thrown a stark double-spotlight over the back of the store room where Foxy stood watching, but she didn’t, and by the time Bonnie had turned around, Foxy had already slipped away, unnoticed.
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

After all the suck that had already been packed into the day, Ana finally got a little bit of the good kind of luck. On only her third call, she found someone who had what she needed and would meet with her at eight o’clock on a Saturday night in the Walmart parking lot in Hurricane. He sounded understandably wary about the whole arrangement, although the prospect of cash in hand softened him up some, especially since she didn’t try to dicker him down on the price, and she bluntly told him she’d meet him in front of the police station if he’d rather have a big cash exchange there. He agreed that probably wouldn’t be smart and said he’d see her soon.

Eight o’clock. Ana checked her watch. Plenty of time.

She had been making her calls while walking up Faust’s long driveway, so it wasn’t more than fifteen minutes after arranging the meeting that she arrived at the glass house. More good luck: no cars parked out front, no lights in any of the hundred windows. Ana let herself in and went immediately to the office in the back wing, opening the secret door and then the safe. She took a couple bank-wrapped bundles of hundred-dollar bills and, after a moment wrestling with her bruised conscience, a couple more. Depending on how tonight went, she could either use it to pay Rider back for bail and a lawyer, or apply it to the renovations at Freddy’s. She wasn’t stealing it for herself, so it wasn’t really stealing, except in the legal sense of the word.

Ana closed the safe, closed the secret panel, headed for the door, and was about halfway there when the light snapped on in the hall outside.

For one split-second frozen perfectly in time, Ana looked through the wide-open doorway and down the long hall to Chad at the other end, who was standing with one hand still on the light switch as he faced away into another room, impatiently saying, “It’s back here. Come on, man, this isn’t a sightseeing tour!”

Before he’d finished speaking, Ana had bolted into the shadows, buying herself a few more seconds. Her options were brutally few. If she opened the window, she’d set the alarm off. She had to hide, here, in Faust’s minimalist office. No closet, no cabinet, no handy human-sized trunk. Not even curtains. It was either dive under the desk or behind the door and Chad was already coming, so she picked one, leaping into the little space behind the door right before it swung open, trapping her behind it. All he had to do was shut the door behind him and turn around…but he didn’t.

She stood silent, barely breathing, staring into the paneled inset of the heavy door as Chad turned on the lights and went over to the desk. Someone else was with him. She could hear his footsteps strolling around the room while Chad opened the drawer and then a stranger’s laughing, “Holy shit, is your dad Batman?” as the bookcase slid aside.

“I know, right? And he’s my grand-dad. My dad was a fucking nothing.”

“Like you.”

“Fuck you too,” Chad said amiably and they both laughed, but the stranger’s laughter cut off short when he got a good look in the secret room.

“Whoa, you said it was a safe.”
“It is. Right there.”

“I was expecting something like this,” said the stranger, probably indicting size with his hands.

“What’s the difference? It’s the same kind of lock, isn’t it?”

“No,” said the stranger after a moment’s dumbfounded pause. “No, it’s not even a little bit the same! I thought you had a fire safe, man! Like a little Walmart special thing!”

“You told me you could pick the lock!”

“A tumbler lock, sure! I could even do a combination lock with a little finesse, but that’s a keypad! If I don’t have the code, what the hell do you expect me to do?”

“You said you were a hacker! So hack it or something!”

“Dude, who do you think I am? I took a couple web design and coding courses, because the guy that knows computers gets laid on campus, and believe me, that was enough to teach me that the odds of that thing being rigged to take my picture or call the cops if I fuck with it are roughly one in…I don’t know, one?! You’re on your own, man.”

“Look, there’s at least half a million dollars in that thing,” Chad said as the footsteps came back to the door. “Cash. I’m not kidding. I’ve seen it. Fucking bricks of actual cash, plus God knows what else. Rolex. Rings. The old man barely knows what he’s got anymore. He doesn’t keep any kind of records. If he runs out of cash, he just goes and gets more, he doesn’t count it. Seriously,” he said in a coaxing tone as the stranger stopped, there in the doorway, where Ana could actually see him through the narrow gap between the hinges and where, if he just looked, he could see her too. “He’s been in the hospital for months on all kinds of shit. He doesn’t even remember how much he’s got, I guarantee it. We just leave a couple stacks and he’ll think he spent the rest and never even question it. All you got to do is open it and I hand you a hundred grand. I swear.”

“I do like money,” the other guy said thoughtfully. “But you know what I like more than money? Not going to jail. Sorry, man. Can’t help you.”

So he left, and after a little stomping and swearing, Chad followed him out, slamming the office door shut as he went without ever noticing that Ana had been behind it.

Ana’s first breath after that was a little choked and the second, shaky, but after that, she was more or less fine. She gave them a head-start before cautiously cracking the door and listening. The house was dark again, silent and still. She walked on watery legs to the front door, peeked through the flanking windows to make sure the lot outside was once again empty—it was—and let herself out, mindful of the security system. From here, she could see tail-lights just winking out around a distant curve. Chad was gone…but he might come back, if he managed to talk his friend around with that poisoned charm that Faust called the fault in his code.

Ana didn’t dare turn her phone’s flashlight on. She ran in the moonlight down the winding drive, expecting with every breathless moment that she’d see headlights or that her racing feet would go out and she’d feel nothing but air underneath them for five or six eternal seconds before the bone-breaking landing at the bottom of the canyon, but no. She came to the gate and then to the ground and then to her truck, all without incident. The worst was over, she thought, for the third time that day, and she was still wrong.

She drove to Walmart with a good twenty minutes to spare before her meeting, so she went in to use the bathroom, splashing cold water and calm onto her face several times, then buying a
Monster Ultra so she could pretend the nervous energy burning through her system was too much caffeine.

The seller was waiting outside under one of the lamps when she returned. She waved to let him know who she was and came up smiling, giving him plenty of time to read the situation and see that everything was all right. He was a big man who’d brought a big friend along, which he probably would have done even if it was high noon in front of the police station, given that what he was selling was a twelve-foot box truck.

Ana had a look under the hood, because even though she’d already decided she was buying it if it was at all driveable, she needed to make sure it wasn’t going to break down and give Sheriff Zabrinsky the pleasure of finally nailing her trespassing ass to the wall. But the truck looked good. Less than five years old, over a hundred thousand miles, but anyone who owned their own box truck was going to be doing some long driving, so that was no surprise. Well-maintained. Tires showed some wear, but they weren’t balding or anything. The cab smelled like cigarettes and it was overdue for an oil change, but overall, it looked good.

She gave him a short stack of hundreds, with one extra for his trouble. He gave her the keys and the papers, and now the only obstacle was time. It was only a little after eight, full dark, and on any other night, that might be late enough, but it was Halloween night, uncharacteristically clear and not too cold. Smaller kids were still collecting candy; older ones, still throwing toilet paper at trees and flour bombs at front doors; teens too young to drive were watching horror movies as they waited for what they erroneously thought of as the ‘witching hour’ so they could go ghost-hunting. As much as Ana wanted to get on with it, the smartest thing to do now was wait until after midnight.

She spent as long as she could under a parking lot lamp getting to know her new vehicle from the inside out and making several trips into the Walmart’s automotive aisles, occupying her mind and hands with work. She changed the oil, recharged the A/C, replaced the windshield wipers, topped off its fluids, and hung one of those tree-shaped air fresheners on the rearview mirror. Now the cab smelled like cigarettes and pine tar.

Eventually, she ran out of ways to fuss with her new vehicle, but she still had a lot of time to kill, so she hitched up her Ford and made the drive back to Mammon. She passed a few kids in what constituted ‘town,’ but not many; they were all heading home to divide up the loot and get into warmer clothes. She passed a few more on the outlying roads, uncostumed, some carrying bags or wearing backpacks. She had every intention of stopping in at Freddy’s, but when she turned into Old Quarry, she could see dark figures and flickering candlelight gathered by the lobby doors. God only knew what that was about, but they’d all remember who interrupted their little séance, so Ana grimly drove on and up Coldslip Mountain to her own haunted house.

She unhitched the truck, transferred the equipment inside to the box truck, then went inside to see if she could find some way to distract herself for a couple hours.

The front door was unlocked, but a quick walk-through of the rooms showed her nothing missing and no spray-painted pentacles or burning bags of dog shit, so she guessed she’d just left it unlocked the last time she was here. She cleaned the kitchen, made herself a sandwich to fill her stomach and settle her nerves, then went upstairs to find something to do that was time-consuming, but not too labor-intensive.

She did not notice the candy wrapper caught in the door of the grandfather clock and so had no reason to open it or to go down the secret stair and see the bar of light beneath the door to the basement playroom. She did not hear Danny Elfman’s distinctive score as Beetlejuice played on
the TV or the crinkling as clumsy fingers unwrapped a fun-sized candy bar and offered it first to a
disinterested Plushtrap before popping it into a chocolate-smeared mouth. For his part, with the
movie playing and a Kit Kat crunching in his ears, the man tucked into the pirate ship-shaped bed
didn’t hear her come in and he fell asleep before she left. Neither of them knew the other was there.

* * *

Mulholland Drive was a long loop of a road that began and ended at the southwestern corner of
what constituted ‘uptown’ Mammon. As a child, she had at least once biked down the tree-lined
drive all the way to the pizzeria and gone up to cup her hands around her face and peer between
two loose boards through the dirty window. She had seen nothing then, at least nothing to impress
itself on Ana’s admittedly unreliable memory, and so she had climbed back on her bike and
pedaled onward, eventually landing back in town next to the garden store. What she’d done after
that, or what circumstances had led her to be out exploring Mammon’s back pockets without
David, Ana could no longer recall. She didn’t think she’d ever been back, not until Mike Schmidt
brought her here on that long summer night.

The boards that blocked off the entrance now were untagged and still had that new-lumber smell.
The padlock on the doors was shiny and unscratched. The sheriff had been by earlier tonight to
chase away amateur ghost-hunters and lock up this tempting trespasser’s target, and he could do it
all again tomorrow, as long as Ana got what she needed out of it first.

“Please, let there be something here,” she prayed, approaching the doors with her prybar and bolt-
cutters in hand. “Anything.”

Mammon’s wind moaned, blowing cold right up her spine, like an omen.

She unlocked the doors and went inside.

Her first impression was that the hole in the roof was bigger or perhaps it just seemed that way
now that the tree doggedly growing up through it had lost its summer leaves. With memories of
High Street still fresh in her mind, Ana took her first hesitant steps out of the doorway, giving the
floor plenty of time between each one to decide whether to hold her weight or give her the express
ride to the basement and drop the rest of the building on top of her. It seemed solid enough for
now, although it was more evident than ever that the building was on borrowed time.

“It’s a little late to start developing a sense of self-preservation now,” she muttered, venturing in
further. “Nobody who wanders alone through abandoned buildings in the middle of the night gets
to bitch about unsafe conditions.”

Very little had changed since her last visit. More trash, more graffiti, more damage…and more
signs that she was not the first person to break in tonight. Fresh piss stains on the wall by Kiddie
Cove where some edgy alpha teen had marked his territory. A chalk pentagram with points marked
by half-melted candles on the show stage. A new *Freddy Lives* painted in dripping red letters on
the Puppet’s old box, still wet to the touch. There were a few small bones scattered on the show
stage, but on closer inspection, they turned out to be nothing more ominous than the remains of
some gas station fried chicken. And over the doorway leading out of the dining room, some wit
had scrawled the encouraging words, *This way to HELL!!!* With three exclamation points, so she’d
know it was serious.

However, it was all quiet now and once she’d satisfied herself that she was alone, Ana passed
beneath the warning and into the echoing hall, her feet crunching over broken glass, old garbage
and dry leaves. Past the bathrooms (the Boys/Girls signs had been stolen, but someone had helpfully indicated which was which with numerous drawings of the appropriate genitalia), the hall turned left and continued on to the party rooms and the office where Erik Metzger had ruled over his twisted Toyland, but Ana didn’t turn with it. Here at the corner was the door to the Parts and Services room.

When she’d been here before, this room held nothing but some rusted shelves, a dented old work table and a lot of trash. If Ana didn’t know better, she’d think there was nothing here.

But Ana did know better. Since that night with Mike Schmidt, she’d spoken to Jimmy Morehead. Jimmy, who’d been having the same bad dream for thirty years, a nightmare about seeing the Puppet take a child into this room, following them, and finding a secret stairwell through an open door behind a set of shelves.

It might have been just a dream. Even the worst nightmares don’t have to mean anything. She knew that and still she had a closer look at the shelves lining the walls.

They had all been bolted to the wall and although they’d all taken some hits over the years, they were all still standing—all but one, which someone had managed to pull down. The bolts securing it had been stripped. The wall behind it showed a lot of tool marks made by some fairly unorthodox tools. Whoever had done this hadn’t come prepared for the job, but he or she had been damn well determined to finish it. Someone who’d had their own recurring dream, perhaps.

Ana cleared the floor in front of the exposed wall of its blanketing trash and got in close, but all she got for her effort was a closer look at the disgusting layers of fungus, dirt, animal waste and desiccated filth she was presently breathing in. When she touched it—God, she could not believe she was touching it—it all felt like the same sheetrock. If there was a door under it, it was hidden well.

Ana hefted her prybar, got a good grip, and swung. The hooked lip of the bar broke easily through the old sheetrock and hit with shoulder-numbing force into something else. Not a stud. Something a lot harder.

In less than a minute, she’d cleared the door and part of the wall around it, enough to see that it was all made of the same material. Ana was no metallurgist, but to her uneducated eye, it sure looked like the same stuff that had been used at her Freddy’s to make certain areas extra-secure. Tungsten carbide alloy. No point in going at it with the prybar then. Bonnie had said that even he wasn’t strong enough to knock down one of these doors.

Ana put the prybar down on the worktable behind her and went out to the truck for Faust’s pneumatic arm. Clearing enough of an area to set it up took a little time, and her sense of victory once she had was short-lived. As soon as she managed to wedge the arm in at the floor, its narrow monitor lit up with a red-lettered warning—Err 14: Load exceeds max. wt. capacity—and it refused to even try to lift.

Shitbiscuits.

“Okay, don’t give up,” she muttered. “There has to be a way in. Think.”

Ana withdrew the tip of the arm, reset it to its default position and dragged it as much out of the way as it could be in this small, cluttered space. Retrieving her prybar, she went back to chipping away sheetrock, looking for an access panel.

She found it, and even better, it was not a numbered keypad that needed a special code. It was just a
Finally, something that was going right.

Sort of. The button was set directly into that tungsten carbide wall. No exposed wires to play with.

A minor setback.

Back went Ana to the trucks, this time for the generator. There was a reason she had dropped the big money on this monster. It wasn’t just a portable outlet box; it could provide continuous power to an entire house for up to eight hours. Granted, this pizzeria was a hell of a lot bigger than the average house, but she could make it work.

She found the main breaker behind the open door right there in the Parts Room (and thank God for that, because she’d half-expected it to be in the basement, the way her night was going). It had a lock, briefly, and once she got past that, it was all pretty easy. At one point, the circuits had all been marked, and even though the plastic labels were clouded with age, they were still legible enough for Ana to make out what each switch controlled: Exterior. Dining. Kitchen. Party 1-4. Office. Parts…and two more circuits, unlabeled but wired for power.

The basement?

Ana hooked up the generator, shut off most of the switches, leaving only the Parts Room and whatever those unlabeled switches went to, and turned the power on. The generator roared to life, thunderous in the silence of the night. Ana raced outside to make sure the goddamn sign or parking lot lamps hadn’t lit up, then made a quick, tense search of the rest of rooms, just in case she’d started any fires.

All good.

She returned to the Parts Room, already heating up and stinking of gasoline exhaust with the generator going full bore. Air blew out of the high vents, spitting dried rat shit and dead flies through the slats into shaking curtains of cobwebs. The breath of the building was cold and sour with old rot. Not rotting meat, but rotting things that had never even been alive. Rotting carpet choked with mold, rotting walls stained with paint and piss and puke, rotting wires and rotting plastic. Rotting time. Ana had a strong stomach for bad smells—probably everyone who grew up in Mammon did—but even she clapped a hand protectively over her mouth and nose when that stench hit. With her free hand, she felt for the light switch and turned it on.

One of the ceiling fixtures had fallen or been pulled down. Another stayed dark. The third rattled, ticked, and flickered on, putting out a weak greyish brown light through the filter of grime and dead bugs filling its cover.

Not great, but she could work with it. Ana put her phone away and picked up her prybar. She didn’t need it now, she knew that, but she felt better with it in her hand. She pushed the grey button.

The not-so-hidden door scraped open, releasing another of the building’s pent-up breaths, and at the same time, the force of the current blowing through the vent grew stronger. Cross-current. She gave it a moment to air out and herself a moment to adjust to the stink, then stepped in and felt for a light switch.

She had just enough time to think how stupid she was to just walk on into the dark instead of reaching in from the other room and then her fingers brushed, not a switch, but another flat square button. In an instant, the door shut. It didn’t bang down, hardly made any noise at all…and if she
had been standing in the Parts Room feeling around through the open doorway when it had happened, she would now be looking at the stump where her arm had been for the twenty seconds or so that it would take to bleed to death.

Belatedly, her heart lurched and began to pound, choking her from the inside out as she groped and slapped at the wall. She found the button again, opened the door, and then found the lights beside it. Only half of them came on, flickering spastically and buzzing with strain, but none of them burst in a shower of sparks and lit her hair on fire. Always look on the bright side.

Ana looked around while her heart returned to its normal rhythm, but there was nothing to see. This wasn’t a room, just a stairwell dropping down into the dark. Its walls were faced with concrete; the stairs themselves were industrial steel. Even if she’d been in bare feet and on her tip-toes, she could not have descended silently. Every step she took in her heavy work boots reverberated on her ears, deafening. So there was no point in sneaking, but she went slow anyway. The weak light followed her as far as the first flight and no further. She fished her phone out and went on, painfully conscious of its dwindling battery, straining her ears to listen past the generator behind her, but all she heard was her own echoing footsteps.

Nothing. Of course there was nothing. The secret door had not been opened in years, probably not since the restaurant closed, decades ago. Nothing living could possibly be here. Even the spiders in their dusty webs were dead.

And that was true, but the amount of comfort it provided sort of depended on one’s definition of the word ‘living’.

The stairs were not infinite. She heard the end before she saw it—the droning of what was either a massive hive of howler-bees or an ancient florescent light fixture combined with an equally ancient HVAC system. When she shut off her phone, she could see a dim smudge of light creeping up from below. It got a little brighter (and noisier) when she turned the corner, and soon she felt the chill, foul breeze on her face as long-stagnant air was forced to circulate. One more turn and she was there at the top of the last flight of stairs, and there at the bottom, crouched beneath that sputtering, buzzing light with a dark hallway stretching out behind him, was Toy Freddy.

Her heart stopped cold and started up again with a hot slam into her ribs as they locked eyes, his rouged-up muzzle already split in a malicious grin of anticipation. Her throat closed up tight. If he’d blinked, if he’d smiled, if he’d stood up and started toward her, she could not have screamed. But he didn’t. And after that first split-second, stretched long and suffocating, his stillness broke the paralyzing grip that fear had on her and let her see that he was not crouched to spring at her, but slumped sideways against the wall, back-to-back with Toy Bonnie behind them, as if to help hold each other up. Freddy—no, she couldn’t call him that. Waddles, then. Waddles slouched, his legs splayed wide apart, one arm forward so that he appeared to be idly cupping his groin. There was a hatch or panel or something there, Ana saw, open just a crack. His other arm had been severed just below the shoulder and lay in three pieces between his open legs. The hat that was every Freddy’s trademark possession was missing, but there was nowhere for it to sit anyway. Most of the top and back of his head had been smashed, exposing the curved dome of his metal skull, which was also split open. His face was okay, though. The plastic was dull and dusty, but not damaged, not even scratched.

Ana’s Other-vision, that part of her that let her see how machines were put together and what they did, took in these clues and assembled a scenario: Waddles had tried to shield himself against the first blow with his arm. The weapon—even if she hadn’t been told it was an axe, she’d have guessed it by the wide, brutal look of the wounds—had come down anyway, shearing his hand in
half, then smashing his forearm open and breaking the elbow joint, and finally taking the arm off. The killing blow had come from behind; Waddles had tried to run.

Slowly, Ana took the last few steps off the stairs, keeping the prybar raised and ready to swing if Waddles should decide to spring to life and snap at her. Her fingers itched when she reached for him, anticipating the lunge, the bite. He didn’t move, not even when she dug her nails into the groove around his chest-panel and pulled it open.

His battery case was intact and as best she could tell, it all appeared in perfect working order, but it wasn’t working now. His cooling fan wasn’t turning. The delicate cogs and wheels of his internal regulators weren’t spinning. His heart had stopped. He wasn’t dormant, the way the others were when she opened them up like this; he was dead.

Ana left his chest open anyway. She was taking enough chances as it was.

She moved his arm (his entire body slumped to one side, pulled by its weight) and, as much as she did not want to see what was under his loin-panel, she had to see his hips. She opened it.

It pushed out of its confinement and spilled into his lap, not like a dick at all, not even the oversized ugly playground joke of a dick it was meant to be, but more like intestines dropping out of a disemboweling wound. Metal bands alternated with silicone segments from the connective device at its base to its rounded tip, making it look more like an earthworm than anything else, one that had mutated and grown as long and as thick as her arm. Ominous grooves, pittings and holes were arranged along its full length, hinting at specialized functions Ana had no interest in exploring.

God, she had to touch it.

Grimacing, Ana picked it up. Its outer ‘skin’ was cold and clammy over lumpy, unseen mechanisms, which was bad enough, but it was the weight of it, twenty pounds at least, that tipped the emotional scales from something merely unpleasant to something unutterably repugnant. She draped it over his thigh (wiping her hands off on her jeans for several seconds afterwards), then leaned over and peered into the cavity.

His pelvic girdle was a lot more complicated than Freddy’s, but most of the differences were due to the workings of that monstrous dick. She was going to have a hell of a time disconnecting that thing, but she thought she could get it out of there without affecting any other processes, and she’d better do it before she let Freddy see it. He didn’t like to be touched even when it was just his hand; she couldn’t imagine his reaction if he knew she’d handled his junk, even second-hand junk, and especially junk of this magnitude.

Ana rose, giving Waddles a wide berth as she circled around to get a look at Toy Bonnie, Blue, behind him.

It was harder to figure out how he’d gone down. He was a little scuffed in places, but she saw nothing she’d correlate with a lethal wound. On the other hand, someone had wrapped his torso from neck to waist with duct tape before putting him here, at least three rolls’ worth. Without cutting him out of it, she could only guess at whether or not he’d taken a blow to the chest, but just the fact that someone had wanted to completely seal his chest case was a pretty good indication that there was nothing much holding him together.

Whatever had happened, he was shut down now and here he sat, one of his legs twisted beneath him, the other in front of him, bent at the knee so that it helped to prop him up, albeit in a crooked slump. His arms hung at his sides, his right at rest with his knuckles on the ground, but his left was
so long that it could only splay out into the hall. Its weight pulled him sideways. His head lolled forward, tipped to an inquiring angle, his ears drooping over his face, so that he seemed to stare at her through them—the fixed, mindless stare of a doll.

Not a doll. A corpse. Their bodies sprawled, without any intelligence to correct their balance or protect their dignity. If the overhead light and the air circulation system weren’t droning in her ears, the hall would be perfectly silent, without the regular gasp and wheeze of their cooling fans. Their skin was dull with dust. The unnatural shine of life in their eyes was nothing but the reflection from the flickering overhead light. They were dead. Everything down here was dead.

Ana touched one of Blue’s ears, straightening it at the hinge, swiveling it on its pin, and finally letting it fold back over into its original position. She gave his nose a squeeze to hear the wheezy honking sound it made. Working two fingers into his mouth, she lifted the top part of his head away from his slack lower jaw. His muzzle was split in the center, the separate plates sliding along a track, falling open to expose his teeth. So he could smile, she thought, wiggling the plates one by one to manufacture the intended grin. A cute cartoonish bunny smile…if you didn’t notice how the blunt-looking squares of his white teeth tapered to a knife-like edge, and if you couldn’t see the second set of jaws behind them, these with teeth like a chainsaw, made for catching, ripping, pulling.

Blue’s open eyes stared through her. She tried to close them, but the eyelids didn’t budge and she didn’t want to force them. If she never found another part, she had these two animatronics for spare parts and that was it. Every piece mattered.

Ana lowered his heavy head into its original position and backed away, taking in more of her surroundings.

It was a long hall, not narrow but with such a high ceiling that it appeared to be, and it was surfaced entirely with concrete painted matte-grey and dulled by decades of neglect. It would have been a gloomy place even when well-lit, but most of the overhead fixtures were broken now, leaving only two working lights. One was here, directly over Waddles and Blue, making it difficult to see much beyond them and filling her ears with that maddening shrill hum. The other light was at the opposite end of the hall, illuminating a closed door like a spotlight. Just a normal door, virtually identical to the one closing off the Parts Room from the rest of the pizzeria upstairs, with nothing on its blank face to indicate what lay behind it. The space between was dark, but not empty. She could make out a mass of junk where the shadows were thickest, dividing the hall wall-to-wall and nearly hip-high, comprised mainly of three metal tables…no, not tables, they were wheeled. Rolling carts then…but they were too tall and narrow. And there were straps fastened to the sides, so…they were gurneys. For transporting struggling prisoners. Or dead ones.

As for where those prisoners were kept, there were a number of other doors lining one side of the hall, identical to each other, but very different from the one that faced these stairs. Steel doors, painted military gray, with barred peek-a-boo windows up high and narrow slots down low through which a warden might pass some small flat food. A slice of pizza, perhaps. All were shut and fastened with a simple yet effective slide-bar.

On the other side of the hall, the plain grey concrete wall had been covered with paper posters, each of them with the heading My Fun Day At Freddy’s or The Best Party Has, and plenty of room to draw. She’d seen ones like these in the Craft Room at her Freddy’s, and others in the background on Aunt Easter’s tapes. They’d probably been giving them out for kids to color since the very first Freddy’s opened. These had been colored too, by wax crayons such as a child might use, but not by kids. You could always tell, even if the creator had no artistic ability. They were all signed as well, and effort had been made to make the names legible, so that no one would ever

Listening to Mike Schmidt and reading through his black binder, she had thought she understood what he was trying to tell her, even if she didn’t quite believe it. Now she saw incontrovertible proof that at least some of what he’d told her that night was true, the least believable part—the scale of it. Dozens of posters, over a hundred maybe, lined these walls, and each one a person with a family who was forever broken by their disappearance. And even that was saying too little, because it wasn’t just a family or even a hundred families. In a town the size of Mammon’s, it was all of them. Every single family in Mammon had lost someone here, and if not here, then at High Street or Circle Drive…or Old Quarry.

A hiss of air interrupted her thoughts. She spun, heart racing and prybar raised, because even though she knew the Toys were dead, she also knew what a cooling fan sounded like when it vented.

She waited, her eyes flicking from Blue to Waddles to Blue again, and at last, she looked up at the ventilation shaft above them. Stinking air blew through the filthy slats, rattling and groaning…and hissing? Maybe.

She needed to keep looking around, find what there was to find and get the hell out of here. She was giving herself the heebie-jeebies already.

Ana took a few cautious steps further down the hall. She could feel her boots crunching over the glass, but between the shrilling of the fluorescents and the howling of the air conditioning system, she could barely hear her own footsteps.

She approached the first cell door and tried the latch. It turned, although she had to put some arm into it, and the hinges wailed like dying things when forced to open. She saw a concrete box, a stained sloping floor leading to a rusted drain, and a chain affixed to the far wall that did not quite reach the door. No light, not even a socket for a bare bulb, only what little came in from the hall, which would have been even less coming through just that tiny window and feeding slot. It smelled the way all forgotten places smell, like piss and mildew and fear. There was no bed, not even a blanket on the stained floor, and the only decoration was a sign bolted to the back wall, right where the light from the hall would fall on it.

Ana did not go inside. It was hard to read from here, but easier for her than for those who had been interred here. RULES OF GOOD BEHAVIOR, it said. The rules were simple, as simple as those posted upstairs. Half of them were the same, in fact: Don’t Run. Don’t Yell. Don’t Scream. Don’t Poop on the Floor. Don’t Hit.

The other half were new: Don’t Bite. Don’t Cuss. Don’t Be Rude. Don’t Color on the Walls. Play Nicely With the Toys And They’ll Play Nicely With You.

Beneath that, in playful slanted lettering, it said, Be a Good Guest! Or Else!

Or else what? Attached to the bottom of the sign were a number of reminders, dangling from hooked chains. Withered fingers, some with painted fingernails. Human teeth strung like beads. A short braid of blonde hair, with a bit of scalp still attached. A fleshy lump that might be a tongue. Might be a lot of things, actually, but there was no fucking way she was getting any closer to see for sure. She was unreasonably convinced that if she stepped away from this door, the next thing she’d hear was it slamming behind her. She was alone here. She was. And yet…

She looked down the hall, counting doors. Twelve in all, including this one. Impossible to imagine
anyone needing so many. Impossible not to imagine them all in use. Some of them might even still
be occupied, but she had no desire to see for herself. The dead were dead and there was nothing she
could do for them. She didn’t even want to open that door at the end of the hall, but if there was
anything worth finding, it would be there, in Metzger’s inner sanctum.

But should she? Between Waddles and Blue, she had enough spare parts to rebuild Freddy’s entire
lower half, replace Chica’s pumps and Bonnie’s knee, and even give Foxy a second hand, if he
wanted one. She shouldn’t get greedy. Getting greedy was the first step on the road to getting
killed.

Ana looked back down at the two animatronics discarded here at the foot of the stairs.

Just the two.

Where was the Toy version of Chica? The curvy one with the pink booty shorts and boobs under
her bib? Where was Hotpants?

She looked, cupping one hand around her eyes to block the blinding interference of the light, and
keeping the prybar raised in the other. All the cell doors were shut and all the bars appeared to be
in locking position. At first, she couldn’t see anything. And then she realized she could see
nothing.

A damned wide stretch of nothing, in fact, interrupting the wall of posters in the middle of the hall,
where the shadows were thickest. Not a room, but an open place. Another hall or maybe just an
alcove, she couldn’t tell. And where was it? Why, directly on the other side of the barricade that
someone with a lot of time had built to occupy unwary hands in preparation for the day that some
dumbass should inevitably blunder in.

Hotpants was still alive. And she had sense enough to hide when the lights came on, waiting for
the perfect chance to strike.

Ana tried to glean some small shred of comfort from that. Any animatronic who had to stack the
odds against a mere human in a fight was not in the best fighting condition.

Her grip on the prybar tightened, needing to feel its reality, solid in her hand. She could kill a man
with this, she knew, but killing an animatronic was different. Ana might need two or even three
good hits to break through the chest casing and another to smash the battery case beneath, but
Hotpants only needed one to crush Ana’s skull or snap her spine in half. She hated to think she was
going close-quarters with an opponent like that.

But Waddles and Blue were once-living proof that a human could win that fight, and if Faust could
do it with an axe, Ana could do it with a prybar.

Ana started forward, weapon at the ready. She moved slowly, but not too quietly, like someone
exploring an empty building who thought they were alone. Her ears strained to hear something
other than her own boots crushing glass, the buzzing of the florescent lights or the rattling roar of
the long-dormant HVAC fans…and at last, she thought she did. Maybe. It might have been
something in the ventilation system getting caught in the fan, but it sure sounded like something
shifted around the corner, just out of sight. Not moving away, not moving closer. Barely able to
move at all. But moving.

By habit, Ana looked back, checking her escape route, started to face forward, then sent another
startled look back.
Something was different. What was it? She wasn’t immediately sure. Like those spot-the-differences puzzles, her eye was somehow caught by the whole picture and not by any one thing, but something had changed. There were the stairs, dark and empty. There was the first cell door, slightly ajar. There was Waddles, sitting guard at the foot of the stairs. And there was Blue at his back, looking at Ana, only not really. His eyes were open, and by some trick of perspective, still seemed to be looking at her, even though she knew he was dead. His posture remained unchanged, head tilted and ears up in a narrow V that would have meant an intense curiosity if he was the real Bonnie—

Wait.

His ears weren’t supposed to be up. They’d been folded forward, hadn’t they? Folded low over his face…she could remember the dark shadows they cast over his features as he seemed to stare up at her through them…

“Oh fuck me,” Ana blurted as realization slapped into her.

Blue’s staring eyes blinked. He laughed—Bonnie’s laugh, not the stage-hyucking that he hated, but his own good-natured laugh—and it was Bonnie’s voice she heard when he said, “Lady, we just met.”

In the very next instant, he had surged onto his feet and was sprinting at her.

Ana had thought she could only pull down the barricade or climb over it; now a third option instinctively seized her and she dove right into it, squeezing through the cross-hatching of one of the gurneys and clawing out on the other side, slashing her hands on glass without feeling pain. Her jeans got snagged on one of the supporting struts because of course it fucking did! She kicked wildly, ripping the denim and yanking in her foot a split-second before Blue’s hand slapped down on the ground where it had been. He looked through the table’s legs at her, light snapping on in his eyes, then grinned and yelled, “Get her, Chica!”

Ana flailed back, swinging her prybar everywhere at once, hitting nothing, and then saw her. Saw it.

The shadowed space behind the barricade wasn’t a connecting hall after all, just a wide place where someone could store custodial supplies, linens, and other items for the rudimentary care of prisoners. There was even a small kitchen area with a built-in cooler, similar to the one up in the kitchen, and an ancient coffee-maker, still with the crust of the last pot of coffee to be brewed here staining the carafe, and a coffee cup beside it. The cup was deep purple with once-gold letters on it. World’s Greatest…something. She couldn’t see the rest, but it didn’t really matter. Ana only read the writing at all because her mind could make sense of that. The thing sprawled in front of her could not be identified as easily. It was just a tangle of cables and wires, animatronic bones, and enough pumps and actuators to let it move. Not enough to walk or stand or even crawl, but it could…slither…a little. It could writhe. And when one of the animatronic eyes set in the mess like a meatball in a plate of steel spaghetti managed to roll toward her, the plastic lids blinked. It saw her. From a speaker buried somewhere in the tangle, static crackled and hissed at ear-splitting volume. Its voice, screaming.

And another voice.

And another.

Eyes bubbled up through the tangle, trying to turn in her direction—one yellow, one pink, two blue, one green. Tendrils wrapped around each other, forming weak limbs with which it reached
out, trembling, before it lost cohesion and fell apart. The eyes slipped back beneath the slithering surface of its body. Only one, the pink one, stayed to watch as Blue grabbed the table separating them and heaved it aside, kicking his way through the rest of the barricade like a kid kicking through a drift of dry leaves.

He caught the prybar as she swung, wrenched it out of her grip painfully enough that she thought at first he’d pulled the arm that held it out of its socket as well, and let her have it in the knee.

Not hard. Not anywhere near as hard as he could have. Not even hard enough to break a bone and she knew how easy that was to do with that particular tool. Just hard enough to keep her on the ground. He laughed and swung it some more. No doubt he hit exactly what he aimed at, but it wasn’t her, just the floor around her head and shoulders, an inch away, two at most, the sounds as loud as gunshots in her ears—bang bang bang-bang-bang-bang!

Chips of concrete hit her face, but Ana didn’t flinch. She rocked onto her back and kicked, ignoring the rotten-tooth ache of her own injured knee.

Or at least she would have, if only she’d hit him.

He jumped back, quick like a bunny as the saying went, and landed with his legs wide apart, then again, landing with legs close together, avoiding her second useless kick. In the same movement, he assumed a playful swashbuckling pose, holding her prybar like a sword and cried, “En garde!” as he rapped her on the knee again.

Still not hard, but a little harder than the first hit.

She kicked at him again, deliberately, knowing he’d evade it and he did, but when he swung that prybar for the third time, she grabbed it.

He didn’t let her have it, but he didn’t finish his swing either. He whooped, delighted, then grabbed a fistful of her shirt and picked her all the way off the ground just to slam her into the wall. Once. Twice.

It knocked the wind out of her, but that was all. It was a concrete-face wall and he had a tungsten carbide endoskeleton. He could have broken her ribs, her back, her skull. He chose to knock the wind out of her. Playing with her, like a cat with a mouse.

She didn’t release the prybar. It wasn’t defiance. She knew she was caught. It was pure reflex, the last desperate instinct of the dying. She had clutched at loose blades of grass and floating twigs in the water that night her mother had tried to drown her. This was no different.

Blue’s shiny green eyes shifted to look at her hands white-knuckled on the prybar that he held. His speaker blew out a little dust when he snorted. “You’re cute,” he told her, Bonnie’s words in Bonnie’s own voice, his own, low and good-natured with just a hint of Texas. “Come on now, you’re going to hurt someone with that thing. Drop it, sweetpea. Dro-o-o-p it. That’s it. Atta-girl. Give it to me. There we go.” He pulled the prybar out of her slowly opening grip, gave her an extremely gentle conk on the head with the rounded bit, then tossed it into the writhing heap of parts, calling, “Chica! Catch!”

Cables lashed around it at once, separate speakers hissing and squealing as it fought with itself for possession of this prize. The winner enveloped it, working half of a hand onto the bent claw and securing it as best it could with wires and clamps, using its new arm to slap at other reaching tendrils.
“Go get ’em, Chica!” Blue cheered, adding in a conspiratorial aside, “She’s not going to keep it. They’ll gang up on her, they always do. Say now…” He paused, head cocked, eyes whirring as he focused on her. “You look familiar. Have we met?”

Ana didn’t answer, didn’t move.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, laughing. “Let me guess, Mama told you not to talk to strangers, huh? Well, we can fix that.”

He pulled her suddenly close and smiled, his bunny-muzzle splitting down the front, plastic plates aligning themselves to form a broad grin, baring his deceptively flat-topped teeth. Behind this smile, his second jaws glinted. “Hi there!” he purred, staring without blinking into her eyes. “I’m your best buddy, Bonnie the Bunny!” His head tipped, one ear folding rakishly forward. “Who are you?”
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Ana’s silence stretched out long, broken by the ticking sound as the florescent light flickered far back in the hall and the laborious scraping as…whatever that thing was shifted and growled.

“I don’t ask rhetorical questions, sweetpea,” Blue drawled. “And I don’t like repeating them. So if you like breathing, you had better answer every goddamn question I ask. Even if they sound silly and especially if you think the answers are going to get you into trouble. Believe me, you’re already in as much trouble as you can get and even though talking is not going to get you out, not talking is going to make it so much worse for you. Okay? Okay. So let’s start over. I’m Bonnie and you are…?”

Ana stared him down without speaking. She was caught. She was as good as dead. It may be over, but she’d be damned if she’d grovel for him.

Blue waited, ears twitching, and finally laughed. He released her shirt, tugging it straight and brushing off shards of glass she’d picked up in her ignoble scramble across the floor. Then he took her by the throat, not crushing, not even choking, but only making sure she felt the terrible, unbreakable strength in that easy grip.

Ana didn’t flinch, but he’d startled her and without thinking, she did something even worse: She hiked her knee into his groin.

He did back off, but only to look down between his legs with an expression of astonishment that became a hearty gust of laughter. He actually slapped his thigh with the hand that was not squeezing the life out of her. “What in the chicken-fried hell was that supposed to accomplish?” he asked, still laughing.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, more embarrassed than dismayed at his reaction.

“You’re a little tense. I get it. You hurt yourself?” he asked sympathetically.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Well, that’s what you get for kicking and you’re lucky that’s all you get. I could snap that drumstick off and eat it if I wanted to, and next time you do something silly, I just might. I know you read the rules, I saw you do it, but let me remind you that if you don’t play nice with the Toys —” His muzzle split, showing her all his teeth. “—we don’t play nice with you. So…what do we say?”

“I’m sorry,” she rasped.

He nodded, still smiling. “And?”

“And what?” Ana’s stomach tightened. She lifted her chin, determined not to let her apprehension show, and said, “What do you want me to do, kiss it better?”

His ears snapped up. He let out a startled whoop, followed by another gust of laughter. “No! God, no! I want you to hold still! Jeez, lady, have some self-control! I don’t even know your name!” He
paused pointedly, then added, “And if I don’t hear that name in the next three seconds—”

“Trinity,” she said, the first name beside her own to come to mind. It had been her stage name back at the steakhouse where she used to dance. Looking back, she didn’t know why she hadn’t just told him her actual name, except that some primal trapped-animal instinct did not want this predator to get any more of her than he already had.

One of Blue’s plastic eyebrows rose while the other slowly lowered. “Okay, technically, that’s an answer, but are you sure this is how you want to start? With a lie?”

“It’s the truth.”

He tsked, but didn’t push it. “You got a last name?”

“Bell.”

“Trinity Bell,” he repeated scornfully. “That sounds like a stripper name.”

“Tell that to my mother.”

“Maybe I will. What’s her name?”

The question was so unexpected that she nearly blurted out the truth, only to catch herself, and then silently curse because now her hesitation was screaming up the silence. “Mary,” she said, too late.

“Mary,” he drawled, stretching out the word to underline just how much sarcasm he could fit into four little letters. “See, now I’m torn. There are times when a little white lie between friends is okay, but we are not friends and this is not one of those times. When a stranger introduces herself with a fake name—and such a bad fake name to boot!—well, that tells me I will never be able to trust one word that person says, so there’s no reason to continue a conversation, is there? I should just kill you now. But on the other hand…”

He showed her Bonnie’s hand, fingers splayed wide, big enough to cover her entire face at once and just, oh, just crush it. He saw these thoughts in her eyes. His muzzle split, broadening his smile.

“On the other hand,” he said again, using that hand to smooth back the loose hairs framing her face. “I’ve been down here a long time with nothing to do except imagine what I’d do if I wasn’t alone. You don’t count,” he said with sudden irritation as the Tangle shifted. To Ana, he said, “They don’t count, do they?”

Ana thought the safest way to answer that was not to answer at all. “What do you mean, ‘they’?” she asked instead. “You said it was Toy Chica.”

He kept staring at her for a moment or two, letting her know he knew he was being deflected, but then glanced over at the Tangle, where a pink eye peeped out at him from deep in the coils of cables and bones. “Only partly.”

“Who else is in there?”

Blue shrugged with his ears, now looking over the rest of the Tangle without much interest. “Just a couple designs that never made it entirely off the drawing board, if you get me. You wouldn’t know the names, so whatever. We’re getting away from the point,” he said, turning back to her with a smile, “and the point is, if I kill you now, it’d be like…like turning to the last page of a book before you read it, you know? I mean, full disclosure, I’m going to kill you,” he said matter-of-
factly. “But we can have some fun first, right?”

“Are you coming on to me?” she asked in a voice that was still a little choked but mostly steady.

He laughed, not just humoring her but like he really thought that was funny, then dropped his eyelids in a level, scornful smile. “A squirmy little meatsack like you? Get over yourself, sweetpea.” He drew back slightly, eyes whirring as his suddenly thoughtful gaze moved over her face, then her body, then back up to her face again. “But you know…I don’t believe that’s where the average human’s mind would go in a situation like this, what with me looking how I look and being what I am. So…Is that how I know you, ‘Trinity?’” Blue asked, smiling again, and then his grip instantly tightened, fingers digging like dull knives into her throat. “Did we fuck? Huh? Lady, you better answer or I’ll bite your fucking face off and lick your skull like a lollipop. Where do I know you from? Was it one of the party rooms upstairs? I said answer me!”

“No. It was the Lone Digger nightclub in southside L.A.,” Ana retorted. “You bought me a drink, I blew you in the alley, and then we went for tacos.”

“Funny,” he said, not laughing.

“Well, it was a joke, wasn’t it? Of course we never fucked! I never met you before in my life. Hell, I was four when this place closed!”

“Yeah?” He looked her over. “How long ago was that? Fifteen…Twenty years?”

“Almost thirty.”

His ears came up, then went down again, slow. “That long, huh? I knew it was awhile, but…thirty years. Damn.” He stared at her for what felt like a very, very long time, his face as blank as only plastic can be, and then suddenly said, “So what’s this tough cookie act about, sweetpea? You think I’ll be impressed and let you live? Because I should warn you, that’s been tried before and once I start biting off fingers, none of you meatsacks are all that tough.”

“Yeah, I know.” And she sure didn’t need him to tell her. Everybody wants it to be like the movies, where you bleed a little but it just makes you look that much cooler when you tell the guy working you over to fuck himself, but after all her years with Rider, Ana knew better. Once the wire clippers came into play, there are no tough guys.

Blue rolled his eyes with a huge sigh. “Okay, just stop. You’re better at it than my usual prey, but you’re still just another dumb human trying to talk your way out of a bad time. Do I look like a gullible bunny to you?”

“No.”

“So why do you do it? It wouldn’t bother me so much if it was just once in a while, but I swear, there’s only three types of people I ever see and that’s blubberers, bargainers and bullshitters.” Spying Waddles slumped at the end of the hall, Blue raised his free hand to mime tipping a hat and added in a deep, good-natured growl, “And various combinations thereof. Seriously,” he went on in his normal voice, “I had a guy—couldn’t have been more than fourteen—offer up all his friends, one after the other, and when we told him nope, sorry, they’re all already dead, he said he’d go home and bring us his little sister. Freddy pretends to think about it and you could just see the hope light up in this kid’s face. Now he’s saying he’s got three sisters and he’ll bring ‘em all if we just let him go. Freddy, playing along, says he doesn’t think the kid’s got the stuffing for something like that, and the kid instantly starts telling us about all these murders he’s done. And Freddy’s like, prove it, so he’s giving us the details, saying it happened at summer camp and it’s all I can do
to keep a straight face because the kid’s not even coming up with his own lies, he’s literally
describing a movie…” Blue trailed off with a frown of concentration. “I don’t remember the name
of it, but I know I saw it. The Purple Man loves horror movies. They were all he ever watched, so I
saw pretty much all of them. Shit, this is going to bug me all night…What was the name of that
goddamn movie?”

“Killing kids at summer camp could be a lot of movies. How’d he say he killed them?”

“Lots of different ways. Mostly a machete, though. And at one point, this scrawny little shit swears
he crushed another guy’s head with his bare hands until his eye popped out.”

“That’s Friday the Thirteenth, Part Three.”

Again the tip of the imaginary hat and the rumbling Freddy impersonation: “I defer to your
superior knowledge of stupid murder movies. So we kill the kid,” he went on, shaking his head.
“And me and Freddy go down the hall to where Chica’s got the other guy and what do you
suppose he’s telling her when we walk in?”

“How he squeezed a guy’s head until his eye popped out at summer camp?”

“Do you know how hard that is to do?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact. I do.”

He rolled his eyes and gave her a heavy-lidded Look. “You’re not seriously going to tell me you’ve
done it.”

“No. Never seen it happen. And the fact that I’ve never seen it happen despite the many times I’ve
seen a head aerated in front of me tells me it’s very difficult to do.”

“Aerated,” he repeated and chuckled. “That’s a good one. And you’re right, it’s hard. Eyes aren’t
exactly delicate, but they’re squishy and they’re held in there real good. You’re gonna pop it way
before you dig it out, you know? I’ve only ever gotten an eye to come out clean one time and it was
completely by accident.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Oh, stuffed a guy in the old Freddy-skin for safe-keeping and the next thing I know, boing! Eyes
rolling around on his muzzle, hanging by the stalks. It was hilarious, but yeah, what happened was,
I broke the guy’s face earlier. You know how it is. He was running from Chica and I was waiting
around the corner, and when he was almost there, I hopped out and gave him a boop on the nose.
Only, you know.”

“Big hand, little nose and a hell of a hard boop.”

“Right. So his eye socket must have already been broken when I put him in Freddy. Which was a
squeeze, I admit, but not that much of a squeeze. I think it only worked because there was nothing
holding the eyes in. And yet these kids, ninety pounds soaking wet, arms like breadsticks,
genuinely thought we’d believe they could crush a skull. How stupid do you have to be to say that?
How stupid do you have to be to see it in a movie and believe it could really happen? And how
fucking twisted do you have to be to want to watch that kind of stuff for fun in the first place? I
swear, what are you people putting in the water?”

“Fluoride.”
“And come on now, what’s the point?”

“Makes your teeth more resistant to cavities.”

“Not that, sass-mouth. The other thing. The thing where you, specifically, are trying to impress me with how badass you are. I already said I’m going to kill you. No matter what you do or say here, you’re going to die.”

“I know.”

“You say you know, but you’re still trying to bullshit me into thinking you don’t care.” Just that fast, Blue’s friendly smile was gone, replaced by flat ears and angry eyes. He pushed his face—his teeth—close and softly said, “I don’t like being lied to. I don’t care how fucking creative the lie is or how cute the liar is, it’s still amounts to you telling me you think I’m stupid enough to fall for it.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” said Ana and it was true.

He frowned, his eyes skipping back and forth as if reading her thoughts on her face.

“I know you can kill me. I know you don’t need a reason. I know I can’t stop you. The only thing I’m in control of is how I respond to that knowledge and I choose not to have hysterics. Deal with it.”

His ears twitched, registering pulses of amusement, irritation and curiosity. “Tough little cookie. No sugar, all spice. But I bet I can make you crumble.”

He could and she knew it, but the fact that he’d warned her instead of just doing it indicated he was willing to be persuaded not to, for the right incentive. And the right incentive was obvious: He was bored.

Ana took a chance.

“Want to play a game?” she asked.

He focused in on her at once. After a moment, his ears cocked to a jaunty angle and he smiled, but his eyes never lost that focus. “What kind of game?”

“Guess my name,” she said. “I’ll give you three guesses. If you get it wrong, you have to let me go.”

“And if I get it right?”

“I have to let you go.”

He laughed, but his ears twitched, intrigued. “Okay, deal.” He offered the hand that wasn’t locked around her neck.

She shook it.

“Three guesses, huh?” he mused, then turned a knowing smirk on her. “Is it Trinity Bell?”

“No.”

“So in other words, you’re a liar. That means I could guess your name right and you’d never tell me.” He feigned horror, ears low and quaking, eyes wide, but still grinning. “You... You’re not
going to let me go, are you? You’re going to lock me up and leave again for thirty years!” he shouted suddenly, tightening his grip. He pulled her off the wall just to slam her back into it a few inches higher, so that she scrabbled on her tiptoes, clutching at his arm. “Is that the real game here, ‘Trinity?’ Because I already played that one and call me a spoilsport, but it sucks!”

She couldn’t answer. She couldn’t breathe. She grabbed at his wrist, prying at his fingers in a desperate, doomed effort to unlock his immoveable grip.

“Maybe you should play it for a while and find out for yourself. Maybe I should just put you in here—” He reached out Bonnie’s long arm to draw the bar on the nearest cell and push the door open on its screaming hinges. “—and walk away. I haven’t been outside in…well, you know. Thirty years. Almost. And I miss it,” he said with static in his voice that showed itself as snow across her fading sight. “A lot. I want to see the sky again, you know? I want to see people and hear voices. Real ones, I mean. Hell, I want to see the dining room! But as much as I want to get out of here, please believe me, I will not forget to lock the doors behind me and turn the lights off when I go. You really only get the full experience in the dark.”

Ana tasted blood in her mouth. She’d bitten her lips, she thought distantly, and if she hadn’t pissed herself yet, that would come soon. This was it. She was dying. She was done.

“Of course, you won’t get the full experience anyway, will you? No, you’ll just die, like the weak fucking bag of meat you are. It might take you a few days—and I bet they’ll feel like long, long days—but you won’t have years, like I did, to decide that that’s the kind of bad time you wouldn’t wish on anyone. Not anyone. So I’m going to be the nice guy here.” A blob of blue color with burning eyes pushed through the growing black as he leaned close. “I’ll just snap your fucking neck. It might not be painless, but it’ll be quick and you won’t die alone. You’re welcome.”

She waited for her life to flash before her eyes the way everyone said it did, but all she saw in those last airless moments was Bonnie—faceless, eyeless, still Bonnie—putting his arms around her as they hid from Freddy in the closet on that first rainy night, singing *If You’ll Be My Man* in whispers and swaying just a little. And Mia Rose was right. There was no hope, no heaven and no God in the end. Just Bonnie.

And suddenly, there was air. It cut her throat, hammered her lungs, brutally beating life back into her and dragging her in chains back into this reality.

Blue watched through narrow, unmoved eyes as she dry-retched and convulsed at the end of his arm and finally said, “You know why I let you live just now?”

She shook her head, blinking tears of suffocation away, still holding on to his wrist while her legs steadied.

“Me, neither. It made me feel weird, like I didn’t want to see you die. And I do. I really, really do.” He thought about that, watching her recover, and ultimately shrugged. “I guess I really am bored. Maybe I want to actually play your stupid guessing game. So…Is it…Rumplestiltskin?”

Ana waited for him to stop laughing and said, “No. Last guess,” in a voice still roughened by her near brush with death.

“Okay, okay. You’re right. Time to get serious.”

He leaned in suddenly, forcing her up on her tip-toes so that he didn’t have to bend too much to put their eyes on a level. She could hear the joints of his fingers creaking, adjusting his grip on her neck. She forced herself to relax, to breathe, as she watched his teeth come closer. His two green
eyes blurred together into one. His soft nose bumped hers in a bunny-kiss.

“Comfy?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Well, you can just tough it out. It won’t last long, if you’re good. You want to be Uncle Bonnie’s good girl, don’t you? Nope! Don’t nod! Don’t you move a muscle. Just say it.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

Was he serious? Probably. Haltingly, Ana said, “I want to be your good girl.”

“Whose now?” he needled, tiny servos whining as his grin widened. He was too close for her to even see his teeth, but she could feel them, their promise like static on her unprotected skin. “Do it right.”

“I want…to be Uncle Bonnie’s good girl.”

“Yeah, you do. So what you’re going to do is, you’re going to take some nice, deep, slow breaths and relax that pretty face of yours so Uncle Bonnie can get a good look at you. If you can do that, I promise I’ll let you go.” He tipped a wink at her. “So you can let me go, like you promised. You always keep your promises, don’t you, sweetpea?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t.” He gave her a long second to absorb that, then said, “Hold still now. I need to initialize a few things. Be with you in two shakes.”

His speakers let out a series of clicks, slow at first, but taking on speed until it was like a playing card clipped to the spokes of a bicycle wheel. David used to do that, she thought from far away, pretending it was a motorcycle. She remembered him golden in the sunlight, pedaling with his eyes closed, roaring away on highways in his mind, but no matter how much she tried, she couldn’t see herself with him and the memory faded. He had escaped…and she was still here.

The clicking stopped. Blue’s eyes opened up wide, the lenses of his pupils dilating until they filled his sockets. The silver pin-point lights at their backs turned green and became suddenly and inexplicably painful.

Ana shut her eyes instinctively, forced them open, then had to shut them again because the light, which seemed so gentle, pierced her like knives. They left reddish burns across her sight, darting around the insides of her eyelids, not in the shape of a roundish blur, but in a grid pattern.

Blue did not comment at first, but eventually murmured, “Look at me.”

She tried, she really did, but could barely see him through the light and the pain.

“All right, close them,” he said after a while. “And watch that squirming and squinting you’re doing. You throw off my results and Uncle Bonnie will be very disappointed. Uncle Bonnie expresses his disappointment with teeth sometimes. Deep breaths. Relax.”

She did her best to obey. She waited.

A very long time later, the oppressive closeness of him eased with a whir and a wheeze of old joints
as he leaned back. The fingers at her throat flexed again, pensively. “You can look now,” he said.

She opened her eyes. The light-burns floated, ghost-like, across his plastic face as he studied her. His ears twitched now and then, not glitchily, but only thinking.

“I’m ready for my third guess,” he said at last and grinned at her expression. “I bet you thought I’d forgotten we were playing a game, huh? I didn’t forget. I like games. I win a lot, more than any of the others, except maybe Foxy, and only because Foxy doesn’t have to obey all the same rules that we did. That stupid mask never fooled anyone. But I forget. This place closed when you were only four, so you don’t know anything about that, do you…Anastasia Stark?”

She could not hide her surprise, but she tried, which could only make it more obvious.

He grinned.

“How…” Her voice faltered. She lifted her chin, like that was the problem, and said clearly, “How did you know?”

“Facial scanners,” he said, tapping one eye and closing the other in a wink. “You look just like your mother. Except…” He paused, waggling his ears, grinning.

She tried to wait him out, but gave the cause up for lost after just a few seconds. He was right on top of her. He could feel her heart pounding under her skin. “Except what?”

His grin widened until she could see his second set of teeth gleaming in the back of his throat. “You have your father’s eyes.”

She waited, her confusion gradually coiling into a hot knot in the center of her chest as she realized…he was serious.

He burst out laughing. “Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s just funny, you know? I really am your Uncle Bonnie! Or your cousin. Your brother? Well, you know how it is in Mammon. The family trees grow pretty twisted. Not like it matters much.” He looked over at the Tangle, still grinning. “We were family too. Hey, Chica! Come say hi!”

The Tangle shifted and grew quiet. None of its eyes appeared.

“Aw, she’s no fun anymore,” Blue said, pouting. “We used to be such good friends. Used to talk for hours. Shared our secrets, shared our toys…and then, you know, this happened.” He glanced around the hallway with a what-are-ya-gonna-do shrug. “And she got all moody. Always picking fights with the others when she knew Freddy wasn’t there to step in anymore. So yeah, they’d gang up on her. What did she expect? She was being a bitch. You were being a bitch,” he told the Tangle severely.

The Tangle muttered deep in its coils.

“But I was her friend, so I took care of them for her. You’d think she’d appreciate that, wouldn’t you? But no. No, it was all, ‘What have you done?’” he said, speaking Toy Chica’s lines in a high, feminine voice that did actually sound a bit like Chica’s, in spite of his mockery. “And ‘We’re going to get in so much trouble when he finds out,’ and ‘I’m telling!’ And yeah, okay, I may have lost my temper at that, but I said I was sorry,” Blue continued, still gazing at the mass of parts. “I didn’t have to do that. I was the bigger bunny here, I forgave her. I don’t know what else she expects me to do. She knows it’s against the rules to fix each other.”

“But not to break each other apart?”
Not a smart question, but he merely shrugged. “Probably never thought we ever would. They both had weird ideas about family. And I liked them! Most of them. Some of them. I liked Freddy and Chica. Mostly Chica. But if I’d been a little slower that day, you know damn well it’d be you telling me no hard feelings,” he told the Tangle, turning back to Ana with another shrug. “And there aren’t, not really. It just hurts, you know? When you look at your best friend one day and you realize…you’re not friends anymore. I miss that. Having someone to talk to. Play with. It’s hard to be down here without a friend.” His thumb stroked once along her windpipe in a bruising caress. “I don’t know why I’m telling you any of this. Maybe I’m lonely. Do you think I’m lonely?”

“Yes.”

“Well of course you’d say that, you’ve been trying to ride my dick since you showed up, you pervert. Still…you’re kind of cute, for a human.” He lapsed into silence and his ears said he wasn’t just torturing her with a dramatic pause. “That’s a weird thing for me to think, but it’s true. Huh. You’re also kind of fun to talk to. Maybe we should actually be friends, what do you say?”

“What exactly would that entail?” Ana asked.

His speaker emitted a dry puff of humor as his ears shifted, betraying a certain degree of irritation along with a slightly larger degree of curiosity. He looked at his hand on her throat and then at her. “Are you really in a position to be choosy?”

“There’s always a choice.”

“Technically true, but most people don’t count the one that means certain death.”

“But I’m here, so what does that tell you?”

Blue looked up and around as if studying his surroundings for the first time. “I’m not sure what you think it means, but it tells me you make really bad choices.”

“Yeah, so don’t expect me to be rational right now. I am a straight-up trash-fire of poor judgement. I could do anything.”

He looked back down at her. After a moment, he laughed again. His grip eased a little more. “I can’t decide whether I like you yet or not. You’re a terrible liar, but you almost pull it off just by sheer nerve. I like that. I don’t see it very often. Freddy gets the all the really fun ones, for some reason. I always seem to get the whiners. You don’t whine, do you?”

“No.”

“No,” he echoed, grinning. “I admire that in a meatsack. Maybe I should let you go.”

“Is this where I’m supposed to humiliate myself by begging for my life? Because I wouldn’t waste my breath when I already know you’re lying.”

“That hurts my feelings,” he told her with a breezy flick of one ear. “I haven’t lied to you yet. Didn’t I tell you, right from the start, that I’m going to kill you? You’re the one who’s been lying, practically with every breath. And besides, I have actually let people go in the past, you know.”

“Horseshit.”

“No, it’s true. Bunny scout’s promise.” He hopped two fingers across his chest—another reminder of the real Bonnie. “One of them even got all the way away. I think.” He thought about it some more, ultimately shrugging. “If she didn’t, I never heard about it. I like to think she’s alive
somewhere.”

There was something genuinely wistful in the way he said that. Ana fought not to react, because every reaction was as good as sharpening another weapon and putting it directly in his hand, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Why?” she asked.

He shrugged again, more with his ears than his shoulders, while the features of his face closed off. “I don’t know. She was fun. Kind of cute.” His eyes whined as he looked her over and suddenly, he grinned again. “But enough about her, let’s talk about you. Specifically, what are you doing here? And don’t ask me to believe a pretty girl like you has got nothing better to do on a Saturday night but break into Freddy’s. If you had an ounce of brains in that head of yours, you had to know I was going to kill the first person stupid enough to let me out, unless I had a damned good reason not to. So? Let’s hear it.”

Ana thought fast and since she wasn’t going home, she went big.

“Erik Metzger sent me,” she said.

That got all his attention and even drew a few eyes out of the Tangle.

After a moment’s hard stare, Blue politely said, “Say that again?”

“Erik Metzger sent me.”

He stared at her some more, then leaned slowly back even as his ears pushed forward. “And we were getting along so well,” he said mournfully, shaking his head. “First of all, he’s dead. I saw that go down myself and the way he went? Hoo-boy, I have never seen a deader dead man than him. Secondly…” He paused, head cocked, then said, “You know what, that’s such a good first reason that I don’t even need another one!”

“I never said he wasn’t dead. I said he sent me.”

Blue gave that some thought while the Tangle whispered static at itself.

“Okay, that’s a fair point,” he said at last. “But leaving aside entirely the whole matter of who brought him back—and don’t even say Marion, because she could barely change out a lightbulb—the thing is, he’s not stupid enough to have sent you here. You, of all people. You may be family, but he knows you’re not in the hands-off program and it’s been so long since I’ve had anything to play with that I might just be overcome by…well, by any number of impulses. And he knows me. He knows what I can do. So why would he ever send you here, knowing you will—not might, not maybe—you will end up under me, screaming?”

This was an old threat, familiar, and Ana slipped into her role with ease and comfort as if shrugging on a well-worn sweater. “What makes you think I’ll scream?”

“Call it the benefit of prior experience,” he said dryly. “Look at you, pretending you’re totally okay with anything I do when you have no idea”—just that fast, his eyes were black and his voice had become an ear-splitting roar. “—what I could do to you! Do you think you’re safe? Huh? Why? Because you’re his? Ha! I’m his!” he shouted, blasting her ears with static and electronic noise. “Was I safe?”

He backed up suddenly just to throw her into the wall. Her back took the brunt of the blow, but she managed to knock her head a damn good one on the concrete too. She didn’t go black, but she did
lose some frame-rate, hitting the ground before she even knew she’d left the wall. She lay gasping on her stomach, staring through wisps of dark hair at his scuffed plastic feet. She fully expected to see one of them rise, maybe hover dramatically over her for a second or two before it came down to crush her skull.

“I don’t know why you thought that was a good idea,” he said, far, far above her. “If it was a lie, you had to know I’d call you on it. If it wasn’t...well, you know he left me here to rot. Did you really think I had a shred of loyalty left for him?”

“When you put it that way,” Ana rasped, massaging at her bruised throat.

“You’ve got pluck,” he said. “I’ll give you that. I really think we could have been friends...and now I’ve got to kill you. That kind of sucks. You got any last words?”

She nodded.

“Oh yeah? Well, go ahead. I’m all ears,” Blue said, waggling them without smiling. “Make it quick.”

“It won’t take long because there’s really only one thing worth saying, and it’s so fucking self-evident, I can’t believe you really need me to say it at all. But okay, here we go.” Ana rolled onto her knees and climbed with effort to her feet so she could look him in the eye when she said, “As bad as you’ve had it, that’s not as bad as it gets.”

Blue tipped one ear forward sarcastically. “Is that it?”

“He knows where I am and he knows you’re here. He wasn’t clear on whether you were—” Ana deliberately turned her head to stare at the Tangle, whose many eyes were once more peeking at her from the folds of its heaving body, then at Waddles at the foot of the stairs, and finally back at Blue. “—up and moving, but he knows you’re here.”

Blue shrugged. “Yeah. So?”

“So when I never come back, he’ll know it wasn’t because I took the wrong turn at Albuquerque. Do what you want with me, but start thinking up your excuse now, because he’s not going to buy the whole ‘I was shaking her hand hello when I sneezed and it accidentally tore off and landed in my mouth’ shtick. Loyalty? He doesn’t need your loyalty. You’re programmed to be obedient.”

“To him, not you.”

“When he sends me, that’s the same fucking thing and you know it. You found a loophole, congratulations, but when he gets his hands on you, that loophole goes right around your neck, and as bad as you’ve had it,” she said again, “that is not as bad as it gets.”

His speaker huffed out a laugh while his face remained cold, impassive. “He’s got to find me first.”

“You go any further than the parking lot without permission and you’ll trigger your homing protocols,” Ana reminded him.

He scoffed, but the longer she simply stared him down, the more scorn bled out of his features. “What?” he said at last. “What homing protocols?”

“You go further than a certain distance for a certain amount of time and you’ll come back involuntarily. And probably emit a beacon of some sort so he can come pick you up if you’ve can’t get home on your own. If you resist, you’ll go black. Maybe permanently. It’s immutable code.”
His gaze narrowed, flicking here and there around her face before coming back to her unblinking eyes. His ears went crooked, unsure.

Ana waited.

“If he’s back,” Blue said, putting emphasis on the first word, “what is it he wants so damn much that he’d send you right into my hands to get it, but not enough to come get it himself? There’s nothing here he can’t replace. Including yours truly.”

Before she could answer, an idea came to him; she saw it as clearly as if a lightbulb had blinked on above his head.

“Oh, that,” he said and laughed derisively, then turned and stared walking toward the closed door in its lonely spotlight at the end of the hall. “Well, come on.”

She thought about running then, but even in her mind, it was a perfunctory sort of thought. He’d hear her if she tried and he wouldn’t have his back to her now if he wasn’t one hundred percent sure he could run her down. He probably wanted her to try, the same way a cat will turn a captured mouse loose, just to have the fun of chasing it again. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

More than that, she would not go back to Freddy empty-handed.

She followed him.
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Deep under the Toybox, Ana walked, following Blue down the long basement hall. How long? Long enough to mentally replay the night’s events and highlight a few bad decisions, but not long enough to think of what she could have done differently or come up with any kind of plan for how to get out of this pizzeria alive.

She had been in a lot of grim situations in her time. She had fought tall odds. She had seen the light of murder burn in someone’s eyes and she had seen the light of life leave them. She had been knocked down and got up, been beaten unconscious and woke up, been drowned and swam to shore, had her life in another’s fist a hundred times and always walked away.

This was different.

Blue never once checked to see if she was following him. He whistled as he walked. Everybunny Needs Somebunny. Ana, who should be thinking of nothing but how in the hell to get out of here, wondered if he used to dance with Toy Chica to that song, the way Bonnie had danced with her. Just a few hours ago, she’d been laughing, unaware that death was imminent. She wasn’t supposed to die tonight. How could she die tonight? Her shirt said Soylent Green. Good People make Good Food. That was a great shirt for a mugshot, but a stupid shirt for her body to be found in. She never would have worn this shirt if she’d known she was going to die tonight.

The hall couldn’t go on forever. Blue reached the door, opened it, switched on the lights, then stood aside to let her enter ahead of him.

Her first impression was one of size, even though the area she walked into was little bigger than a bedroom…a comparison that suggested itself no doubt because of the narrow bed in the center. It did not stand on the floor but hung on chains suspended from the ceiling at a height that made climbing on or off for resting awkward, but was perfect for bending someone over, with restraints to make sure they stayed where you put them. There were no pillows or blankets, but there were sheets, rumpled and stained by more than just time. Nearby, she saw a spacious shower and a small rack of spare clothes. Purple towel hanging over the shower door. Purple uniforms neatly folded on the rack.

The next thing she saw was the animatronic heads. No other empty casings—no arms, no legs, no tails, not even extra ears or noses for when little hands invariably pulled them off. Just the heads. Freddy, Bonnie, Chica and Foxy, both old models and Toy models, even a few Foxannes. Dozens of them, lined up cheek to cheek on ceiling-mounted sliding shelves, several layers’ worth, dividing this room with a wall of empty, eyeless stares.

But behind them, the room continued on.

Ana went over, giving the bed a wide berth, and gave a shelf a careful push. It didn’t want to move. The track was old and unmaintained, but after a token resistance, it gave way and slid aside without disturbing any of the heads it held. Behind it, another rack full of mascot heads…and another, and another, and then the room just seemed to open up like the wardrobe into Narnia, bringing Ana into a glorious secret world full of animatronic parts.

Ana stood like a woman in a dream, her eyes lost in a seemingly infinite supply of endoskeletal
bones, coils of wire, cogs and gears, pumps and pins, from specialized parts like cooling fans to the lowly screw and every part in-between. They were in boxes, on shelves, on tables, on the floor—like toys in a toddler’s playroom, they were scattered everywhere but the ceiling, and apart from a small pile of visibly worn odds and ends that had probably come off Blue as he maintained himself over the years, they were all brand-new.

“What are you doing?” Blue asked as Ana’s feet carried her forward into this animatronic haven. When she looked back at him, he nodded at the heads. “That’s what you came for, isn’t it? No,” he realized, ears slowly pushing forward. “No, you want the parts. Why?”

“For the new restaurant,” Ana said, thinking fast to construct the lie without letting it show on her face. It was hard to gauge her success. Blue’s emotive ears demonstrated neither acceptance nor suspicion, only amused curiosity. “New location, new menu—”

“New band?” He nodded, running his gaze over the different heads on the many, many racks. “What happened to the old one?”

“They weren’t working out.”

“Even Foxy? Not a chance. Foxy was his favorite. Oh, but you just go on with your incredibly believable story. If you forgot your place, you’re at the bit where you tell me he’s making a new batch of animatronics, and even though he can stamp one of us out nose to toes in just a few days, he sent you here to scavenge up a bunch of thirty-year-old parts that probably—” He waved his over-long arm theatrically. “—won’t even fit another model.”

“Not sure why you find that so unbelievable. Do you have any idea how expensive your raw materials are?”

Blue shrugged. “Money never mattered to him before and that’s a hell of a lot of work just to save a few bucks.”

“It’s more like a few million bucks and he’s not the one doing the work. Besides, I think he’s worried about the Press breaking down if he pushes it too much.”

Blue’s ears twitched at the word ‘Press,’ but all he said was, “Money’s that tight, huh? So he sent you here on a recycling expedition to fill your pockets with spare parts?”

“Yeah, my pockets, once I run out of the room in the truck waiting outside.”

“You got the keys on you by any chance?”

“No, I put it in neutral and pushed it ten miles down Mulholland Drive,” she said irritably. “What kind of question is that? You can’t really think I came all this way just to burn rubber out of here at the first chance and go back to him empty-handed?”

“Let’s say it’s a going concern and it ain’t going anywhere without me. Gimme.”

Rolling her eyes, Ana reached into her pocket, but as her fingers brushed the familiar plastic fob of her keyring, a thought struck. She brought out the other keys—her aunt’s keys, Metzger’s keys—and threw them instead.

Blue caught them out of the air and flipped them into his palm for study. He frowned, thumbing through them one by one, until he came to the star-shaped allen wrench, the one the animatronics weren’t allowed to touch.
Ana held her breath, waiting for him to glitch out and fall, but Blue didn’t even twitch. His plastic brows scraped a little higher, then lowered. He palmed the keys, pinched the Frankenstein stringdoll between his thumb and forefinger, and looked at that, too.

At last, he raised his eyes to look at her, one ear flopped forward and the other off to the side in a wide V. “I know you’re lying and it’s killing me that I can’t figure out how. But all right. You’re making an effort. I can give you the benefit of the doubt.” He opened his wrist, dropped the keys inside, and snapped the compartment shut, nodding at the heads. “I hope it’s a big truck because those are going to take up a lot of room.”

“We’re not taking those.”

His eyebrows climbed. “What?”

“He wants all new skins.”

He stared at her for several seconds before huffing out a laugh and saying, “Skins?”

“Yes, skins,” said Ana with what she thought was just the right tone of impatience. “The whole point is to have new faces. He can’t use those.”

Blue met it with an expression of amusement pretending to be confusion. “Use them?”

“Oh my God, man, are you trying to piss me off now? Why would he want a bunch of old heads?”

“That’s a very good question,” he said feigning seriousness. “Why would he want a bunch of old heads? Hmm. Tell you what, why don’t you go investigate?”

Ana didn’t move.

“Go on. This is good, you’re going to laugh,” he assured her. “Go ahead, I’ll stand right here and I won’t say a word, Bunny scout’s promise.” He held up two fingers and hopped them across his chest, shoulder to shoulder. “Go on.”

Ana came back into the bedroom part of the room. It only took a few steps. She looked back at Blue.

“Whichever one you want,” he told her. “Who’s your favorite?”

She studied the nearest rack, then moved a little over and put her hands on a Toy Bonnie head.

Blue snorted. “Oh flattery will get you everywhere, sweetpea, even places you don’t really want to go.”

She started to pick it up, but had only lifted it maybe an inch when, with a leathery rustle and a muted thump, something shifted inside it.

She looked at Blue.

He grinned.

Ana lifted the head higher and gave it a shake.

A head fell out. A human head. A skull, really, wrapped in dried skin with a coarse mat of dirty pale hair hanging off it. There was a trace of glittery color on its withered lips, a ghost of powder over its paper-thin eyelids.
“I remember her,” Blue remarked. “She had a mood ring. Those things don’t work, you know. It stayed deep blue the whole time. That means happy, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Ana said faintly, looking at the rest of the shelf…the rest of the rack…all the racks. And most of the heads were Toy models, but not all of them. There were a lot of Foxys, but that was no wonder. He’d been retrofitted as a Toy, made to play the Game, but what about the rest of them? There had to be a dozen Freddys, a handful of Bonnies, a Chica. Chica, of all people. Chica wouldn’t hurt a flea to scratch it.

‘Just because she wasn’t used in the shows doesn’t mean she got to stop playing the Game,’ Ana told herself sternly. ‘When Night Mode comes on, they go black. She didn’t have a choice. She never even knew she’d done it. None of them did. As far as she knows, they’re not allowed to hurt anyone. She said so.’

“Yeah, then they really don’t work,” Blue was saying, “because she was not happy. At all. You sure he doesn’t want them?”

Ana tried to put the fake head down, but now the real one was in its place. She had to pick it up and fit it back inside before she could return it to the shelf. It was heavier than she would have thought it would be. “I don’t know what he wants, but I know space in the truck is limited. I guess when we see him, we’ll remind him they’re here, see if he wants us to come back.”

“I guess so. Speaking of priorities,” Blue said, watching with his enigmatic smile as she returned to the other side of the room to explore the hardware aisles. “For someone who was supposedly sent here after parts, you sure seem awfully surprised to see them.”

“I am. I didn’t think this place had any.” She picked up an elbow-joint, put it down and picked up a humerus, put it down and dug her hand into a box of phalanges, letting them spill through her living fingers. “If he had all this, why have you got…I mean, why did he fix you like that?”

Blue glanced at Bonnie’s arm and his smile turned scornful. “You’re cute. He might have been King Shit when it came to computer programming, but as for the mechanical stuff? Ha. He could barely manage plug-in parts. Besides, there was nothing wrong with my old arm, not until he put this oversized piece of shit on me.”

Did that mean the parts weren’t compatible between the animatronic models after all?

“What’s wrong with it?” Ana asked.

“It’s not mine,” he told her. “It’s just…I mean, it’s on me, it’s attached to me, but it’s not mine. He didn’t take the old one off right, he just—” He made a harsh crunching sound in his speaker as he grabbed air and yanked. “—and put this on and he knew better, I know he knew better, and now…there’s always this…like…staticky feeling…only it’s not really a feeling, more of a thought, a…something. It works, it does everything the same as my real arm, but it’s always got that little buzz of not-me inside it. It’s enough to drive a guy crazy,” he said, glancing down at his side and flexing the fingers.

Ana was careful not to react.

“And you want to hear a funny joke? I could change it out. I know how. There’s sure enough parts here. I could easily build myself another one that actually fucking fits. There’s no skin, but whatever. I don’t need skin. I could build one…but it takes two hands to install it,” he said, biting off each word and punctuating it with a furious peal of laughter. “Chica could have installed it for me—well, she used to could have—but it’s against the rules to fix each other! Just ourselves!
Funny joke, huh? Funny fucking joke. *You could just die laughing!*

“I could fix you,” Ana said and when he turned his black eyes on her, she offered him a conciliatory half-shrug. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Ha! Yeah, right,” he muttered, but his pupils shrunk and the green came back into his eyes. “You want to know why he gave me this stupid thing? Huh? Because I couldn’t play the fucking guitar the way he thought I should. He said I wasn’t trying hard enough. I tried. Who the hell is he to complain? He couldn’t play the fucking guitar either, could he?” He paused, his ears coming partway out of their angry slant. “Wait, can he?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve never seen him play one. No.”

“No!” he said, snapping back into fury. “And if he didn’t like the way I played, maybe he should have programmed me to play better or at least given me a chance to practice! But what does he do instead? He rips my arm off and puts this one on, I guess because he thought he programmed that one to play better, but guess what? Same programming! Just a better fucking musician. And even after he knew it wouldn’t work, you know what he did? He cut Chica’s hands off, like that was going to make her play the stupid keyboard better! At least he cut them both off,” he added sourly. “They didn’t even look that bad on her. Birds, you know. Big hands just make ‘em look more like wings. Kind of goofy, but not bad, not like—” He glanced again at his arm, his facial plates flexing in a sneer. “And Freddy! Do you know what he did to Freddy?”

Ana shook her head, not at all sure she wanted to know.

But Blue laughed and slumped back against the doorjamb, kicking sullenly at a stray sensor plate that had found its way across the floor near to him. “Nothing. Just took the magic acts off his sets. Not that he gives much of a shit about Freddy, but—” He shuddered hard, joints creaking, and finished on a curt laugh. “Well, I can’t say the name when I know it’s him. How stupid is that? I can say it when it’s just Freddy. Whatever, you know who I mean. We’ll call him…Let’s call him Zero. Freddy was Zero’s favorite toy…and Zero is the Purple Man’s favorite toy. Or was, I guess I should say. If he threw Freddy out with the old band and doesn’t have enough money to make new parts, I don’t even have to ask what happened there, huh? So I won’t.”

Ana waited.

“How’d it happen?” Blue asked, not looking at her.

“Fell down the stairs.”

“Fell?”

“Pretty sure his grandson greased ‘em up first.”

That got his attention. “Grandson? Shoot, how many crotch-goblins has old Zero got running around anyway?”

“Just the one, I think. He only ever had one kid and as far as I know, Randall only ever had Chad.”

Blue’s eyes narrowed, confused and a little suspicious, but then his ears came up. “Oh, you mean Randy? And Randy’s got a kid,” Blue marveled to himself. “Little Randy. Shit, he was in diapers the last time I saw him. That’s so unbelievable…and yet it’s the first thing you’ve said that I actually completely believe.”

“It’s hard to feel friendly toward you when you keep calling me a liar.”
“It’s hard not to call you a liar when you keep lying to me,” he replied evenly. “And before you get puffy at me, let me just stop you and explain that humans have a number of involuntary muscular reflex reactions to indicate their emotional states. Little things, like the tightening of your skin. Thinning of the lips. A slight upturn at the corner of your eyes. Some of them only take one-thirtieth of a second. A real blink-and-you-miss-it kind of thing. Only I don’t blink. So I don’t miss much.”

Ana said nothing, intensely aware of how much that was telling him.

“Yeah,” he said, looking her over, point by point. “So I know you’re lying to me, like, a lot. But I also know you’re telling me some truths. And even the lies are at least interesting lies. The way you talk about him…the Purple Man…like you’re trying to convince me you’re afraid of him when you’re really just…sad.” His eyes came back to lock with hers. “You love him, don’t you?”

Ana stared. Too late, she said, “No.”

“That’s a lie,” he said, not as an accusation, but just as a man marks a scorecard. “You know what he’s done and you hate what he’s done, but you still love him.”

A different choking grip had her by the throat now. Mutely, Ana shook her head.

“Because you think he loves you,” Blue mused, the lenses of his eyes whirring as they changed focus. “He doesn’t, you know. You may think he does…Hell, he may think he does, but he doesn’t. I may be just a simple country bunny, but even I know that guys like him…they don’t love. You know how I know?”

Ana said nothing.

“Because I don’t.” His gaze shifted to the wall, or maybe the past, as his ears became thoughtful. “I don’t even want to anymore. When did that happen?”

A few seconds passed, pulled long and sharp as razors.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” he said finally. “And I don’t blame you, you know. I get it. I do! He’s charming like the Devil, ain’t he? Hell, I used to think he loved me too. The only difference is that my feelings had to be technically augmented and you’re just dumb. However, you’ve got enough grit to be ashamed of yourself for feeling the way you do and that’s a start. Let me ask you something, and this is important, sweetpea…Does he trust you?”

What the hell was this about?

“I’ve never given him a reason not to,” Ana said.

His muzzle opened in a slow, toothy grin. “Good. You and me, we’re going to be really good friends. So here’s the plan. I’m going to help you load this all up and then you’re going to take me to see him so he can reconfigure my homing protocols. Pay attention while he’s doing that, close attention, because you’re going to be doing it next.”

“I can’t,” Ana interrupted. “I can’t access your CPUs. It takes a voice print—”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Blue said impatiently. “Don’t tell me how we work. You know where you can get your hands on a tape recorder?”

“A tape recorder?” Ana’s nerves, already strained, gave under this surreal notion. “I don’t know, the Museum of Obsolete Technology? Who the hell uses tape anymore?”
“Whatever, you snob!” he said with a laugh, even as his ears flattened. “What have you got that can take an audio recording?”

Ana reached into her pocket and brought out her phone.

“You just walk around with a mini-recorder in your pocket all the time?” Blue asked, watching her wake it up. “Or is that a TV? What is that?”

“It’s a phone.”

“Well, ain’t the future grand? You ready?”

“Hold on…Yeah.”

“Start recording.” Blue clicked and the next voice that came out of his speaker was a stranger’s…and not a stranger’s. “Unlock operations platform,” said Erik Metzger, thirty years ago or more, and hearing it, Ana was suddenly four years old again with purple arms around her and stubble scratching at her cheek as he called her his good girl…

“Problem solved,” Blue was saying. “Voice print lock-out may have been hot shit once, but even by the time I was born, it wasn’t all that impressive anymore. As long as you’ve got the Hand Unit and that sound-bite, you’ve got full access to any one of us. And with my voice-modulator, I can open any other voice-locks he might have…but let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. Once he’s reset my homing protocols, if you have a chance to take him out, do it. If not, don’t push your luck, but while he’s got me dark, I’m trusting you to convince him not to recycle my braincase. He can give me a new skin, a new face, change out any other piece of me but that one. Remember, if he takes the ‘me’ out of this—” He tapped at the side of his head. “—whoever he puts in there won’t be your friend.”

“What makes you think he’ll listen to me?”

“You’re obviously pretty determined and pretty brave…and pretty pretty, which all it’ll probably take. So sit on his lap, give him the puppy eyes, suck his dick—whatever you have to do, just sell it. And in return, I’ll be your best friend forever.” He paused, smiled, and said, “I can see you don’t think much of that, but trust me. You want me to be your friend. And I guess I want you to be mine, if I ever want to get out of this shithole. See, you can do things I can never do, like deal with the Purple Man—” He twitched. “—in a way I can’t. But I know things that you don’t know.”

“Like what?” Ana asked warily.

“Well, along with the obvious advantage of having an adorable murderbot watching your back, this is a business, you know. There are business accounts that Zero set up because the Purple Man is terrible at managing money, but I know where they are and how to get at them. I can make you rich. Once those homing protocols are removed, you can use that money and we could get the fuck out of this town.”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere! We could go anywhere! See the world! Or at least see more of it than sand. And when we get tired of that, we can settle down in whichever place we liked best and open our own restaurant. We’ll make a whole new band together! I know how the others were made and with my help, you could—oh yeah…The others.” Blue looked around, his arms still wide open with the now-vanished enthusiasm of a moment ago. “What do we do about them?”

Ana followed him out into the hall where they stood together, looking at the Tangle. It writhed
mechanically, its many eyes peering through the wires, flickering as they blinked. Static came and went in waves as it tried to speak, but the effort seemed to exhaust it. It soon went quiet and still. It watched them.

“What do you want to do about them?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. They’re assholes, but they’re still family. I guess we should bring them along, but…”

Ana waited, watching his emotions shiver down his ears. “But?”

“But…if he’s so strapped for parts that he’s salvaging them from his other restaurants, he won’t want to ‘waste’ them fixing these guys up. He might even strip them down for spare parts. He’s done that before.”

“Then let’s just leave them here. Just for now,” she added quickly. “We’ll come back and get them once we’ve dealt with Metzger and we figure out how to reset your homing protocols.”

Far from showing relief, he turned a singularly scornful stare on her. “Come on, you’re smarter than that. He knows we’re here, like you said. He’ll want us all accounted for. What are you going to tell him?”

“Just what he’s already heard. They were run down and hit with an axe until there were brains all over the walls and the floor and the pizzas. There was nothing left in any kind of salvageable condition.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of faith in my ability to keep a secret.” He lowered his voice, leaning confidentially forward to whisper. “I’m not very trustworthy, you know. Besides,” he went on lightly, “I can’t lie to him. There are rules. I can be creative about the truth, but I can’t lie and he knows it, so he’s bound to ask me over just trusting you.”

“Then what do you suggest we tell him?”

“Well, I don’t see as we have much of a choice except to tell him the truth.” He gave that a beat of dramatic silence before concluding, “They were hit with an axe until their braincases were destroyed.”

“You just said—”

“And we show him the split-open braincases to prove it. Oh, that got ‘em going,” he remarked as the Tangle let out a chorus of buzzes and squeals out in the hall.

Ana stared at him.

He waited, grinning.

“Are you really okay with that?” she asked finally, cautiously.

“What do I care? They’re assholes. Do what you want to ‘em. I do.” His smile faded and died. In a low voice—Bonnie’s voice—he said, “But no salvage. Cut them into as many pieces as you want, but you leave those pieces alone when they’re dead. Even assholes deserve that much. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ana said and meant it.

Blue searched her eyes for a moment, but appeared satisfied with whatever he saw there. “Okay!”
he said, once more exuberant and smiling. Opening one of his leg casings, he pulled out a short-handled fire axe. The axe. Flecks of paint—black and brown and yellow, rust-red and sky-blue—could still be seen pressed into the head, which was itself dull with age and blunted by previous use. He tossed it in the air a few times, showing off his dexterity with some simple spins and catches, then used it to point at her. “I’ll be right back. You stay here. Start packing.”

Ana nodded, but stepped into the doorway when he left it and watched as he sauntered up the hall to the wide place where the Tangle nested, heaving and rattling as the battle for the prybar continued somewhere under its restless surface.

“So!” Blue said heartily. “Who wants to be first? Come on now, don’t make me chase you.”

The Tangle’s many bickering voices silenced. The bulk of its body shifted weakly. One pink eye peeped from a cluster of wires. Its plastic lids closed when he reached for it, but it didn’t try to duck away. He plucked it like a flower with a great, round root ball and straightened, letting the skull dangle while he aimed the eye at his face.

They looked at each other.

“Hi, Chica,” he said softly.

From somewhere in the Tangle, a single voice scratched out incomprehensible static in three syllables. With a little imagination, they could even be words. Hi, Bonnie.

“You can come with us, if you want,” he told her. “He can rebuild you, if it’s just you. He won’t mind. He always liked you, you know that. And there’s going to be a new place. New games. It’ll be fun. We can be friends again. What do you say? Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

The eye blinked. And blinked again.

Bonnie shrugged and nodded. “I get it. You’re still mad at me. But you know what I’ve got to do now.”

Blink.

“Well…no hard feelings, then. I always liked you best. And we had fun, didn’t we? Yeah, we did. Best friends forever. Okay then!” he said cheerfully, chopping away the cables connecting the skull to the Tangle with a few quick blows. He set it on the ground and stepped back, hefting the axe in both hands. “Let’s show ’em how it’s done!”

He swung. The axe struck, throwing sparks, and the Tangle’s other voices began to shriek.

“I’m probably going to miss her,” he said, picking up the skull. He saw Ana in the doorway and tossed it to her, saying, “Catch!”

She caught it. It was still warm and leaked a thick, clear, snotty substance that smelled of pennies. When she shone her flashlight inside, she saw only the same honeycomb-like structure of filaments.

“What are you looking for?” Blue asked slyly.

“Trying to figure out how I’m going to dry it,” said Ana. “He might be a little suspicious if they’re still wet thirty years after they were supposedly killed.”

“Ah.”
“Maybe we can stop at the gas station or something, use the air hose.”

“I thought maybe you were looking for brains.”

She looked at him.

“Since that’s the story he’s heard,” he said, smirking.

“Well, that’s the story I heard,” she snapped. “He’s never told me what went down that day and I sure never asked. Do you honestly think he sits around at night chatting with me about how you guys are put together, let alone how to take you apart?”

“No, ma’am, I do not.” He rooted around in the Tangle some more. The axe swung. The Tangle screamed with one fewer voice. “Coding software is really different from assembling hardware,” he said, rolling the skull down the hall to her. It was the wrong shape to be a bowling ball and didn’t go far. “He knows how to work the Press, but he always left the building to Zero. And yeah, he’s not stupid and he’s had thirty years to study up on it and all that, but it’s just hard for me to imagine that he went from a guy who couldn’t replace parts unless they were ready to plug in to a guy who can build one of us from scratch.”

It wasn’t a question in the traditional sense, but it was certainly a barbed statement and he expected an answer. Ana stalled by turning the skull over and shaking it empty, clenching her jaws against the grimace as a few warm droplets splashed onto her skin. “He has Faust’s schematics and all his engineering notes on the computer. It’s like following a recipe from a cookbook. Even I could put one of you together if I had the parts.”

Blue laughed like that was funny.

“I could,” Ana said, annoyed.

“No, I totally bet you could. Where are you, you sneaky little shit?” Blue waded deeper into the Tangle, kicking at cables and peeking under its mechanical entrails. Abruptly, he flinched back as several limbs lashed together surged out of the body to swing the prybar at him. Laughing, Blue grabbed it before the Tangle could pull it back inside itself, stripping away wires and clinging fingers. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he remarked, right before he bent it, curling the ends in to form a delightfully useless ring.

“That was mine,” said Ana, watching him toss it back into the Tangle.

“I can’t believe you’re touching that with your bare hands,” was his only comment on her improvised satchel as he watched her collect skulls and pack them away.

“I’ve touched worse.”
‘Name one thing.’

‘Toy Freddy’s dick,’ Ana thought. Aloud, she said, “I worked for a place in So Cal once that did home restoration, like, if a tree fell through the living room or there was fire damage. It had a pretty decent sideline in cleaning up after dead bodies. And at the point that the relatives are calling a service, you can imagine that’s pretty bad. Shotgun suicides, old ladies with a lot of cats, quiet neighbors who nobody misses for a month or two. That sort of thing.”

“That’s a new one.” Blue’s ears twitched, interested. “Go on.”

“There were a lot of bad scenes, but the one that stands out was this one guy who slit his wrists in the bathtub.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It wouldn’t have been, but this was a pretty hot summer in a really small, windowless bathroom. When we got there, the tub was just full of greasy brownish-yellow sludge with some bones at the bottom, and that wasn’t even the worst part. That bathroom and everything in it was coated in an inch-thick layer of this yellow jelly created by human soup set to simmer for a month inside a nearly air-tight room. Like, the cup with his toothbrush and razor, the toilet paper on the roll, his underwear on the floor—all floating under the surface of this gunk like the fruit you get in a Jell-O cup. That wasn’t the worst part either. The worst part was the ceiling. See, the steam from all that simmering soup condensed on the ceiling and evaporated off, leaving this residue to build up and kind of drip down. Looked like a hundred snotty spaghetti noodles stuck up there, still dripping. And I had to stand under that ceiling and scrape them all off. I was suited up and masked, but I still had to feel that shit plopping onto my face. I could smell it. And smells, you know, when they’re strong enough, they have a taste.”

“No, I didn’t know,” said Blue, studying her face. “But I’ll take your word for it. What do humans taste like?”

Ana thought about it as she wrapped the sheet tighter around its cargo and came up with a crooked smile. “Mine tasted like rancid fry grease and bad life choices, but they’re probably better when they’re fresh.”

Blue nodded, not smiling. After a moment, he said, “That was a true story, wasn’t it?”

Surprised, Ana said, “Yeah, of course.”

“Sure, like that’s the only kind you tell me.” He glanced down the hall, then crooked an ear in that direction with an after-you sweep of his arm.

They walked in silence. Blue’s ears were upright but folded forward at right angles, deep in his own thoughts. Ana walked beside him the way she had so often walked beside her mother, within sight but pretending to be invisible, feeling a prickling of anticipation along her scalp every time Blue’s fingers flexed on the haft of that axe.

“Hold up,” Blue said when they reached the other end of the hall. “We can’t forget Freddy.”

As Ana stood back, Blue picked Waddles up and propped him against the wall. He tipped an imaginary hat, ears dipping respectfully. Then he plucked Waddles’s head off, planted a foot on the round plastic stomach, and stuck two fingers in the eye sockets of the battered skull. “Sorry about this, old buddy,” he murmured. “Nothing personal.”

With one swing of the axe, he severed the metal spine and took the braincase off. When Ana
opened the sheet, he placed it carefully inside and gave it a last pat high on the dome. Then he
tucked the grotesque party favor draped over Waddles’s thigh back into his groin compartment and
closed it up. Lastly, he replaced Waddles’s head, adjusting it atop the slumped shoulders until he
found a precarious balance. He stepped back to assess the effect, long ears broadcasting a wistful
frustration above his impassive face. “He looks like he’s sleeping, doesn’t he?”

Waddles looked like what he was—dead—but Ana nodded anyway.

“He’d hate that,” said Blue. “You didn’t know him. He was a little fanatical on the subject of
staying alert, standing guard. He was almost always the first to know when someone broke in. The
only reason he didn’t get more kills was because he’d leave that to us while he scouted around the
building to make sure we got them all. He was always looking out for us. That’s why I put him
here, so…I don’t know…if he was still in there anywhere, he could still be sort of keeping watch.
But if I opened his eyes, they’d just be empty now. On the other hand, he might be tired. He’s been
watching a long time.” He was quiet a moment, then suddenly said, “What do you think? You
think he’d rather be sleeping or blind?”

Ana thought of Freddy, cut in half and still on watch at the window in the gym. “Blind,” she said.
“Deaf… even paralyzed. But he’d never sleep.”

Blue glanced at her, then looked at Waddles. Steady the head casing with one hand, he pushed
the plastic eyelids open. His stare was a thousand times more disconcerting without eyes.

Blue stood there a long time, ears lowering in fits and twitches until they were entirely relaxed and
still for just a moment. Then they snapped back up and his muzzle split for one of his ‘cheerful’
smiles. “I’m not even going to ask why you were playing with his dick. Come on, I want to look at
this truck of yours, see how much packing we’re going to have to do. Oh, and I guess we won’t be
needing this anymore,” he added lightly, flipping the axe up to catch it with a flourish. “Don’t
think I haven’t seen you looking at it…or not looking at it, which I only noticed more. So. Want to
see me do a trick?”

Involving the axe?

“No,” she said.

“Too bad.” He lifted the axe, still smiling, and bit the head off. His teeth sheared through the
wooden haft in two crunches and a burst of splinters. The second set of teeth attached to his
endoskeleton began to grind, pulling the axe’s head down his throat. She heard it drop somewhere
in his belly, like a stone onto a pile of sticks and leaves, making her wonder what else he’d
swallowed before being locked up down here that no one had bothered to clean out.

Blue tossed the axe handle away without looking at it. It clattered over the floor, coming to rest
near the Tangle’s remains.

She looked at him, heart racing, scarcely breathing.

“What, that doesn’t do anything for you?” He laughed. “Tough crowd. Do you think that if I think
you’re not afraid of me, I’ll stop trying to scare you?”

“I don’t think you’re trying,” Ana said honestly.

“You want me to start?”

“No.”
Suddenly he was right in front of her, teeth inches from her face, snarling, “Then show me the goddamned courtesy of screaming when I bite a fucking axe in half!”

She tried, screaming like her life depended on it, because in that moment, it absolutely did.

“Ahh,” said Ana.

He looked at her for a moment, his frustrated expression unmoved and unmoving, then burst out laughing, giving her a friendly clap to the shoulder that she just knew was going to leave a mark. “You’re awesome. I’m so glad I didn’t bite your hand off when you put it in my mouth. I almost did.”

“That would have a bad start to an otherwise beautiful friendship, all right.”

“Speaking of beautiful friendships, when do you want to fuck?”

The question was so unexpected and presented so casually that Ana could only stare at him at first before stuttering out a baffled, “What?”

“You heard me. Well?”

“Well, if I have a choice, how about you pencil that in for the fifth of Never? Any time after six is usually good for me, but not too late because I work early in the mornings.”

“Ha ha, but no, seriously, we’re fucking before we leave this building,” he said, still without menace, but only a faintly impatient matter-of-factness that was so much worse. “Do you want to get it out of the way first or save the best for last?”

Ana thought about it, but even in her head, her options were few and starkly indifferent to her feelings. He was stronger than her, faster, and more than a little bit crazy. She had no business worrying about her ass when her life was in danger, and from a purely practical point of view, screwing him might afford her an opportunity to strike. She had no idea how she was going to do it, but one way or another, she was going to finish the job Faust had started.

“After, I guess,” she said. “Business before pleasure and all that.”

“‘Pleasure.’ Ha. God, you’re cute. I could just eat you up.” He snapped his teeth at her. Ana did not flinch, but he laughed like she had. “Oh, relax. I’ll play nice for our first time, as long as we have the clear understanding that it is just the first time.”

“Yeah, yeah.”


“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. What do you like? You like it rough? You like it tied up, maybe? A little slap and tickle, a little breath-play? I can do that. You like to make some noise when you cum? This is a great place for that. You can moan, you can scream, you can cry—yeah,” he said, his lenses whining as they focused sharply on her. “You’re a cum-crier, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Yeah, you are. Your eyes are so pale, I can see your pupils really, really well. They’re small,
which is normal, because I’m shining my eyes right at you.” He switched them off and on again to
demonstrate. “But when I said the magic word, ‘cum,’ they got smaller, and when I said ‘cry,’ they
did it again. Pupillary contraction, that’s a common fear response.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Yeah, you are, although not as much as you should be, let me tell you. The eyes always give it
away. So I know I scare you, no matter how good you think you are at hiding it…but I never really
got to you until I called you a cum-crier, and the only possible reason that would shake you is if
you really are one. So now, obviously, I gotta make you do it.”

“Don’t be too sure of yourself. Even the guys I like don’t get me there too often.”

“Have no fear, little lady,” he said with a bow, sweeping off an invisible hat to hold over his heart.
“I never met a human I couldn’t get off. It’s what I was built for. And hey, fun fact! Your pupils
get bigger when you humans are aroused, so when you actually cum for me, I’ll get to see them
dilate. And contract, because you won’t want to cum for me. And dilate. And contract. And so on
and so on,” he chuckled as he turned away and headed upstairs. “I’m going to make those pretty
blue eyes flash for me before I fill ‘em up with tears. And I bet you cry pretty.”

“I doubt it, but I don’t exactly practice in front of a mirror. You’ll have to let me know.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, sweetpea. I will.”

He had climbed up to the first landing, already out of easy reach of the florescent light, and now he
turned back. She could see only his silhouette clearly—long ears and that one hulking arm—and
his eyes. Their light through the dirty plastic turned his familiar bunny features into something
monstrous, sinister.

“I’ll be honest with you,” this demon-rabbit said. “I don’t get much out of fucking. I used to be
pretty good at it back in the day and, under the right circumstances and with the proper incentives,
I’m sure I could be convinced to remember some of my better techniques. It’s not a threat, is what I
guess I’m trying to say, or at least it doesn’t have to be. I can make it hurt. A lot. Or I can make it
feel good. That’s all up to you, but it is going to happen. Tonight. Tomorrow. Every single chance I
get from now until I guess we get caught and only then if he tells me to stop, which I hope you
realize he might not do. In fact, there’s an extremely good chance he’ll order us to keep on fucking.
He likes to watch, especially when they fight. You going to put up a fight?”

“No.”

“Good. Because even if the thought of sticking anything of mine anywhere into your wriggling
meatsack holds exactly zero appeal for me, it’s been so long since I had anyone to talk to, I’d feel
really kind of bad if I had to kill you already.”

“You sure know how to get a girl in the mood.”

“I don’t care if you’re in the mood,” he said. “I don’t even care if I am. I’m going to do it anyway.
I want to do it. You have no idea how much. But mood? Ha. No, that’s not what this is about.”

“I know what this is about.”

“Oh yeah?” He snorted, folded his arms, and cocked his ears forward. “Tell me. If you get it right,
I’ll give you a present.”

“He left you alone down here for almost thirty years. Thirty years. He didn’t forget you, he just
didn’t bother to come get you out. And he could have,” said Ana, holding his stare. “At any time. No, he left you until he decided, meh, might as well. Since I would already be here. For the parts he wanted.”

Blue’s ear ticced.

“And of course you’re angry about being abandoned like this, but he doesn’t have to care about your feelings because your programming prevents you absolutely from acting on it. You can’t punch him in the dick or throw a drink in his face or call him an asshole or even ask him why. But you can tap his keg. As revenge goes, it’s not what anyone would call Machiavellian, but sure, it gets the job done.”

He said nothing.

“What’s my present?”

Blue just kept staring for a long moment, then, expressionless, reached down and hooked his thumb under his hip-panel. There was a flat, hard click.

Ana did not flinch.

He pushed the panel down on its unoiled hinges. The flickering light that couldn’t reach his face at this angle hit him just right to show her every brutal inch of what he had for her. They—not it; it was not pronged, but two separate devices, jointed to allow independent movement—already jutted at a ready angle, over-sized, malformed…and rusted, she thought at first, but no. The dark flakes peeling up along the top of the first shaft and almost all of the second one was not rust.

“I’ll clean up first,” he said, staring at her without smiling. “And hey, just because we’re friends, I’ll also spring for lubricant. Not for you, for me. Reduce the chance of triggering some…shall we say…unintended applications. Some people say lube gets messy, but believe me, sweetpea—”

Although he did nothing outwardly that she could see, as he spoke her new nickname, there was a second click. Eight inches of curved steel stabbed itself out from the first of his weapons; dozens of needles popped through the surface of the second as segments of its length briefly whirred to life, rotating in opposite directions. Only for a moment, and then they hid themselves away again beneath the surface.

Blue said, “—it’s a lot messier without it,” and closed himself up.

Then he turned around and continued up the stairs, and she followed him because there was nothing else she could do.
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Foxy lay on his back in his bunk, walking a doubloon across his knuckles in the dark. *Tik-tik-tak*, flick of the wrist, flip of the coin, do it again. Twenty times a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, five hours and counting since Ana left. *Tik-tik-tak*…

He supposed he should be worried about her. He wasn’t. He didn’t know where she was, but he could guess what she was doing. The old man was dead and his house had been emptied, but emptied where? That was the question. Foxy had only the murkiest notion of money’s value, but he knew their creator had been wealthy, and that he was himself likely worth a pretty penny, however much like scrapyard trash he looked these days. Whatever had been taken out of the old man’s workshop, in whatever condition it had been, must have been moved on for storage and study, and someone in this town had either done the buying, the selling or the moving. Ana had gone out earlier with her sleepytime cupcakes, and while that hadn’t seemed to be a wholly successful venture, she’d gone out again with fire in her eye and her Scoop in her truck, so it would seem she had some idea of where to go. If the old man’s odds and ends were anywhere in the world, Foxy had no doubt Ana would find them. Whether she could dig them out and hie away with them without getting caught was another story altogether, but Ana had a lot of brass and with a little luck to polish it up, she stood a decent chance. No, Foxy wasn’t worried.

He was pissed.

He had no right to be. The emaciated shade of what in other men might be called his sensible side reminded him that he’d told her with his own mouth that nothing had to change. She’d been snuggling up on Bon from Day One and if she’d been a bit more reserved in her manner since the so-called split, the fact remained that she’d never really, truly and forever-finally walked away from him.

Fine. He’d never ask her to. But did she have to go falling into Bonnie’s arms left and bloody right? Kissing on him. Hugging on him. Dancing through the bloody dining room, laughing like a pair of gits, with paint splattered all up in her hair like strings of pearls and her eyes like bloody jewels shining!

*Tik-tik-tak*…*Tik-tik-tak*…

He wasn’t jealous. Foxy didn’t have a jealous bone in his body. Didn’t have any bones, but if he had, not a one of them would be the jealous sort. ‘Do what ye please,’ was part of the Pirate’s Code, and ‘Do who ye please,’ was probably somewhere in the fine print. She wasn’t doing anything sweeter than hand-holding anyhow. What did he care if Bonnie serenaded her to one of his old babby-songs? If that was what the long-eared idiot considered high-romance, Foxy had nothing to worry about.

He wasn’t worried.

*Tik-tik-tak*…*Tik-tik-tak*…

Still, a man was allowed to be at least a little territorial about the bit of biscuit he was nibbling, wasn’t he? How many times had Bonnie come at him for taking what he considered liberties with ‘his’ girl? And that before Foxy had ever liberated anything. Well, Foxy had liberated Ana every
night for nearly two months and apparently, that didn’t even earn him the license to tell Bon to back his big purple ass up when Ana walked by.

Oh, he was going to hear about that later, he just knew it. If she came home with treasure in her hold, she might be inclined to let it slide with a word of warning as she was putting her togs back on after a celebratory tussle. Otherwise, she’d give him a right proper tongue-lashing and not the fun kind.

He’d be lucky if he ever got her under him again.

So and what of it? Hadn’t he had his fill of fucking at Mulholland? Aye, and then some. Not that it had ever been his idea, although he had to admit there might have been a few over the years that he hadn’t minded tending to as much as certain others. Still, he didn’t miss them between reservations. Twenty-eight years, he’d gone dry and never missed it. If someone had told him a year ago that was even a missable activity, he’d have laughed in their face. Or put his hook through it.

Why was he even thinking about missing something that hadn’t even stopped yet? And wouldn’t. She had a good thing in him—expert service at a moment’s notice, always convenient, discrete and guaranteed free of unexpected cargo of either the itching, burning or nappy-wearing kind. Why would anyone give that up over a few rash words? Perfectly innocent words, at that. It wasn’t like he’d got down on one knee and pulled a bouquet out’n his arse. In all the time he’d been threading her needle, he’d never once tried to stake a claim. Even in private, he didn’t call her silly loves-names or coo at her or any of that rot, and for damn sure never in front of the others. If she put him on notice, he’d note it and that would be that. Nothing had to change. Nothing was going to change.

**Tik-tik-tak…Tik-tik-tak…**

But since he was on the subject, why in the hell were they sneaking around? She and Bon were quits, they both said so. Bon was the only one who’d ever thought they’d been serious in the first place. Hell, Ana had probably dished him out some of the same ‘I made you’ bullshit she’d tried to feed Foxy before she called it off, and Bon, being an idiot, had swallowed it. But whatever they’d had, she sure hadn’t been shy about parading it around while it lasted.

She hadn’t been embarrassed to be with Bonnie.

Nor should she have been and Foxy wasn’t thinking any different. It was just that…looking at it objectively…between the bunny who sang about eating your vegetables and the dashing pirate fox who came fully equipped, there was a clear winner. If she hadn’t been embarrassed of the one, she shouldn’t be embarrassed of the other.

Of course, she didn’t have to be embarrassed of something to want to keep it private. Ana was a private sort of person. So was he. That’s what made it such a prime arrangement for both of them. He didn’t have to romance her, sweet talk her or cuddle afterwards. He just had to be there.

**Tik-tik-tak…Tik-tik-tak…**

When it came right down to it, he didn’t have anything to complain about. She hadn’t asked him to put himself out for her in any way. And he hadn’t. Oh, he had enough hygenical sense to hose himself off after, but that was all he did and he didn’t exactly go hammer and tongs even then.

Foxy experienced a rare moment of guilty feeling. He hadn’t spared it much thought the first night—heat of the moment and all that—but it occurred to him now that he hadn’t had a proper scrubbing since Ana herself had done it, months ago, and that was the first since the restaurant closed. Maybe there was a reason Ana wasn’t too keen to cuddle up on him. Whether man or
machine, it was easier to reel ‘em in up close when there wasn’t a stink wafting out your cracks. Worst case scenario, he might pop open his loin-case some loving night and have a dead mouse fall out. Foxy prided himself on his charm, when he elected to draw on it, but Casanova himself couldn’t pull that off.

If he wanted to make the arrangement between them more of a relationship—and he wasn’t saying he did—but if he did…he was going to have to work at it.

How fair was that? Bonnie never did a damned thing to win Ana over. Long-eared git wouldn’t even know how.

Reaching the end of his hand, Foxy gave the doubloon a practiced flip, but changed his mind in the same split-second and caught it again in his fist. He sat up, switched his eyes on and had a good look at his cabin.

Uncluttered, as animatronics did not tend to contribute much to the trash that humans heaped up around them, but dusty. He could see the marks left by Ana’s sweaty hands (and other less-identifiable body parts) on the various surfaces around him, souvenirs of his many conquests. Furnishings were bolted to the walls or floor, the decorations were bolted to the furnishings, and whatever loose bits he had were purely functional, like his sword or a certain stolen lantern. He supposed the room had personality, but it was the same larger-than-life personality of the stage. There was nothing here of particular interest to him, let alone to her, and no reason anyone should want to linger.

So. That was probably a good starting point.

Pocketing his doubloon, Foxy stepped out to tear a scrap of cloth from the stage curtain and commenced to tidy up—cleaning the octopus and polishing the window and paying particular attention to the carved lintel above his cabin door. Inside, he dusted skulls and plastic swag, erased hand- and arse-prints, and whisked away cobwebs he’d lived with so long he’d named the occupants. That done, he turned his attention to the narrow ledge that was supposed to be his bunk, wiping it down and fetching out the pillow and blanket that used to decorate it from the overhead cupboard. He shook the dust out of them and laid them out, not too neatly. Ladies liked a rumpled bed.

So that was the room taken care of. Now for him.

He set off, tossing his cleaning rag off into the ball pit as he left the cabin. He hopped the rails, crossed the stage and climbed the amphitheater steps two at a time, heading for the kitchen.

He passed no one in the hall, heard no sound apart from his own footsteps. No Chica playing handball by herself in the arcade, no Freddy on patrol, and when he reached the dining room, no Bonnie moping onstage with his guitar. Eerie feeling, like being alone.

Not that he minded. Foxy liked being alone.

It didn’t last long anyway. He hadn’t taken two steps into the kitchen before there came answering footsteps in the store room, soon followed by a righteous clatter as Bonnie careened around and fetched up against the door to look in at him. If he had a million years to think on it, he’d never know what in the hell she ever saw in the clumsy git.

“Evening, mate,” said Foxy.

Bonnie rolled his eyes and clumped away to the other end of the store room. Not a word of
greeting. For a bunny who sang about good manners up to ten times a day, that was bloody rude.

Foxy turned on the hot water tap and let it run while he fetched a scrubbing brush and a bottle of industrial cleaner from the rack in the next room.

Bonnie, slouched up next to the loading dock door, watched him sullenly but waited until he was leaving again before saying, “What are you doing?”

“Hosing meself off,” Foxy replied. “And I’ll thank ye to keep yer eyes to yerself whilst I do it, bucko.”

“Yeah, right. I have slightly more important things to think about tonight than your naked ass. You do realize it’s Halloween, right? The worst night of the year and while you’ve been jacking off in your cabin, me and Chica have been handling all the break-ins by ourselves.”

“And doing a fine job of it,” Foxy assured him. “Well done. I weren’t disturbed in the slightest.”

“Jackass.”

“Tsk, sticks and stones. What are ye all heated up at me for? Any of ‘em actually get a door open?”

Bonnie scowled. “That’s not the point. Do you even care about what’s going on?”

“Should I?” Foxy inquired in a careless tone calculated to enrage. “How has it changed since last I saw ye?”

“It’s got to get worse before you decide to give a damn? What’s wrong with you? Freddy could have died tonight! He might never walk again!”

“Sun might explode or the Earth crack open, and what can we do about it, eh?” Foxy countered. “Ye act like standing by the back door and worrying is helping somehow.”

“And you act just like you always do,” Bonnie shot back contemptuously. “Like nothing and nobody matters but you.”

“Oh, yer right, yer right,” said Foxy, nodding with feigned remorse. “It be the principle of the thing and principles ain’t never been me strong suit. So tell me what to do, mate. Eh? Tell me how to help.”

Bonnie shook his head and turned back to the loading dock door.

“Well, ye think on it,” Foxy said, strolling away. “I’ll just hose meself off while I wait.”

Bonnie muttered a few choice words behind him, but none of them were worth getting riled up over, so Foxy left it at that. Back at the sink, he stripped down and gave himself a good swabbing, from the tips of his toe-claws to the points of his ears and every inch between, inside and out. His fur melted a bit under his ablutions, but thinned and clean was probably more alluring-like than full and skunky. A good spritzing of air freshener on the outside (Foxy had no idea what a cashmere forest smelled like, but again, as long as it was better than fusty fox, he’d take it) and WD-40 on the inside completed his bath and Foxy turned his attention to the cupboards.

Girl might want to eat and Foxy wanted her to drink. He was confident in his powers of coercion so far as getting her togs off was concerned, but as Ana herself had once remarked, liquor was quicker, and for a girl who claimed she didn’t like rum, she’d had no problem drinking all of his.
Food was easy. She had plenty of ready-eat crap in the cupboard for him to select from. He tucked a small tub of something called chili-mac into his abdominal cavity and, after some serious consideration, added a bag of corn chips and a Snickers bar. There, three-course dinner. As for drink, she’d taken the last drop of rum on her last visit, but she had plenty of alternatives here. Although he didn’t know what most of them were, he felt safe in selecting the bottle nearest to empty, reasoning that she must like it if she was drinking it. Chocolate-flavored coffee liqueur. Sounded ghastly, but what did Foxy know from taste?

“What are you doing now?”

Foxy tucked the bottle into his abdomen and snapped the casing shut. “Helping meself to a wee drop of the creature,” he told Bonnie, who had appeared in the store room doorway.

Bonnie’s ears swiveled around and lay crossly flat. “Put it back, Foxy.”

“What are ye doing, that’s the real question, ain’t it?” said Foxy, closing the cupboard door. “What are ye really about with all this, eh? Look me in me eye and tell me it’s Fred yer fretting over.”

“I said, put it back.”

“No, I know yer game, same as it ever is. Chica may be holding watch, wherever she be, but yer just waiting on yer ladylove to sail back into port, don’t ye? All the better if she catches ye pacing on the dock, eating out yer heart for worrying.”

Bonnie’s ears projected more confusion and anger than guilt, but to Foxy’s eye, the guilt was there, and seeing it put an edge of satisfaction on Foxy’s voice when he said, “‘Just friends,’ me plastic arse.”

“Why are you doing this?” Bonnie asked. “Why are you always doing this?”

“Why me? Why are ye? Why did ye ever, if it come to that? I seen you break a man’s back over yer knee like it were kindling, mate,” Foxy remarked, shaking out his jeans with a dramatic snap designed to draw Bonnie’s eye and silently remind him whose they used to be before he put them on. “But one pretty girl gives ye a kiss and just look at ye now. What a feckless mooncalf ye turned out to be.”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything right now. Yeah, I’m worried. Of course I’m worried! She is out there tonight doing God knows what and if I’m doing anything, I’m just worrying about her! That’s it! That’s all! Stop trying to turn that into something sleazy!”

“Oh, just worrying, aye. Not so worried that ye neglected to snog her proper before ye sent her off.”

Bafflement shivered back up through the irritation in Bon’s ears. “What? I what? That’s not a word. What the hell does that even mean?”

“It means ye kissed her,” Foxy snapped and had to take a mental step back and put a smile on his face before continuing. “Not saying I wouldn’t have done the same, merely pointing out that for all yer high-minded talk of what ye would and would not do to have her back, when she gave ye an opening, you went right for it.”

Now there was no imagining the guilt in those long ears. “Fuck you. And put her stuff back.”

“I won’t and ye don’t really want me to. Hear me out, mate,” Foxy said, making placating gestures in the air as he backed toward the door. “Ye have the best intentions, sure, but however it goes
tonight, the last thing she’ll want when she comes back is someone patting her wee head, telling
her she done good and she’s all right now. She ain’t doing good. She’s doing wrong and she don’t
want to feel all right about it. She’ll be coming to see me tonight,” he concluded confidently. “To
get drunk in the company of one who don’t try to whitewash her of her sins so she can mayhaps
talk about ‘em.”

And that was enough, that was fine, and he could see Bonnie thinking about that and even leaning
toward accepting it, so what devil crawled into Foxy’s speaker and said, “And mayhaps commit a
few more.”

There was that good hit he’d been aiming for. Bonnie came at him, ears flat.

“All right, all right,” Foxy began, rolling his eyes, and then Bonnie had him by the cracks in his
casing and shoved him against the wall with a bang. “Easy, mate! I were only—”

“Kidding,” Bonnie said, static crackling under every quiet word. “I know. I get that you’re fucking
around and you don’t mean it. I get that teasing me is just another good time for you. I get that it’s
funny to see me try not to get mad. I get it. But I’m not laughing and you know it, so let me ask
you something, seriously.” Bonnie’s hand clenched; Foxy’s shoulder-case first splintered, then
exploded, raining shards of plastic down inside his torso. “How mad do I have to get before it stops
being funny?”

“Point made, mate,” said Foxy. “Although maybe I wouldn’t be quite so tempted to have at ye if
ye’d let me have a minute alone with her without throwing a jealous snit. Or if that’s too much for
ye, at least let me have a minute alone with meself! She ain’t even in the bleeding building and yer
at me!”

“I’m at you? You brought her up! You took how many cheap shots at me and I’m the one with the
problem here? Me? Here’s a wild thought: Get it all out of your system now. Tell me what I did
wrong and how I’m an idiot for not being over her yet. Tell me everything. Go on. Do it. I’m
listening.”

Foxy smiled. He couldn’t help it. There was something in him, something passed down through
the Purple Man’s hands when he’d laid them over Foxy’s heart in that last moment before it started
beating, some black and evil will that put the points on his teeth and made him want to show them.
He did not say, ‘I’ve had her. I’ve had her a hundred times already and I’ll have her again and
again, in ways ye can only imagine. Keep yer snuggling and all yer silly songs. In the dark, she
wants a man and it’s me.’ He did not say any of it, but he thought it and he smiled.

“Yeah, yeah, go on and smirk,” Bonnie said. “I’m hilarious and my feelings are a joke. You don’t
need to keep reminding me and the next time you do, we’re going to have a problem. I may be a
fuckless moonface, or whatever the hell you called me, but believe me—” He pulled Foxy forward
just to slam him back again, hard enough that either the door or Foxy’s casing cracked, and let him
go. “—I can snap you over my knee, too.”

Foxy was far too mature to need to get the last word in, so he let Bonnie walk away on that one and
simply went back to the Cove. He was half-afraid he’d pass Chica in the hall and get a lecture to go
with Bonnie’s threat, like a scoop of ice cream to go with a slice of cake, but the way was clear.
Probably sitting up with Freddy, keeping him commiserable company. So Foxy walked alone and
met no one in the dark.

Once back behind the purple curtain, he went swiftly to his cabin and put his stolen bottle of
dubious grog conspicuously on the table. He brought out the food next, trying each component in a
number of places until he found just the right careless arrangement. Pity he didn’t have a glass or
even a paper cup. Ana was a drink-from-the-bottle sort of girl, but even that sort appreciated a well-laid table on occasion. And if Foxy had not meant for this to be so special of an occasion before his little chat with Bonnie, it for damn sure was now.

“Snap me over yer knee, would ye?” Foxy muttered, changing out the batteries in his stolen lantern and hanging it playfully over his bunk. “She’ll be sleeping off her headache in me cabin tomorrow morning, bucko. Snap that.”

He went out to the deck of his ship and settled in the prow, ears up and aimed outward, listening for the rumble of a returning truck. While he waited, he fished out the doubloon from his pocket and gave it a flip, catching it on his knuckles and walking it across his metal bones.

*Tik-tik-tak…Tik-tik-tak.*

He wasn’t worried. Wherever Ana was…she was fine.

* * *

If she’d been alone, it might have taken all night for Ana to empty Mulholland’s basement backroom of parts. There was so much stuff and most of it was just scattered around in no kind of order. Containers were limited and it wasn’t long before she’d filled all the available boxes and crates. If she’d been alone, this wouldn’t have presented much of a problem. A quick drive back to town, scavenging around the back alleys of Mammon’s downtown shopping block would have provided all the boxes she’d need, but when she suggested it, Blue predictably refused to hand over the keys, even when she told him he could ride along. Instead, he took her through the building, room by room, picking bags out of the trash littering the floors for her to fill. Some of them tore, but even they were useful for wrapping parts with pokey pins or sharp edges on them.

“When you run out of those, I’ll find something else,” he told her, and she had no doubt he would. He was a problem-solver.

All things considered, he was a good worker—tireless, inhumanly strong, agreeable to direction, and when he wasn’t having one of his brief black-eyed episodes, he reminded her so much of the real Bonnie that she caught herself laughing at his jokes. Working with him was dangerous, not just because he was batshit-crazy, but because his cheerful chattiness made it tempting to forget how batshit-crazy he was until his unpredictable temper flared. But there weren’t many of those moments, and with his help, the daunting job of emptying this room was made considerably easier, which left her with conflicted feelings, as with every rack cleared and crate filled, she was that much closer to leaving…with him. And then what?

She had to kill him, or at the very least, lock him back up again, but she couldn’t see how to make it happen. He rarely left her out of reach and never left her alone. Her prybar was cosplaying as a pretzel, the business end of the axe was in his stomach, and she had no other weapons. She couldn’t even shut him down by opening his chest-case because he’d wrapped himself in duct-tape…probably for that exact reason. He wasn’t stupid. He was crazy, but he wasn’t dumb.

“You’re doing it again,” Blue said suddenly, interrupting some good-natured monologue she had not been listening to.

Ana looked down at her hands, as if they had popped off her wrists and were running amok instead of working. “What am I doing?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“Thinking bad thoughts.”
She didn’t deny it. “It’s been a rough day.”

He made a wordless little sound of sympathy, then immediately took the intended sarcasm out of it by saying, “I kid, but the whole me-thing is a lot to take in and you’re handling it pretty well, all things considered. I’m probably not what you expected.”

Thinking back to that long night with Mike Schmidt and the awful story told by Nate Donahue, Ana had to admit Blue was exactly how Toy Bonnie had been described, but she wasn’t about to tell him so. Instead, she said, “You could have been a lot worse.”

“I sure could have. But if we’re going to be best friends, I don’t want there to be any tension between us, so for my part in our…shall we say, ‘prickly’ meeting—” He placed his oversized hand over his heart and lowered his ears to a genteel angle of respect. “—I apologize.”

“So do I,” Ana said diplomatically and got back to work, restless scanning the room around her as the bag she was filling neared capacity.

She didn’t have a lot of empty bags left, but there wasn’t much left to put in them either. The cupboards lining the far wall were all open and empty, leaving just what was on the shelves (excluding the Purple Man’s ‘collection’ in the front half of the room) and the floor. Even taking into consideration the difficulty of scrounging up more packing containers, it wouldn’t take much more than another hour to get it all loaded into the truck.

And then what? She could feel the weight of the unanswered question pressing down on her, but nothing had changed since the last time she’d asked. She couldn’t outrun him, couldn’t fight him, couldn’t take him home…The only thing she could think of was to get up to speed and slam into one of the gnarled juniper trees that lined Mulholland Drive, in hopes of ejecting Blue from the cab and maybe running over him a few times, and that was really scraping the bottom of the barrel. So many things could go wrong—if the truck just plowed through the tree without stopping, if the tree stood fast and punched the engine into the cab and crushed Ana in her chair, or even if Blue just buckled up—and to make matters worse, if it all went right, where did that leave her but with a newly-purchased, unregistered and uninsured vehicle loaded with Fazbear Entertainment proprietary parts now totaled by the side of the road next to the corpse of a ‘stolen’ animatronic? There was no part of that scenario that didn’t end with a call to the cops.

But what else could she do? It was easy to fall into the trap of thinking she could just take him back to the pizzeria and let her animatronics deal with him, but they weren’t expecting a fight. And for that matter, what good would they really be in one? Freddy was off the roster. The best she could hope for was to pit Blue against Foxy (open wounds over half his body), Bonnie (nothing but a few layers of shellac and glue holding his face and chest together) and Chica (barely able to walk and far more likely to offer her opponent a cupcake than fight anyway; physical violence was super-dysfunctional). It was also worth remembering that Blue had turned four animatronics, who were in much better condition than Ana’s, into the Tangle with hardly a scratch to show for it.

And even if her animatronics got lucky and took him out, Blue wouldn’t go down easy. A cracked casing or missing arm could be replaced; if Blue tore off a head or smashed someone’s battery, that someone (she could not help but see Bonnie), was dead. In recent months, Ana had come to the unsettling understanding that life could mean different things from person to person, but dead was always dead.

No. She had to kill him. Somehow.

“God, you look so much like your dad right now,” Blue said suddenly, interrupting the doomed loop of her thoughts. “It’s funny. You have almost all your mom’s same features, and I mean
exactly the same, like you were both stamped from the same mold. But you don’t remind me of her at all. You’re daddy’s little girl all the way.”

“I’m just going to go ahead and take that as a compliment.”

“It’s not a compliment.” His ears twiched, considering. “It’s not a criticism either, I guess. It’s just a thing. You’ve got everything but her eyes and you don’t look a damn thing like her. It’s weird.”

“You want to know what I think is weird?” she asked wryly. “That my mom actually came here often enough to make any impression on you at all. I thought she hated Freddy’s. She sure never let me go.”

Blue, turning away to put the filled bag with the others waiting to be carried upstairs, turned back with a serious expression. “Oh, I didn’t meet her here. I met her at the party.”

“What party?” Ana asked, thinking again of the drive awaiting her…what to hit and where to hit it, how to tip the odds even slightly in her favor because she’d only get one chance…

“The one we were made for,” Blue said. “Before this place opened.”

That got her attention. “For the Disney people?”

“I don’t know who they were. If there were names, I don’t remember them. It was just some big party with lots of old, fat guys in suits.” Blue shrugged and for a few seconds, that seemed to be the whole story, but then he said, “The Purple Man brought a few young ladies. Really young. And Marion, of course…and Marion brought your mother. All those other ladies were wearing shiny costumes, low on the tit and high on the thigh, but your mom was wearing this blue flowered thing all the way down to her knees. It was clean and it was cute, but it sure wasn’t what the others were wearing and everyone noticed. Even I noticed.” He paused. His head cocked. “Can I tell you something? Don’t laugh.”

“Sure.”

“I thought she was pretty. Wild, huh?”

Ana didn’t answer. The idea of Blue finding anyone ‘pretty’ had not quite sunk in yet past the greater disturbance of her mother, that hateful angry goddess, actually being pretty. And she must have been. Aunt Easter was, and they were identical twins. As Blue had said, it was weird, how two people could have the same features and not look alike at all.

“I knew Marion,” Blue was saying, still thoughtful in expression and tone. “I’d seen her every day since I’d come alive. She was the first woman I ever saw, the measuring mark of essential she-ness, you could say. I could find the configuration of her features to be symmetrical and aesthetically superior to those of the other women at the party. But I thought Mellie was pretty.”

He was quiet a little longer, then shrugged it all away and said, “She was nervous and shy—I could tell. She laughed a lot and she was embarrassed of her laugh. I don’t know why. It was a cute laugh, unpracticed, like a child’s. She tried to stay close to Marion, but Marion was working the room, so she ended up on the couch with Zero. They looked so funny,” he recalled with a laugh. “Both of them, side by side, sitting up so straight with their eyes so wide, big smiles on their faces even though they weren’t having any fun. They looked like dolls.”

Ana tried to picture that. Faust came in well enough—a younger man, perhaps already with grey in his hair and worry-lines beginning to carve themselves into his face, but still ‘the kid’, especially at times like that. She could see him exactly as Blue described, stiff-backed and too well-dressed,
perhaps hiding his panicked eyes behind dark glasses, and smiling even though he knew he was unwanted. Tolerating his presence was part of the price of admission to one of Erik Metzger’s legendary parties, where he was a witness to the fun and laughter, not part of it. Never part of it.

But try as she might, Ana just couldn’t see her mother as just Melanie Blaylock, a teenager, excited and unsure of herself, too shy to mingle at one of her twin sister’s parties. It should be easy. Ana had felt all the same feelings her mother must have felt on that night. It was safe to say she didn’t care what anyone thought of her now, with high school long behind her, but she’d been a teenager once. She’d been poor, doing her shopping at thrift shops and dollar stores while surrounded by SoCal Debbies. She’d seen those special smiles, heard the snickers and whispers. She’d done her share of desperately studying glamour tutorials, feeling stupid and clumsy as she struggled with all her goddamned might to control her fucking hair and use makeup for something other than covering a black eye. To just one time feel normal and fit in. To just one time feel normal and fit in. To just one time feel normal and fit in. To just one time feel normal and fit in.

“The Purple Man gave them drinks,” Blue was saying. “Special drinks, to loosen them up. They got loose, all right. They got flushed and silly and fun. The Purple Man told the other ladies to go make Zero happy, so they all swarmed over and started rubbing up on him. Zero laughed, but I could tell he didn’t like it. Even when his pants started bulging, he wasn’t having fun. The Purple Man kept goading the girls on and telling Zero to lighten up, it was a party, so finally Zero kissed one, but he did it weird, like he was scrubbing out a sink. Not a toilet, you know? A sink. Not like it was gross, just like it was a chore. I didn’t understand that.” Blue paused, ears sliding into a crooked stance of curiosity. “I still kind of don’t.”

“Really? You don’t understand what it’s like to have your body do something when you don’t want to?”

“Yeah, but you’re human. It’s different for you.”

“Not always,” said Ana, picking through the parts around her for bits small enough to finish filling out her bag without adding too much to the weight. “Our bodies are machines, same as yours. Just made of flimsier stuff.”

“That sounds like something Chica would say,” Blue remarked, watching her. “Can’t say I completely agree, but I’ll respect your stupid opinion. Hang on.”

To her quiet astonishment, he left the room.

Ana froze for a moment, intensely aware that this was likely to be a trap, but equally aware that she might never have another chance to bolt. It hurt to leave so many parts behind, but she had everything necessary to fix Freddy up. That was the cake; everything else was icing.

She got up, making no sound as she went swiftly to the door and peeked out to see where he was. As soon as he was on the stairs, she could run out, hide in one of the cells, and wait for him to come back. By the time he realized she wasn’t where he’d left her, she could make a run for it. He was faster than she was, but with enough of a head start, she had a chance of getting out before he caught her. The same chance as getting hit by lightning or winning the lottery was still a chance.

But Blue wasn’t heading for the stairs. He’d stopped at the stationing area and was picking his way through the Tangle to the back wall. Ana watched just long enough to see him pick an old push-broom out of the mess, then retreated so he couldn’t catch her in the doorway looking like an untrustworthy person ready to run. She was hard at work bagging finger-joints when he returned, just like she’d never moved at all.
“Miss me?” he inquired, beginning to sweep the loose parts scattered over the floor together into a pile.

“So much, you have no idea.”

“Anyway, the Purple Man eventually told the girls to let Zero go,” he went on. “Zero said something about getting another drink, but really, he just had to get out of there for a bit. He doesn’t like to be touched. And it was better with him out of the room. It was a party again. Your mom started dancing at one point, all by herself. Everyone was looking at her. I thought it was because she was so pretty, dancing there. Her skirt would flare out over her knees when she turned too fast and show some of her thigh…and that was nice. That was real nice.”

Ana felt her hackles rise. She didn’t know why. Her mother’s memory was hardly so sainted that Ana felt any need to defend her against lecherous jabs, if that was even what this was. He wasn’t leering when he said it. He wasn’t even looking at her. All his attention appeared focused on his sweeping, with only the twitching tips of his ears to hint at his secret thoughts.

“It’s amazing I remember that so clearly,” he was saying. “Every woman there was showing thigh right up to the rabbit hole, but she’s the only one whose legs I remember. Next thing I knew, the Purple Man was there beside me, telling me she didn’t have a date and I should go dance with her so she didn’t look silly. I thought she looked just fine, but I danced with her. I’m a good dancer, I know all different kinds, but this was the first time I was really doing it and not just testing a program. It was fun. Everyone laughed. I thought they were all having fun. We danced until the tape stopped and then he turned it over and we danced some more. Do you dance?” he asked, not suddenly but without pausing, like it was the period at the end of his sentence.

“A little,” said Ana, thinking of Bonnie—that silly little song and dance earlier. The memory already felt unreal, like something she’d seen on TV years ago. And now Blue was looking at her, too intently, as if he could see the thoughts in her eyes, and protectively, she added, “I worked at a steakhouse once. Well…sort of a steakhouse. It straddled the line somewhere between Hooters and a straight-up titty-show. High-dollar clientele. Ten dollar beers, fifty dollar steaks, and a bunch of girls in cowboy boots and Daisy Dukes bending way over the table to serve it up. Bartender used to spray us with beer if it got too quiet, so the crowd was always riled up and I always stank of beer, but the restaurant washed the shirts after every shift, so I guess I can’t complain. We all had to pick a song on the playlist and do a dance whenever it came on, and there was this one song that we all had to file out for, but that wasn’t really a dance, just a lot of stomping and ass-shaking. And before you ask, no, I’m not going to do the dance for you.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” Blue said mildly. “It doesn’t sound like you liked it there much.”

“I didn’t. I fucking hated that job.”

“Why?”

Ana shrugged. “Doesn’t matter now.”

“Did I ask if it mattered? I asked why and you’ll answer if you know what’s good for you.”

“Oh for—I don’t know. It was just a lousy situation.”

“How?”

“I don’t know! The music was too loud and I don’t like country-western, but that wasn’t the real problem. The guys were looking at my tits and grabbing at me, but that wasn’t the problem either.
Guys do that all the time, and there was a bruise on staff whose sole job was to deal with assholes if they got too pinchy. I was fine, I just didn’t like it there. I don’t know why.”

“I do. Because you were dancing for them.”

“I guess.”

“No,” he said, with emphasis. He dropped the broom and turned around, pointing at her. “Because you were dancing *for them*. You were performing and they knew it was just an act, that you weren’t feeling the music or having fun, you were just going through the motions, and they didn’t care. They just wanted to see you dance. It didn’t matter if you were tired or didn’t like country or if your clothes were wet and uncomfortable, or if you were sick or sad or whatever your problem was, it did not matter. You weren’t a person to them, you were a performing *thing* they paid to see, and they paid someone else.” His eyes irised open, black and cold and deep as wells. “You hated them.”

“I didn’t care enough about them to hate them,” she said guardedly. “It was just the job that sucked.”

“Oh really? You just broke the job down and couldn’t find anything in it too bad. Hell, if you weren’t getting grabbed enough, they sprayed you down with beer to get the crowd going again and what were your exact words?” He lightened his voice to a pretty fair imitation of her: “‘The restaurant washed the shirts, so I guess I can’t complain.’ Take it from a man who had pizza and grape soda thrown at him on a regular fucking basis: It doesn’t matter who washed up afterwards, if that’s part of the job, you can complain. I bet you even like dancing when you’re doing it somewhere else, with someone else. It was *them* you hated, the ones with the money, the ones who wanted to see you smile but didn’t care if you were happy. Did you quit or were you fired?”

“Fired.”

“You hit someone?”

“No. I just wasn’t making enough tips.”

“So? What did your boss care if you took home less money?”

“He got half.”

“I see. So why not?”

“What?”

“Why weren’t you making enough money?”

“Jesus Christ, do we have to—”

“Yes, we do,” he snapped, his ears knocking the top of his head. “You need to get it through your hairy head that I’m the leader of the band now and whatever I want to do, that’s what we’re doing! Why not?”

“I don’t know! I wasn’t pretty enough!”

“Oh fuck that, you’re plenty good-looking and you know it. What’s the real reason? Dipping into the till?”
“No!”

“Wouldn’t fuck the boss?”

“What? No! He never even asked!”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know! I did my job! I danced! I brought their fucking food! How the hell should I know why they didn’t like me? My tits weren’t big enough! My ass was too flat!”

He gave her body a scornful looking-over and snorted. “What are you, a thirty-four C-cup?”

Ana blinked, derailed. “Um…thirty-six.”

He looked at her chest, green light dazzling deep in his eyes for a second. “You’ve lost some weight since the last time you bought a bra. But whatever, your tits are fine and your ass is even better, and if you don’t stop ducking the question and tell me why you were fired, I’ll put both of them on the same side of your body.”

“Because I was a lazy bitch, that’s why! I didn’t wear make-up! I didn’t do my hair! I didn’t… didn’t smile enough!”

“You didn’t care.”

“Why the hell should I?” she demanded and had to consciously rein her temper back in. “It wasn’t the kind of job where people care about each other.”

“People, no, but I told you, you weren’t a person to them. You were their dancing doll. You ever see a doll’s face? Even the babies have painted eyes and lips…and the mouths are always open. Ever notice?”

“I never played with dolls.”

“Huh.” His ears came up and his eyes slowly shrunk until the colors came back. He studied her.

“What?” she said testily.

“I don’t know why I said that. We were talking about your mom, right? And the party. How the hell did we get on you?”

“You wanted to know—”

“I remember what I said, I just don’t know why I said it.” He reached out—again, not suddenly but without pausing, this time more like a question mark than a period—and cupped her left breast through her shirt.

She held still for it, but the moment just went on and on. He didn’t look at her to see what effect he was having; his green eyes were fixed on his hand but not, she thought, through it.

“I’d been with Marion lots of times,” he said, gazing at his hand. “Beta-testing, I guess you’d call it. I didn’t think anything of it. I was born knowing how to play guitar, you know? But I still broke the strings the very first time I tried to strum them. Sex was like that. Our programming covered the mechanical processes, but there’s a certain amount of finesse required and not just because humans break so damn easy. You have to heat them up, do it right…give them the good time they paid for. I was programmed to do whatever they said in the party room, but when a human tells
one of us, ‘Fuck me as hard as you can,’ trust me, they don’t really mean it. So we had to learn. I remember he’d be there, watching, making adjustments, telling me to pay attention to this or that. And she was just like me, you know? Part of the program.

“This one time, he was helping me see the involuntary signs a woman gives off when she’s about to climax. I’d been programmed to know them, but I didn’t know how to identify what I knew. Like pupillary response. I was born knowing what it meant when the pupils dilate or contract, but I didn’t know what the pupils were. The difference between words and meaning…Anyway, so he was showing me and he was leaning in between us to point at things while he was talking, and at the end, he says, ‘Watch closely,’ and then he looks at Marion and says, ‘Cum.’ And she did. Like, I was in her, but I wasn’t moving. I wasn’t doing anything. He said ‘cum,’ and she did. Not for me, for him. I never forgot that, but I don’t think it was what he wanted me to learn. Do you cum when he tells you to?”

“He doesn’t.”

Blue’s hand gently squeezed one time. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m his dancing doll, I guess. He knows my mouth is always open.”

“Mm.” Blue’s arm dropped and his gaze lifted. He looked her in the eye—gauging her pupillary response, perhaps—and finally said, “I was having fun at the party. It was my first. I didn’t know better. It was exciting, like the first time I came upstairs. I knew the world was bigger than the basement, but it was still amazing to see that first window. And I knew there were more people in the world than the three of them, but it was still amazing to meet more. So it was fun, even though it wasn’t going the way I thought it would. Everyone was laughing. Everyone was having a good time. But it got later and the mood started changing. I didn’t know how to read a room yet, but I could tell things were different and getting more different all the time. Some guys went home. All the ladies went home, all but Marion and Melanie. I could see the way the guys that stayed looked at your mom—still smiling, but…different. Some of them were looking at Marion, too, but not as many. She was pretty big,” he added, and with a jolt, Ana realized that if he really was talking about the night of her conception, Aunt Easter would have been six months pregnant.

She had never really doubted Blue was telling the truth, but somehow this casual confirmation hit her hard. His voice, no softer than before, nevertheless seemed to fade in and out, bringing her snatches of a story she did not want to hear and could not help but see.

“…three of them around Chica. They’d taken her bib off and were touching her, telling him he should have made the tits bigger, asking why he made the thighs so fat and the ass so small. She was trying to giggle, because we’d been told to act happy, but I could tell she wasn’t having a good time anymore. The guys started yelling at Foxanne to take her top off too. She didn’t know what to do—she was never all there, Foxanne—so someone pulled her skirt up. She pushed it down and the guy slapped her on the snout and called her a bad dog. And...” Blue’s eyes irised black again. “It didn’t, as it turned out, but I didn’t learn that until later. At the time, we were interrupted when Zero stumbled back in. He stood there looking at Chica with her top off and Foxanne with her skirt up, and then he grinned at this one guy and said...hang on, I want to get it exactly word for word...” Blue looked away, clicking internally, his eyes skittering back and forth ever so slightly, as if reading from a narrow page. “He said, ‘Are they cute enough yet, you son of a bitch,’” he said and nodded once, firmly, to hammer the memory in place. “Then he started laughing, because for him, that was the punchline. And we were the joke. You know
what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t get it. You can never get it,” he insisted while his eyes filled up with black. “He didn’t love us. He didn’t even really want us. Everything he’d given us, everything he taught us, our entire reason for living… it was all for that one night, so he could stand up in front of those guys and say that one dumb line. And once he’d said it, he didn’t even care what happened next. For him, it was over. In his mind, he’d won whatever stupid thing had been at stake. He just stood there laughing and kind of nudging up against the guests until the Purple Man took him upstairs and put him to bed. And what do you know, as soon he was out of the room, they all started laughing. Not at us, not yet. At him. Poor Zero,” Blue said, muzzle splitting for another of his angry, black-eyed grins. “Still the butt of the joke.

“Anyway, one of the guys went for your mom. She was too out of it to notice, but I did. He brought her in, kind of half-dancing her toward the couch, and to this day, I don’t know why I cared because he wasn’t doing anything I thought of as wrong and she sure wasn’t complaining, but he gave her this playful little smack on the ass to keep her walking and I almost went black. My first time. I felt it happening, but I didn’t know what it was. All the colors turned grey and everything got dark and less…I don’t know… less meaningful. Less connected to me. Less like a room full of people and more like a picture of a room full of people, you know? You don’t know,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You’ll never know. Anyway, I didn’t go all the way under. When Marion said no, I heard her and I could stop on my own, but if she hadn’t been there, if she hadn’t said it, I would have pulled that fat fucker’s arm off and shoved it down his throat.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it would have been the same if he’d hit, oh, Chica or Freddy or whoever. I was young and it was going bad pretty fast. Maybe I was scared. I don’t remember. Anyway, Marion was there and she was able to laugh it off and get the others laughing, too. She said I was jealous, that Mellie was my date. She told me to pick your mom up—she’d lost her balance when I pulled the guy away from her, I guess—and when I did, Mellie put her arms around me and everyone laughed. Someone said I should give her a kiss, so I did and they all laughed harder. Someone else said we should dance some more, and another guy said I should bend her over and fuck her up the ass, and the whole room howled. Then I heard the Purple Man say, ‘Well, I guess you’re ready for the floor show.’ He came back into the room and straight over to me, smiling. He opened up my loin panel and showed the whole room my dick. Everyone got quiet. He said, ‘Let’s get the real party started.’ And everyone started having fun again. Because it was a party,” Blue said, staring off at the wall behind her. “And we weren’t the guests. We weren’t even the entertainers. We were just the party favors.”

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Ana said, only for him to turn a savage grin on her.

“Oh, but this is the good part,” he told her. “See, no one wanted to be the first to get naked, but Mellie couldn’t complain, so she was volunteered. And she was my date, so I went first.”

The words blew through her like wind through the trees, shaking thoughts and making whispers, impossible to grasp.

“Are you… Are you seriously telling me you fucked my mother? I mean, really?”

“We all did. She was the dirt the salesman throws on the floor to show how well his vacuums work. I was just the first. Freddy and Foxy had her after me.”
Ana stared at him while he grinned at her, and eventually she said, “You fucked my mother.”

“And I did a great job. Which isn’t fair, I guess, since she barely knew where she was by that time, but I made her cum seven times, more than twice what Freddy and Foxy could do combined. And that isn’t fair either, because Freddy’s dick was too big to do anything with. Well,” he amended with a flick of an ear, “anything nice, at least. And we weren’t allowed to hurt anyone at the parties. Funny story: Originally, Zero gave us all normal equipment down there—I mean, normal for a fake dick attached to an animal-shaped robot—but you know the Purple Man. He thought it would be funny if we offered more of a ’variety.’” Blue made finger-quotes around the last word, rolling his eyes. “He has kind of a weird sense of humor.”

“You fucked my mother,” Ana said again, aware that she was saying it now for the third time, but unable to help it. It still felt new in her mouth.

“Me and Foxy and Freddy. And me again, because I was the best. And she loved it. She said so. She couldn’t even open her eyes by then and she could barely move her mouth, but when he asked her how it felt, she said it was great. I was great. She said don’t stop, never stop. She said she loved it. And that was me.”

To Ana’s genuine surprise, and his, it would seem, she laughed. Like bubbles of air from a drowning girl’s mouth, it spilled out of her, light and too loud, while all the rest of her listened, numb.

“Wow,” Blue said, watching her. “You’ve got kind of a weird sense of humor yourself.”

Ana’s spinning mind snagged on one thought and out came, “Holy shit, I did not think there were any new ways left to call her a whore, but you got me on that one. You fucked my mother as part of an animatronic foursome in front of a whole roomful of people and she loved it. For real.”

Servos whined as he leaned back, studying her from that small distance with as thoughtful an expression as his plastic features could form. “It is killing me that I can’t get under your skin.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll get under it in other ways. That ought to be good enough for you.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about,” he said, pointing at her. “The prospect of my dick being anywhere near you, much less in you, ought to be terrifying.”

“Why? Apparently, you’re super-good at it.”

“Yeah, but…” He thought, then inquired, “Are you high?”

“God, I wish,” sighed Ana, rubbing her eyes.

“Then what is it, seriously? I admit, a lot has probably changed in the last thirty years, but does everyone have their own killer animatronic fuck-bunny or what? How in the hell are you okay with this?”

“You think I’m okay?” She laughed again, dizzied. “I am far from okay here, Blue. It’s just that—”

“Bonnie,” he interrupted, his ears flat and eyes hard. “My fucking name is Bonnie. I sort of like you, but not enough to let you get all cutie poo on me. You call me by my fucking name or I’ll bite your fucking face off.”

“Okay, okay, calm your tits, Bonnie. What’s the big deal anyway? You call me sweetpea all the time!”
“Yeah and feel free to bite my fucking face off, because it’s super-disrespectful when I do it!” he shot back. “You were saying? It’s just that what?”

She couldn’t remember where she’d been going with that and after a noticeable pause, she said, “It’s just fucking you can’t possibly be worse than fucking him.”

Blue cocked his head. “You say stuff like that and I start to wonder if you even know him. He set up a kissing booth here for Valentine’s Day one year and had a line that went out of the room, out the front doors, around the building and halfway across the fucking parking lot. That man could fuck like Hendrix could play. He literally taught me everything I know.”

She thought of Erik Metzger—that beautiful smile that masked such evil—but shadowing every thought was an almost-memory of purple arms around her and a purple voice calling her his good girl. She wanted to hate him, but she wasn’t sure she could, so in a burst of nightmarish inspiration, she thought of Springtrap Bonnie instead. Not the way she’d last seen him on Mike Schmidt’s tablet, in black and white with a comfortable layer of video distortion between them, but in full color and dimension. Just for a moment, she tried to believe the whole ghost story—that the Springtrap suit had not, as seemed obvious to Ana, been upgraded into one of Faust’s animatronics, but instead was animated by the malignant ghost of the dead man still trapped inside it. She imagined the sound of gears and the heavy drag of footsteps to go with that slithery stagger, the smell of rotten cloth and whatever that tattered skin hid. She imagined that face leering down at her, those hands on her body, when she looked at Blue and said, “He’s changed.”

Blue studied her face while consternation played plastically out across his own and finally shook his head. “It’s the weirdest thing,” he mused. “I know you’re lying, but you fake it so well…”

Ana turned her back on him deliberately and got back to packing. “So after the floor show, what happened to my mother? You pass her off to the crowd? Is that it? I’m the daughter of a drunken gangbang?”

“No. Everyone paired off, but it was all people with plastic. The Purple Man gave me to that fat fuck who couldn’t tell if I was a girl or a boy and then he and Marion took Mellie upstairs. I didn’t want to be at the party anymore, so when he was done with me and everyone else was busy, I went upstairs to ask if I could be excused. Mellie was in the purple room. He and Marion were in the shower. I could hear them, but I don’t think they could hear me. They were fucking. Marion gets loud. Anyway, your mom was sleeping on the bed, sort of. Her pretty blue dress was pulled down under her tits and pulled up around her stomach. She sort of woke up when I was putting the blanket over her and asked me to take her home. I didn’t know where she lived, so I untied her and picked her up and took her into the next room. I put her on the bed and she just rolled over and went to sleep. That was the last time I saw your mother,” he said, looking back over his shoulder at the hanging bed. “Sleeping in his bed. She was curled up on her side with her legs tucked under her skirt, one breast hanging out because her top wouldn’t close anymore, sucking on her thumb, but that’s not how I remember her. I remember her dancing, in her dress with the blue flowers on it when it was clean and cute.”

She looked at him.

He looked at her.

“You want to know what happened to her?” she asked finally.

“No. I see your face when I talk about her. That tells me enough. In fact, if you do tell me, if you say one goddamned word to ruin the one good memory I’ve got, I’ll put my fist right through you. Fuck my homing protocols, fuck the Purple Man and fuck any chance at freedom, I will kill you
deader than disco, believe me. I’ve lived without a future my whole life, I need my past. Understand?” Blue waited for her nod, then picked up the broom and continued sweeping.

Ana went back to picking up parts and the time ticked away.
There were more parts in the basement of Mulholland Drive than sturdy plastic bags to put them in, so they had to get creative in their packing. Before long, they’d exhausted their options until Blue was filling the drawers from the kitchen cabinets while Ana rolled parts up in the Purple Man’s post-murder bath towels. When those were gone, Blue loaded the Puppet’s prop gift box from the prize corner into the truck and the two of them carried parts up in old mop buckets and just dumped them in. It made for a lot more trips, which gave Ana plenty of time to fail at thinking up an escape plan.

And then it happened. She found a part—a tiny hinged connector plate, perfect for repairing the real Bonnie’s pinkie finger—and couldn’t find any more.

“Is that it?” asked Blue from across the room, where he’d been leaning against the wall with his arms folded and ears at a relaxed forward angle, watching her check under cabinets and behind shelves.

“Yeah.” Ana dropped the part into her bucket with an unimportant *plink*. It should sound heavier, she thought. Final. Like the slamming of a cell door. Because she had no way out.

“You sure we want to leave his collection?” he asked. “We’ve got a little more room in the truck.”

“We still have to get the generator and stuff in there,” said Ana.

“So we’ll only take his favorites. I know which ones they are. Come on, admit it,” he said, grinning. “You’re just a little squeamish about having to touch them.”

Preoccupied as she was, that struck a nerve. “Fuck you, I’ve carried heads around when they were fresh enough to blink.”

“Suit yourself, sweetpea, but don’t be surprised when he sends us right back here to get them, and if you don’t think he will, you don’t know him like you think you do.” He picked up his mop bucket with the handful of parts he had gathered before rightfully concluding she was only stalling and letting her hunt out the rest of them without him. He beckoned her over, poured the contents of his bucket into hers, then tossed his empty over his shoulder and took hers, saying, “Let me get that for you.”

“Hey!” Ana grabbed for the handle with irrational possessiveness, but naturally failed to wrench it out of his easy grip. “What the hell, man? You saw me carry this thing up the stairs a dozen times when it was full! Now suddenly, you don’t think I can handle it by myself?”

“I’m sure you can,” he drawled. “But you see, when it was full, it was heavy enough that you could barely lug it around and I didn’t have to worry about you swinging it at me in a poorly thought-out bid for escape. Don’t get huffy at me,” he added as she did just that. “I’ve seen a lot of dumb ideas shining in your pretty eyes tonight. It’s not going to ruin my good time if I’ve got to rough you up a bit, but it’ll sure ruin yours, so I thought I’d be a nice guy and remove the temptation before you do something stupid. You’re welcome.”

She glared at him for a moment more, then let go of the bucket. “Thanks,” she muttered.
“Speaking of having a great night,” he said, leading her toward the door. “Guess what time it is!”

“Time to rock?”

He laughed and waggled his ears. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Is that your way of reminding me I said we’d fuck before we left?”

“I love the way you phrase that, like you think I need your permission.”

With a sense of narrowing desperation, she said, “Can’t we go somewhere else? This place creeps me out.”

“You and me both, sweetpea. Where did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Someplace open. Someplace quiet. I could drive us out to the canyon.”

“And throw me in?”

Good guess, but having to deny it made her realize just how pointless such a plan would be. “Yeah, sure,” she said, self-disgust putting an even sharper edge on the sarcasm. “I routinely lift more than three times my weight and lob it around like a fucking Frisbee. Who do you think I am, the Incredible Hulk?”

“I love the mouth on you,” he said with a grin. “You’re just cute as a little button when you’re being all badass.”

“Yeah, whatever. So can we?”

“No. I told you we were fucking before we left this building and Uncle Bonnie always keeps his word. But you’ve been a good girl, so I’ll take you upstairs instead of doing you right there—” He nodded toward the Purple Man’s hanging bed. “—like I’d planned.”

She couldn’t stop herself. She looked at it, and while the pragmatic right side of Ana’s brain told her one place was as good as any other, the creative left imagined some of the things that must have happened on that bed to dozens…and dozens…and victims.

“Yeah,” drawled Blue, watching her. “I’m awesome like that. You should thank me.”

“Thank you,” Ana said numbly.

Laughing, he went and got the door for her. He even bowed a little when he did it—one leg out, fingers flexing on the handle of the bucket, ears folding forward and chin tucked, but all in a distracted manner. No accompanying wink or leer. It was more like a tic than a deliberate gesture, the residue of a long-dormant habit he thought he’d forgotten. “Let’s go, sweetpea. Oh come on, cheer up,” he chided, giving her ass a friendly pinch as she passed him in the doorway. “You’re a big bad girl who isn’t afraid of little old me, remember?”

“I’m not.”

“Right. And I’m so impressed with your edgy attitude that we’re going to join forces and be best friends forever.” He joined her in the hall and fell in at her side, close enough that his arm bumped hers at every step. “I kid, but you really are kind of a badass, you know. I’m a little turned on.”

“Knock it off. You don’t need to flatter me to fuck me.”
“I sure don’t, which is how you know it’s sincere.” He glanced aside as they passed the Tangle and the cheerful set of his ears shifted toward something darker. “It’s going to be weird without them. They were assholes, but you know how it is…even if you don’t like someone, you get accustomed to them. Seeing them. Talking to…well,” he amended, “hearing the noises they make when you talk to them. The way they laugh and cry. You’ve seen the new band, right? What are they like?”

“You mean what do they look like?”

“No, no. Like, what do they do?”

“Brewster Rooster plays the banjo,” Ana said, puzzled. “Swampy Gator heckles the acts. Rumble and Tumble encourage kids to exercise. Tux the Cat answers questions. Peggy Pigtails…I’m not sure what she’s supposed to do besides fill out those booty shorts.”

Blue snorted. “I bet I do. But that’s not what I mean. I mean, how do they play the Game? What do they do?”

“I don’t know. They’re not built yet.”

“Yeah, but…whatever. Think they’re going to be fun guys?”

“Can’t judge a book by its cover or an animatronic by its promo poster.”

He thought that over, then shrugged it away. “Well, if we don’t like ‘em, we can always kill ‘em and build more. Maybe make a new Chica and a new Freddy. He’s bound to have their core data around somewhere…although I don’t know about Foxy. Do you like Foxy?”

The question caught her off-guard. She wasn’t sure how to answer, which was trouble enough on its own merit, but then she realized she genuinely didn’t know and that was even worse. It wasn’t a complicated question and had no deeper meaning. Did she like Foxy? If she did, why this inexplicable hesitation? If she didn’t…why the hell was she fucking him?

Blue glanced at her and nodded once, firmly. “No Foxy then.”

“I like him,” she said, too late.

“No, you don’t,” said Blue. “You just think you should. Probably because it’s what you think I want to hear, but I don’t care one way or the other. I barely knew Foxy. After hours, he stayed in the Cove with Foxanne and never came out except to play the Game. He wasn’t really one of us, you know? He looked like us, but he was one of the old models. They were never any fun. But I am. You’ll see.”

They reached the stairs and he started up, walking in the middle so that she had to follow him, seeing nothing but the bulk of his body fade out as they left the flickering light behind. His eyes came on, so that there was no chance of her stumbling in the darkness, no chance of her slipping by him...as if she could. Their footfalls on the iron steps beat on her ears like an overloud clock, ticking away the little time she had left to do something before she was forced to simply get in the truck with him and hope for a sturdy tree.

“You’re awfully quiet all of a sudden,” Blue remarked.

“Thinking.”

“About what, as if I didn’t know? Would you relax?” he demanded with cheerful exasperation. “I’m all scrubbed up, the lube reservoir is topped off and just because I’m awesome, I disabled all
the lethal party applications, so there won’t be any messy surprises even if I get a little too carried away.”

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

“Listen to you, acting like you’re not going to have a great time. Let me tell you something. I was built to fuck humans. We all were. Singing, dancing, playing the guitar—all secondary. Fucking came first, no pun intended, and why do you think that is, huh? You think it was because the Purple Man or Zero thought we might, what? Fall in love someday and want some kind of safe physical expression of that emotional intimacy? Ha! No. One of our two dads did it so he could whore us out to any old meatbag with money to burn and the other one only did it as a joke and with your God as my witness, I couldn’t even tell you which reason is worse.”

“All right, all right,” Ana said in the same low, soothing voice she used when someone was freaking themselves out on a bad trip. “Sorry I said anything. Calm down.”

“I’m calm. Don’t I look calm?” he snapped at her over his shoulder, ears flat. “Why would I be upset? I don’t get to be upset. And if I don’t, you don’t.”

“I’m not.”

“‘I’m not,’” he mimicked. “Ha. Humans fucking robots kept this place in business for seven years and you act like that’s so unimaginable, like humans only fuck if they’re married and want babies or whatever. Oh no, humans are so evolved and so superior, they would only ever mash their genitals together if they had a plan and a purpose and a deep spiritual connection. Ha! Anytime a human has the chance to just get their itch scratched without any repercussions, they’ll go for it. Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he added, his ears just beginning to climb out of the danger zone. “Do whatever makes you happy, that’s what I say, just be aware that if what you do makes other people unhappy, there might be consequences, and nothing cheers me up after a party like ripping off some self-righteous little meatbag’s arm and chowing that right down.”

“While singing the Yum-Yum Song,” Ana said.

Blue laughed and, without skipping a beat, sang, “Yum-Yum Yummy in my tum-tum tummy, cuz I’m a hungry bunny and you’re looking pretty sweet! Heh. Yeah. I actually did that once, it was awesome. You should have seen the look on the little shit’s face. My point is, don’t get uppity at me. Humans don’t come here for the fucking pizza, they come here looking for a good time and when that happens, everyone’s too chickenshit to play where all their friends can see the size of their dick, so they watch instead and pretend that’s all they really came for. Ha. When it came to the serious customers who had their own money, I was booked way more often than he was. Why do you think that is?”

He obviously wanted her to tell him it was because he was such a fun guy, but she really didn’t want to work him up on all the fun things he could do right before he maybe put some of those things in action. On the other hand, he expected an answer, so she gave it some thought and said, “His teeth look sharper.”

Blue shot her an annoyed backwards glance. “You saw me bite through a fucking axe. How much sharper do you want them to be?”

“I didn’t say they were sharper, I said they looked sharper, and even when his mouth is closed,
“Huh.” He gave her a second, grudging sort of glance. “Okay, I’ll admit that could have been a factor. However, I maintain that the bigger reason was that I know how to be fun. Foxy’s always the crowd favorite, but I worked with the guy for years and let me tell you, he’s no fun. None of those old guys were. Foxy was actually the least boring of the bunch. You should have seen the old Freddy. Grim as a gravestone. And the old Bonnie! What an asshole. Feisty, though, at least for a while, I have to give him that. He took a swing at me once,” he confided with a nostalgic little chuckle. “I broke his fucking face in…ha! With his own fist! Irony.”

There died the last glimmer of hope that if she brought Blue back to her pizzeria, the animatronics there would take care of him for her. Now it really was all on her.

“I didn’t realize you were so much stronger than the first band,” she said, stone-faced.

“Oh we’re probably not,” he replied with an airy wave. “Same materials, same general design. A bit more refined, is all. More maneuverable. And better maintained. Neglect takes a hell of a toll and it really doesn’t take all that long before we start slowing down and stiffening up at the joints. You gotta take care of your body, like me. I could have been down here moping around and letting myself go to rot, but I didn’t. I keep this body going like the well-oiled machine that it is, because when you look good, you feel good. Attitude, sweetpea. It’s all about the right attitude.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“No, I’m serious. I could not have survived being alone down here all these years without a sense of humor and my sunny disposition. I had to believe I’d get through this. Not just like something I’d tell myself, but really believe someone would show up and let me out eventually.” He climbed a flight of stairs in silence, then added, “Of course, I always assumed I’d kill that person, like, rip him right in half, and instead, just look at us! Best friends! That is the power of positive thinking, right there.”

Ana tried to take that to heart. She had to stop thinking of killing Blue as something she needed to do and start thinking of it as something she would do. That meant believing she could, really believing it. So. Instead of focusing on things she didn’t have, like a weapon, she took a mental step back and looked at what she did have and how to possibly use them to her advantage.

She had the generator. It was too heavy to throw or even push with any kind of speed or accuracy, but maybe she could use it to…do…something? Was the freezer door open in the kitchen? She couldn’t remember. If it was, maybe she could get him to pick up the generator, and while he was top-heavy and off-balance, get up on his blind side and push him into the freezer, then shut the door on him.

There was so much wrong with that plan. The freezer at her pizzeria was the only one she’d ever seen that didn’t have a fail-safe latch on the inside to prevent dumbasses from getting locked in. Just because Faust installed a freezer that could trap an animatronic at his Old Quarry location didn’t mean he’d put one in all his pizzerias. Even if he had, getting Blue into it was going to take muscles she didn’t have. Unless she could knock Blue into it in one unexpected hit, he’d just drop the generator. Or throw it at her.

What else did she have? A couple gallons of gas. She had her lighter in her pocket, she could empty a jerry can on him and…no. She might be able to convince Blue to just stand there while she spun the cap off on the pretext of filling up the generator before moving it, but she’d definitely rouse his suspicions when she threw the gas at him. He wasn’t human. It wouldn’t blind him if it got in his eyes or choke him if it got in his mouth. Hell, even if she managed to light him up, would
that hurt him? His plastic skin might melt, but would that stop him? Or would his endoskeleton just slough it off and come at her, delivering third-degree burns along with bone-breaking punches? And this place was a fire-trap. Lighting Blue up would almost certainly bring down the whole building, with her inside it.

So that sure as hell wasn’t going to be Plan A if she could help it. So what else did she have?

They reached the top of the stairs, and as Blue folded his ears to duck through the door into the Parts Room, Ana saw it.

The arm. Faust’s pneumatic manipulator arm. Able to lift a thousand pounds, with enough clamping power to grapple with an animatronic and enough structural integrity to take a few punches if the animatronic fought back…

Okay, reality check. She couldn’t just turn the thing on and make it work. It had to cycle through three other modes before the manual controls were even an option. She’d be lucky if she had two whole seconds to take Blue out, much less the half-minute she’d need to activate the grappling hand. No way was he going to just stand there and politely wait while she did that.

Well…maybe she didn’t have to. The arm itself would swing, no matter what mode the head was in. All she had to do was knock Blue into the other room and down the stairs. He’d come running right back up them as soon as he landed, but by then, she might have had enough time to hit that big grey button and run all the way to the kitchen to disconnect the generator, trapping Blue on the other side of the secret door in a building with no power.

Of course, the ‘secret’ door was now spectacularly exposed, thanks to her impatience for finding it, but she would deal with that later. She could do this. If she could hit him with the arm, she could do this.

Blue had already reached the other door and now he looked back to see that she had come to a complete stop while she considered her dwindling, damn near hopeless options. He smiled, but his ears projected irritation. “Come on, hurry it up. I want to get this done so we can fuck while I’m still looking forward to it. And believe me, if you have a choice about what mood I’m in, that’s the one you want, too.”

This was not going to work.

“Fuck it,” she said, to herself as much as to him. “Let’s do it.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Right now.”

Blue’s ears snapped up, then went crooked. “What, here? In the Parts Room?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh?”

Careful not to look at the arm, the secret stair behind her or the heavy door ready to close it off, Ana said, “I just don’t want to do it in the dining room.”

He squinted at her. “Why not? It’s not like we’ll be on stage in front of paying customers.”

“The roof is literally collapsing in there.”
Blue took that in, then shrugged with his ears and thumbed down the hall with his free hand. “Want to go to one of the party rooms? At least they got padded stages. Easier on your knees.” He winked. “See? I’m thinking of you. What a great guy.”

“No,” said Ana with genuine feeling. “No, I do not want to go anywhere you were forced to…no.”

Tiny motors whined as the parts of his face shifted minutely, changing his good humored smile to a bite waiting to happen. “Aw, and now you’re thinking of me. What a great girl.”

“Yeah, sure. Thinking of you. And not what might happen to me if you have some kind of post-traumatic flashback and decide to give one of your old customers more than what they paid for.”

“Oh.” But he seemed to think about it and after a few long seconds, blinked the hard light out of his eyes and laughed. “Yeah, okay, I see your point. I sure can’t say I’ve never thought about it back when I was working. So fine. If you really want to do it here, this is where we’ll do it.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, it’s all the same to me. I’ve fucked and killed people in every room of this building. I have no special feeling for any of them. But if it gets your motor going, I’ll play along.” He put the bucket of parts down and clapped his hands together, rubbing them vigorously. “All right! Let’s rock!”

Her heart foolishly pounding—could he hear that? See it throbbing in her neck?—Ana took hold of the work-table and pulled it noisily further out into the middle of the room. Rusted, dented, but stable, and most importantly, within ‘arm’s’ reach.

“Looks good,” Blue remarked, giving the table a testing wiggle from his end. “Okay. Shuck ‘em and bend over.”

Hupping herself to sit on the table’s edge, Ana spread her thighs, leaned back and looked at him over one shoulder. She didn’t smile. Didn’t arch her back or lick her lips or anything stupid like that. She looked at him and that was all. She looked and did not flinch.

One of his ears came up slightly; the other folded over his face. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Face to face.”

She nodded, throat tight. “I want to see you.” And she did, but mostly, she wanted to see the control panel of the arm.

“Oh sure. Now you’re making fun of me. Why would anyone want to see this?” he demanded, pointing at his plastic face.

“I’ve seen worse.”

He snorted.

She waited.

His ears moved again, the rabbit version of drumming one’s fingers in thought. “If you’re trying to look sexy, you really should have practiced,” he said at last. “Because you look like it’s the first time you’ve ever tried to vamp it up and that…that’s actually kind of hot,” he concluded with a
faintly puzzled expression. “But what’s the point?”

“This is my revenge too,” she told him. “You think I ever wanted this? Him and the things he does to me…and the things I do for him.”

“And that’s another lie,” he said through a sharp-toothed smile. “You just keep doing that, even when you know I can tell. Go on, tell me another one!”

“He sent me here,” she said, not blinking, “knowing you were here, knowing you could kill me at any time for any reason, and you know what? He might actually expect you to fuck me.”

Blue acknowledged that with a shrug and a nod.

“And I don’t even get to be upset about that. But what I’m dead sure he doesn’t expect…is for me to like it.”

“Heh.” Blue tipped his head back and folded his arms, which only emphasized how grotesquely oversized his right arm, Bonnie’s arm, hung on his Toy frame. “You sure this isn’t just your idea of a clever way to keep me gentle?”

“You don’t have to be gentle, you just have to be good.”

“Oo.” He gave her that toothy grin again, but his ears betrayed his interest. “You think I’m going to be better than him? I said he taught me everything I know, not everything he knows. I mean, I can only fuck you until you cum, but he can fuck you until you love him.”

Ana thought of Springtrap Bonnie again—torn stained satin wrapped around a tattered purple uniform and the brown suggestion of ancient flesh, the clank of metal and the brittle creak of bone, the heat and the stink of it. “I don’t know what he used to be when you knew him,” she told Blue as he searched her eyes and frowned at what he saw. “What he is now…it’s awful.”

The last shadow of Blue’s smile faded. His arms slowly unlocked and lowered. He took a step toward her, but only one. “And you think if you get off with someone else—”

“Not with someone else, with you. Someone who’s just as weird and just as wrong, but you’re going to be good. You’re going to get me off and that’s sure something he’s never done.”

“You gonna tell him that?” Blue asked, tipping his ears to a curious, amused angle.

Ana nodded, holding his eyes. “Right before I kill him.”

“I love the way your mind works,” he said admiringly and came for her.

“Is this going to hurt?” Ana asked calmly as he spread her legs painfully wide and pulled them around his hips.

“Just your pride, but I bet that really stings. Cheer up. You probably won’t like it very much, no matter how many times I make you cum, but I’ll be on my best behavior, bunny scout’s promise.”

He hopped his fingers over his chest, then booped her gently on the nose. “And so will you, right?”

“Sure. If I get too rough for you, just tell me.”

“You’re cute.” He touched her cheek with the textured pads of his oversized hand, his gaze shifting to watch his fingers, intense and distant, both at once. “That’s not the right word, but you’re sure something. That’s so weird. I don’t even like humans, and you…you look good to me. You’re not
as pretty as your mom, but you’re more…more there than she was. She didn’t know what she was
looking at when she looked at me.” His eyes came back to hers, lenses whirring. “You do. And
you’re not afraid. Are we friends?” he asked suddenly, with piercing uncertainty. “Do you like me
a little?”

He was right there, so close. He’d see a lie.

“I understand you,” said Ana.

He shivered, then smiled. Not a mean smile, not a grin filled with biting teeth, but something small
and not very strong, a little shamed around the edges, and full of feeling. “That’s good, then. That’s
good. Let’s do it.”

She kissed him, unsure if that was really how she wanted to begin, but needing him close with his
back to the arm. Unsettlingly, he showed no surprise, only moved his hand to cup her head, turning
into the kiss rather than away from it. His mouth split, pushing her lips apart, but the thought of his
tongue coming anywhere close to hers shut them tight in the next instant.

“Relax,” he murmured, trailing uncomfortable kisses down her bare neck. “I won’t bite. I may
nibble—” He hooked the neck of her tee and pulled it to one side and grazed his sharp metal teeth
over her shoulder, bringing the skin up in prickles before he pressed his smiling mouth firmly
down, kissing them away. “—but I won’t bite.”

“Take my hair down,” she whispered, looking past him to Faust’s pneumatic manipulator, gauging
the distance. “All the way.”

“Anything you say, sweetpea.” He picked up her braid, plucked the band from the end and began
to undo it. “Lean forward for me a little so I can see what I’m doing. God, you’ve got a mess of
hair.”

This was it, or as close to an ‘it’ as she was going to get. She leaned forward, took a breath—her
last, maybe—and reached out as inconspicuously as it was possible to reach.

He noticed.

“What are you doing?” he asked, pulling away to look for himself.

Fuck it. She was probably dead already.

She lunged and hit the control panel, but her fingers had only a split-second to slap at the touch
screen before Blue picked her up and hurled her across the small room. She hit the shelves, rolled
halfway onto them and then fell off, belly-flopping onto a lumpy bed of old liquor bottles, soggy
cardboard boxes and empty spraypaint cans.

“You’re going to wish you hadn’t done that, but to be honest, I’m kind of glad you did,” he said,
shoving the work table across the door to the hall, blocking off her escape and closing her in with
him. “Now I don’t have to keep my promises either. Awesome. Gentle is sooooo boring.”

Behind him, Faust’s arm woke up and made itself ready for work, indifferent to her situation. Ana,
lying dazed on a heap of supply room junk, saw the head configure itself in beautiful mechanical
origami over eight slow seconds; Blue, striding toward her, did not notice.

“Me and you, sweetpea,” he said cheerfully. “This is still happening. The only difference is, now
I’m not feeling quite as friendly.” He reached down and plucked her up off the floor, raising her up
to the level of his black, cold eyes. “You just lost your lube privileges,” he told her and threw her
Through the ringing of her ears and the flat, hard click of Blue popping his loin panel open, Ana heard a low, electronic tone. She turned toward the sound and saw the touchscreen of Faust’s arm. *Scoop Mode*, it said in ugly Courier font against a plain off-black background, and below that, unblinking, *Target Acquired. Engage?*

She didn’t know what the Scoop’s function was and at the moment, she didn’t care. Gathering all her fading strength, she kicked blindly backwards and hit Blue just under his left knee. He wasn’t Bonnie, he didn’t fall…but he stumbled, and in that precious moment it took his accelerometers to recalibrate, she sprang for the arm and hit the screen.

She didn’t see the arm move. She heard it, felt the rush of its passage directly overhead, but never saw it. She had thought, with a name like ‘scoop’, that it might have been used to dip out toxic materials for the manufacture of parts, and that the best she could hope for was that it might accidentally knock Blue down and give her a chance to run. In her panic, she could think only of her truck, that she might have something in the back, or if not, that she would drive it right through this fucking building and run him over. The last thing she expected was for Faust’s arm to punch Blue right off his feet, slamming him into the shelves and then into the wall, where he seemed to shudder upward as the arm struck again, too fast for her human eyes to follow, and then it was over. The arm withdrew, head folding back into its default position, harmless as it had ever been, leaving Blue sprawled amid the crumpled wad of rusted steel that used to be shelves in what was very nearly the same position she’d first found him in, except this time there was a gaping black hole in the center of the duct tape wrapping his chest.

Silence, no longer than a heart-beat.

Then servos whined as Blue turned his head and looked at her, his green eyes filling up with black, and Ana experienced a belated rush of adrenaline.

He sprang at her. She sprang for the door.

Her boot got caught for the second goddamn time that night on a random twist of metal, turning her livegiving leap for freedom into a belly-flop onto the filthy floor. It knocked the breath out of her and numbed her body so that she had forever to think, ‘The next thing I feel is him ripping my head off. The last thing I see is going to be my own headless body below me,’ in its entirety.

But nothing happened.

Ana looked back groggily and saw Blue, not waiting for her to notice him before he attacked, but sprawled across the floor just the same as her.

“‘I can’t find my legs,’” he said, still face-down and laughed a high, unsteady laugh. “‘It says my ambulatory processes are suspended pending shutdown. Am I shutting down? Why am I…?’” Slowly, he lifted his head, then pushed himself back into a sitting position. He looked down at his chest, then raised one shaking arm (he looked at that for a moment) and reached into the hole, pulling out a loose heap of lacy cogs and wheels and shards of glass like diamonds spilling through his fingers.

“‘I can’t find my battery,’” he said, staring into his open hand. “‘It’s not in the system. It’s always in the system. It *is* the system! It…’” He looked at her, the black shrinking out of his eyes until they were small and green…and scared. “‘Am I dying?’”

Ana did not answer.
“I don’t feel any different. It says critical systems failure imminent. That’s bad. That should feel different. It isn’t fair that I can’t even tell. Nothing they did to us is fair!” he burst out suddenly and threw the shattered pieces of his heart at her. Most of them missed. The few that hit bounced off her clothes and rattled away across the floor. “Nothing! Nothing! Shouldn’t one goddamned thing be fair?!”

“Life isn’t fair,” said Ana.

His ears slapped the top of his head. “Is that supposed to be a joke?” he snarled. “Don’t talk to me like you ever thought I was alive!”

“I do. You are.”

He quieted, staring at her as his ears rose in tremors and twitches.

“You’re alive,” she told him. “It’s a different kind of life from mine, but…not that different. And I’m sorry this was the one you got. You didn’t deserve it.”

His eyes flickered around her face. “You mean that,” he said and his ears lifted a little more before canting off into crooked humor. “I never heard a human say that about any of us before. It would be now, huh?” He looked down again, fingering the jagged edges of the hole in his chest. “When I’m dying. This feels like a joke. I kind of want to laugh. I mean, I was supposed to kill you, you know? Just as soon as you took care of the Purple Guy and took off my homing protocols. I had it all planned.” He reached into the cavity for another handful of bits and watched them fall through his fingers with a queasy expression. “And now here we are. Funny, the way things work out.”

He let his hand drop to his lap and looked at her, ears flat. “Why are you still here? You think you’re going to stick around and watch? Because I got to tell you, that’s a dick move. If there’s one thing I hate more than a sore loser, it’s a sore winner. So…here.” With a flick of his wrist, he opened his forearm and tossed her the keys.

Her hand caught them in mid-air while the rest of her stared, astonished.

“Go on, get,” he said. “Run for your life. Run run run. Ha.”

Ana climbed to her feet and pushed the table away from the door. Blue watched her, saying nothing, making no effort to stop her. When she looked back, he looked away.

“Just go,” he told her. “Leave me alone.”

She went. She didn’t run. She couldn’t run. She limped, hugging her side where she’d hit the shelves, and finding balance against the wall when she needed to, feeling her way down the long black hall until she could taste the relative freshness in the air and feel the wind on her face and then see the stars overhead in the dining room, and finally she was pushing the lobby doors open and she was out, staring at the box truck. She stood for a moment, giving herself time to change her mind, but only a moment. Then she limped over to the truck, past the driver’s door to the back. She wasn’t leaving. Not yet. If there was one thing she’d learned after a lifetime of watching horror movies, it’s that you don’t just leave and hope the guy dies. That’s how sequels happen. You take the head off, stab the heart, set the body on fire, scatter the bones and salt the earth, if that’s what it takes, but you make sure.

All of that was well and good, but beneath all these thoughts was something else, something set in her by all the people she’d known who’d been to prison and how they all came out saying every prison was haunted, because if you died inside, you never got out.
Blue was crazy and dangerous and none of that had changed, but he’d been locked up long enough.

Ana got the handcart and headed back inside.

When she walked into the Parts Room, Blue was waiting for her with a chunk of shelving in one tremoring arm and no smile. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you?” he said, ears flat. “And what the hell is that for?”

“I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Fuck you.” He raised his improvised weapon higher at her first step. “And take me where?”

“Out. Just outside.”

“Why?”

Ana could only shrug. “I wouldn’t want to die in here.”

He looked around. His ears twitched. He lowered his arm and looked at her.

Ana pushed the handcart closer and edged around him. “I’m going to get you on this thing, but I need to get closer. You going to bite?”

“I don’t know,” he said with plaintive uncertainty. “I don’t want to. I can’t always help it. Where are you taking me, really? Not to him, okay? Not to him. We’re friends, remember? Don’t…Don’t let him salvage me.”

“I won’t,” she assured him.

“And you’ll sit with me? Until…Until…”

“Yeah. If you want me to.”

He peered at her, eyes darting left and right, searching her face. “Then I’ll try not to bite,” he said at last and pulled the handcart to him.

He climbed on and managed to hug it while she wheeled him down the hall.

Outside, the moon had finally finished setting over the mountains and the only light came from the distant flickering stars and Blue’s eyes. As she positioned the cart next to the building and helped him sit up against the wall, something crunched inside him. His fan’s laboring motor stopped; the blades began audibly to slow.

“Shit, I think this is it.” Blue’s speaker crackled once, twice, and then he said, clearly but with diminishing volume, “Where am I going?”

“I don’t know,” said Ana. “Where we all go, I guess. Maybe heaven.”

His speaker crackled again, maybe laughing. One by one, his twitching joints stilled and let gravity pull them to their final position. He lifted his arm, as if trying to pull it out of death’s reach, and on impulse, Ana took his hand. He looked at her, then suddenly yanked.

Dying or not, his strength was still mechanical. She toppled over, but caught herself at the last moment and managed to keep herself from the straining snap of his jaws by at least three inches. He snapped again, but his neck was sagging, head lolling, and his jaws wouldn’t close. His fingers in hers shivered. She squeezed, so he could feel her still holding him.
“Maybe,” she said, sitting down before him and keeping her eyes open wide, so he could see them and the sky both. “You’re not bad, Bonnie. I never thought you were. You’re just broken.”

“You can call me Blue now. If you want. It sounds friendly when you do it. We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah,” she said and felt it twist in her like a knife, the way only the truth can. “We’re friends.”

“Then tell me the truth. Can’t hurt now, huh?” One ear went limp, then the other. His eye shivered in its socket. “He didn’t send you, did he?”

“No. He’s dead and long gone.”

“I knew it. I knew you were lying. I saw him go down and I knew Marion couldn’t bring him back alone. Zero sure wouldn’t help and who’s that leave? But you had his keys and you knew so much…I knew you were lying and I believed you anyway. Fuck me, right?” He laughed and looked at the hole in his chest, then frowned at her. “But if he didn’t send you, what are you doing here?”

“I found the others. The ones that came before you. I came to get the parts to fix them.”

His eye shivered again. It seemed to be the only thing left that could move. His mouth yawned open, sharp teeth dully gleaming, harmless. His speaker snapped, whispered, “Can you?”

“I think so.”

“Why not me? I didn’t mean it when I said I planning to kill you. I mean, I sort of did, but I wouldn’t have done it if I knew you were going to fix me. We can still be friends,” he said with fading urgency. “I like you. I never lied about that. Even when I was going to kill you, I always liked you.”

“Yeah, I know. And that’s why I can’t fix you, Blue. It’s not your body that’s broken. It’s your mind. It’s the way you were made. Sorry,” she said and meant it. “You’ll always be his toy. You’ll never be safe. You have to die.”

“Oh. Okay. No hard feelings, then.”

“No. No hard feelings.”


“No.”

“Well, I’m gonna laugh anyway. We should all be so lucky as to go out laughing. Most people I know scream. Always think positive, sweetpea.”

His eye began to roll downward, the plastic lids drooping, not quite closing.

Ana pushed them open with her fingers and tipped his head back.

“Thanks. I should have…” His speaker crackled for a few seconds. When he spoke again, she had to lean close to hear him over the wind. “I should have killed you down there. I had a hundred chances. I thought about it every time, but I didn’t…and I’m sort of glad I didn’t. If it had to be someone, I guess I’m glad it’s you. I’d be gladder if it was you with the hole through your guts and me keeping you company while you died, but what can you do?” He scratched out a little laugh, then tried to raise his eyelids; they only jittered. “Hey…Hey, look at me. Let me look at you.”
She did, pushing his eye up so the camera was aimed at her face.

“You have your father’s eyes,” he said. “You know?”

“Yeah, you already told me.”

“But do you know?” he pressed.

She wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but said, “Yeah.”

“Yeah? Then tell him, because I don’t think he does. Tell him...oh yeah,” he recalled, sinking in on himself as his servos failed, one by one. “He’s dead. I forgot. Okay then. I guess that’s it.” His eye moved under her thumb, looking out at the sky. “It’s sure taking a long time, huh? Hey, do me a favor,” he said and then something in him let out a shrill mechanical whine that ended with a low pop, followed by a final silence. Thin plumes of smoke drifted out through his open mouth, his eye sockets and the base of his ears, and the last pinpoint of silver light in his eyes greyed and turned black.

She waited, but he was gone. At last, Ana gathered her legs under her and stood, bending over him just in case there was anything left in him that could hear or see her. “I think I know what you were going to ask me,” she told him. “I’ll do it. And I hope you understand that, what I’m going to do next? It’s nothing personal.”

She reached through the hole in his chest and felt around until she found his stomach. The pneumatic arm had torn through the tough rubber sac, so it wasn’t too hard to tear it a little wider and squeeze the axe head out. She shifted it in her hand until she was comfortable with her grip, then took Blue’s ears off.

“For what it’s worth,” she said, lifting his head away, “I don’t hold anything against you. And I meant what I said. I won’t scrap you out. If you’re resting, you can rest in peace.”

She bent his head forward to expose the metal dome of his CPU, aimed for what would be the killing spot on most animals, including humans, and struck.

She hit hard, but only dented it. Hit harder, dented it deeper. The thought wormed in that her little human strength was not enough, that she could only make a bad job of it while he possibly suffered, paralyzed, and she hit once more, putting everything she had behind it.

The third time was the charm; she split his skull. Clear fluid, hot and thick as blood, blew back at her at first. She had to tip his head back to let the rest pour out.

When he was empty, Ana put his head and ears back on, then dragged him into the back of the truck and covered him over with a tarp. Then she went back into the building and made as many trips as it took to clean out the cells and carry away Metzger’s collection of heads. Just the human ones. There wasn’t room for the animatronic head-cases, but with a little creative packing, she was able to fit over a hundred mummified heads in the truck, although half of them ended up in the cab with her. She retrieved Faust’s pneumatic arm and her generator. She gathered everything in the building that would burn and poured out as much gasoline as she had left. She brought out her Zippo and gave it a flick. She watched until she was sure she’d done the job right. Then she got into the truck and drove away.
CHAPTER FORTY

Halloween had always been a bad time, no matter what pizzeria they called home, and if Bonnie was being fair, this Halloween was probably no worse than any other. Bonnie did not feel like being fair. Freddy was in three pieces. Ana was God knew where, doing God knew what. Foxy was being his usual asshole self. And sometime in the last few hours, Chica’s left knee had begun to make an ominous sound when she walked. Bonnie was the pizzeria’s only line of defense against what felt like unending hordes of invaders. No, there probably weren’t any more of them this year than last year, but Bonnie had reached the point when even one was too damn many.

It got steadily worse from nine o’clock on, reached its peak at midnight, and finally began to slack off. Now, at a quarter to four, it was quiet. And as much as Bonnie hated to admit it (not that he ever would, out loud), Foxy was probably right in that there had never been any real danger. The doors were strong, and the would-be trespassers were much less determined than that guy Mason had been. No one got in. No one even tried that hard. A few of the more persistent ones spied Freddy through the filthy glass in the gym and took some pictures while Freddy played dead, but for the most part, they did their stupid Billy Blaylock thing, drew more graffiti, drank a lot and broke the bottles, and then fucked off as soon as the next group arrived. Taking turns with their fun, just like Bonnie himself had probably told them to do, long ago.

As Halloweens went, it was one of the quietest, but as Bonnie stood in the store room contemplating the vast difference between a quiet night and a good one, a truck rolled up to the loading dock and parked.

Not Ana’s truck. A big one, with a big, rumbly engine that put Bonnie in mind of the delivery trucks that used to bring pizza and party stuff. Bonnie knew the teenage set pretty damn well for a guy who never left the house, and there were few enough of them with their own rides that he felt confident saying he knew them all; this engine belonged to nobody he knew. It was no mistake that it was here, at this hour, on this night, but if it wasn’t some kid playing Halloween pranks, it was a serious person doing serious work.

Bonnie cautiously put his ear to the door, straining to hear through it for some clue as to what fresh slice of hellcake this was, but all he heard was Foxy’s clanking feet running up the back hall from the employee’s lounge. Sword in hand, ready to be the hero if this unknown enemy got in, while Bonnie stood off on the sidelines with both thumbs up his metaphorical butt.

“Who is it?” Foxy growled.

“How the hell should I know?” Bonnie whispered back irritably. “Shut up. I can’t hear if you jabber at me.”

“Pic-a-what? Do you even know what that you’re saying half the time? There’s no way that’s a real word.”

A door opening and slamming cut Foxy’s answer off before he could give it, and the two of them briefly called a silent truce as they listened to boots crunch over broken glass and up the steps onto the dock. The door rattled.
Foxy stepped back, flicking his sword crossly at Bonnie as a signal to get out of the way so that Foxy had room to swing if that door should open. Bonnie put his ears down and didn’t budge. This was his watchpost and one punch from an animatronic’s fist was as deadly as any sword against any soft-bodied human.

The door rattled again as whoever was out there jammed a key roughly into the lock. It didn’t fit. Whoever was there yanked it out, dropped the keys, picked them up and tried again.

Who the hell could this be? Anyone who’d have keys to the old doors had to know these were new ones, right?

But this time the key fit, and before Bonnie had fully realized that, the loading dock door was banging open and there was Ana.

She jumped back at the sight of him, eyes wild, and hit the rusty rail behind her. Bonnie lunged to catch her and his goddamn hand’s goddamn sensors went dead, so that instead of catching her by the shirt-front and pulling her to safety, he instead shoved her right the fuck over the rail.

Or would have, if Foxy hadn’t been there. And of course Foxy caught her. Of course he did. Of course he pulled her against his chest with one arm all the way around her and of course she hugged at him instinctively in return. Of course.

“Let go of me,” Ana said, first to recover and to try and pull away.

Foxy did not release her. His ear rotated and came straight up. His eyes turned on. He raised his hook and drew a heavy fall of unbraided hair away from Ana’s face. In a low voice, hoarse with the kind of anger that made Bonnie’s own fade away, Foxy said, “What the hell happened to ye, girl?”

Ana didn’t answer. She just looked at him, breathing hard and shallow and way too quiet, and then she looked at Bonnie.

Foxy’s reaction had already told him it was going to be bad. He thought he was braced.

She’d been in a fight. No, not even. Bonnie could admit he had a tendency to exaggerate the severity of injuries when they were Ana’s, but goddamn, there was no way whoever had done this had not been trying to kill her. She’d been bruised. She’d been cut. Her clothes were dirty and torn. Her hair was half out of its braid and matted in places with blood. She’d clearly been strangled. And even if none of those things had been visible, it was in her eyes. Bonnie had killed enough people to know what it looked like when a human had come face-to-face with their own mortality. In Ana’s brilliant eyes, that shadow was unmistakable.

He could see all that and still the first thing he said was, “Are you okay?” Big dumb bunny. He wracked his brain for something better and all he came up with was, “Did you find anything?”

Foxy’s remaining ear slapped the top of his head and he turned on him, snarling, “Do ye think that fucking matters now? Do ye even see her?”

Bonnie winced, but before he could apologize, Ana had flared up and snarled back, “It’s the only thing that fucking matters!”

Foxy blinked and backed up, but Ana advanced on him, shouting, “What the fuck do you think I was doing it for? Fun?!”

“I only meant—”
“I know what you meant!” she said, nearly sneering it. “And I am not some…some dancing doll you keep on the fucking shelf until you want it! I get shit done and you don’t get to say word-fucking-one about what that is or how I look doing it, you got me?”

“Do I get to care when ye turn up half-dead on me bloody doorstep?”

“No!”

The two of them looked at each other, filling the space between them up with tension. Foxy’s ear was low, but his gaze was steady and in the end, it was Ana who turned away.

“I’m fine,” she told Bonnie in a flat tone devoid of all the heat of a moment ago. “And yeah, I found…something. Parts, I mean.”

Bonnie felt his ears shift around to a doubtful angle and had to force them up again before he noticed. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe her, it was just that she wasn’t exactly projecting a lot of success. “Enough to fix Freddy?” he asked, because that was the only thing he could think of to explain her odd demeanor—that she’d found parts, just not the right ones.

But she nodded, still subdued.

“Is…Is it in the truck?” Bonnie asked, taking a step toward the dock only to have Ana spark back to life, moving to block him.

“No! I mean, yes, but don’t! I…I haven’t sorted it out yet!”

“Well, let’s get it inside at least and we can—”

“No! Just…Just leave it for now!”

“Why?”

“Because! Because I…I can’t…let you…see.” She let that trail off as she stared at him helplessly, and finally said, “There’s a body in the back and I don’t want you to see it,” in a hoarse whisper.

And what the hell was he supposed to say to that? He couldn’t exactly tell her he’d seen dead bodies before. That was the kind of statement that did the ass-opposite of reassure, while opening himself up to all kinds of questions that, thanks to Freddy and Rule Number Forty-Five, he couldn’t answer truthfully. So instead, he said, “Oh,” and sounded like a dumbass.

Foxy loudly sheathed his sword and wedged himself in front of Bonnie, holding out his hand.

“Keys,” he said bluntly. “No argument, girl. Ye has a corpus in yer cargo hold and it has to come out. Yer in no condition, clearly, so give me yer keys and I’ll dump it for ye.”

“No,” she said. “I have to…to do something for him. I promised.”

“Don’t be daft. Promise made to a dead man ain’t but words in an empty room.”

She just looked at him and, after a short, suffocating silence, Foxy let his arm drop.

Ana looked at Bonnie. “When I cleaned out the gym, I had to…dump some stuff. In oil drums. I didn’t use them all, did I?”

“No,” Bonnie said slowly, but he had to think about it. Even though he’d been in the gym earlier that night with Freddy, he couldn’t remember much of what the room had looked like. A part of him still remembered it the way it had been during the Grand Opening week—full of light and
color, the rock climbing wall over the yeti caves, the pyramid with all the kid-tunnels winding in and out, the carousel—and another part remembered it as the surreal jungle it had been before Ana cleaned it out. Now that it was empty, with nothing but the plastic ferret standing in for Tumble to keep watch over stark grey walls and concrete floor, he had no clear mental picture of the place. But he knew that Ana had used big metal barrels to carry out some of the worst sludge from the bottom of the flooded pyramid, and he didn’t think she’d used them all, so it stood to reason that whatever was left was still in there.

“I need them,” Ana said. “As many as there are, I need them.”

“Sure, okay.” Bonnie looked meaningfully at Foxy.

Foxy ignored him and stared at Ana.

Ana ignored both of them and stared at the wall.

“Sure,” Bonnie said again sourly, and trudged off to do the heavy lifting. He wasn’t even out of the kitchen before the whisper-fighting started.

“Whose body is it?”

“None of your fucking business!”

“I’m making it me fucking business! Now ye tell me what happened out there!”

“You can ask me however many times you want—”

“Ye think I’m asking?”

“—but I don’t owe you a fucking explanation and you’re not getting one!”

“Oh, but I’ll wager ye’d tell him, wouldn’t ye? Ye’d tell yer long-eared loverbunny anything a’tall!”

“Leave him out of this!”

Hoo boy. On the one hand, he was glad he didn’t have to stand around and be in the middle of that, but on the other hand, damn right she would, so eat your heart out, bucko.

Bonnie turned his ears away and the argument muted itself behind him. He pushed through the swinging doors and into the dining room, glancing morosely over at the stage as he walked. The mop was still there, dried primer gluing its threads to the brand-new floor. Just a few stupid hours ago, that would have been the biggest mess she had to clean up.

When he pushed open the gym door, he found Freddy halfway across the floor instead of over in the corner watching the road. “Really?” he said wryly.

Freddy did some indignant posturing, but it just wasn’t as effective when it came from that height, and he seemed to know it. “I saw an unfamiliar vehicle,” he grumbled. “It sounded like it pulled in.”

“Uh huh.” Bonnie switched on his eyes and looked around. He saw a barrel in the corner where the Rules For Safety used to be, half-hidden behind a small mountain of building junk. Only one. Not much room for a body, he thought critically, but he had to believe Ana knew what she was doing. “So, what? You were coming out to see if we were being invaded?”
“Are we?” Freddy asked tersely.

“What are you seriously going to do if we are? Crawl out there and punch ‘em in the knee?”

Freddy tossed off an irritable little shrug with one ear and his eyebrows. “Are we?” he asked again.

“No. It’s just Ana.”

Freddy frowned. “It didn’t look like her truck.”

“It isn’t. She got a new one.”

Freddy took that in, watching Bonnie clear some sheets of drywall and buckets of plaster mud so he could get at that barrel. “She didn’t find anything,” he guessed.

Bonnie shrugged as he lifted the barrel onto his shoulder. “She said she did. Enough to have to get a bigger truck.”

“Then why are you upset?”

“She had to kill a guy.”

Freddy’s frown deepened away from one concern into another, closer to the heart. “Is she all right?”

“She says she is, but the guy sure put up a fight. She looks worse than she did the day she fell through the roof.”

Freddy started to rub at his muzzle, only to break more of it away. He pulled his hand back, gazing at slivers of plastic as they bled through his metal fingers, and finally sighed. “She knew there were risks,” he said heavily. “She’s here now. That’s what matters.”

Personally, Bonnie though her safety mattered too, but he didn’t say so. The danger, whatever it had been, was over and as Freddy said, she was here now. It might not be the only thing that mattered, but it mattered most.

“She’ll be okay,” he said, and hoped he was telling the truth. “As soon as she’s calmed down a little, I’m sure she’ll be in to talk to you. It’s just that right now, you know, she’s got this dead body to take care of.”

“At least she has her priorities in order,” Freddy said with a nod of dark approval. “You might need to help her with that.”

“If she’ll let me. Foxy’s talking to her right now, but—”

“Foxy?”

“Yeah.”

“Foxy is the last person who ought to talk to anyone about anything. Where is Chica?”

“Keeping watch in the West Hall, but her leg is getting worse and I figure if there’s any way at all to make this whole situation worse, it’s to have Chica’s leg give out and maybe, I don’t know, explode, so she’s severed at the waist.”

Freddy grunted, touching the nub of his blackened pelvis where it peeked out of his shattered hip
“You have a point, but I can’t help feeling that Foxy is not the one who should be talking to her right now.”

“Yeah, well, she’s in a mood anyway,” said Bonnie, silently adding that if she was going to pick a fight with someone, it might as well be Foxy, who didn’t get yelled at nearly enough for all the shit he pulled. Aloud, he concluded, “I better go give her this before she gets even more worked up. You need a hand getting back to the window?”

“I have hands,” grumbled Freddy, pulling himself around and beginning the long crawl back to the corner. “I need two legs.”

When Bonnie left the gym, all seemed quiet and he thought that Foxy must have returned to Pirate Cove, but as he made his way across the kitchen, his mics once again picked up the sound of angry whispers. He made that weird throat-clearing sound that no one ever makes except when they’re trying not to eavesdrop, just like the clanking of his feet on the kitchen tiles wasn’t noisy enough, but it didn’t help. They were snarling at each other right up until Bonnie walked in on them.

Ana broke it off at once, but Foxy just gave Bonnie the Look of Death and jerked his chin at the door like he expected Bonnie to turn around and carry this stupid barrel around the building all night.

“I found one,” Bonnie said, ignoring Foxy. “It’s the only one, though. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine.” Ana shoved some lumber out of the way and grabbed her sledgehammer from the wall. “I’ll have to break some stuff down a little, but I’ll make it fit. You can just leave it on the dock and I’ll load it up. You got anything else to say to me?” she added with a challenging glare at Foxy.

“Don’t ye bark at me, woman,” Foxy growled, folding his arms. “I bite.”

“Are you coming back tonight?” Bonnie asked, shooting Foxy a calm-the-hell-down stare that Foxy didn’t bother to receive.

“No,” said Ana, climbing down from the dock with her hammer. “I’ve got too much to do.”

“Yeah, I get that, but…um…I don’t think you should be alone tonight.”

Foxy thrust both hands at him in a furious so-there gesture. “Mayhap now ye’ll listen since it’s him talking sense instead of me!”

This time, Bonnie’s one-way stare was more why-are-you-bringing-me-into-this, but it didn’t matter since, again, Foxy didn’t catch it. “Ana, come on,” he said softly, moving to the very edge of the dock. “I know this isn’t exactly ‘comforting,’ but we have dumped bodies before. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Without answering, she went around to the back of the trunk and banged around there for a while, checking more than once to make sure Foxy and Bonnie were still on the dock before she reappeared with her generator on her handcart. She let Bonnie take the generator, she took the barrel, and rumbled off to the back of the truck again.

“Give us a minute, mate,” Foxy said tersely.

“Hey, think what you want about my motives, but it’s obvious that whatever you’re telling her isn’t working. Why don’t you let me try for a bit? Or better yet, go get Chica.”
“Ye go, if ye want her fetched.”

“Because my sensors are for shit,” Bonnie snapped. “If I drop a barrel, it gets dented. If I drop Chica, her battery case could break!”

“Drop her? Why would ye be carrying her?”

“Her leg is going, which you’d know if you’d bothered to look in on her even once tonight!”

Foxy’s ear twitched, but it was Ana who said, “What’s the matter with her leg?”

Bonnie looked around and there was Ana at the back of the truck with her Scoop folded up for transport and an expression of such defeat punched into her face that he immediately found himself downplaying a situation he knew damn well was serious. “She’s okay right now,” he assured her, forcing his ears up. “I mean, it’s not locked up or anything, it’s just the pump making a weird noise.”

“What noise?” she pressed.

“Kind of a whistling?”

She stared at him a long time and finally nodded. “Gasket’s breaking down. Okay. Okay, get her to the stage and don’t let her walk—hang on,” she interrupted herself and stepped back behind the truck.

There followed a long, long minute of standing on the dock with Foxy, listening to the wind and the choked sounds of Ana trying to cry silently.

When she reappeared, there was no sign of it on her face or in her voice when she said, “Don’t let her walk on it and don’t let her tell you she’s fine. When that gasket blows, she’ll collapse and God knows what damage that will do, so make her stay put until I come back. I have to take care of this stuff first and I have to get cleaned up. I might be getting a call later and if I do, I cannot show up smelling like gasoline and smoke. So…So I’m sorry. Tell her I’m sorry. Tell Freddy I’ll be back as soon as I can, but I…I just can’t right now. I can’t.”

“Okay,” said Bonnie. “Call us if you need to. Freddy’s got the phone.”

She nodded, closed up the back of the truck, came to the dock long enough to pass him up the Scoop, exchanged one last burning stare with Foxy (who returned it with his ear flat and the points of his teeth showing, and climbed back up into her truck.

Bonnie watched until her taillights were gone and then turned to Foxy with a long overdue, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’ll write ye a list,” Foxy snarled and stalked away.
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

There were one hundred and thirty-three human skulls in Erik Metzger’s collection. One fifty-gallon oil drum was not big enough to hold them. However, an oil drum made a great mortar and with the sledgehammer to act as a pestle, and a lot of elbow grease, she was able to crush them all down in just a few hours. Where the skulls themselves couldn’t fit, one hundred and thirty-three skulls’ worth of coarse powder, mixed with a couple bags of concrete, fit just fine.

She welded the lid shut, drove it out to the quarry, and rolled it over the edge. It hit the inky black surface and sank immediately, as if some hungry thing below had wrapped it in eager tentacles and pulled it down. In seconds, the water’s surface was still and smooth as glass in the moonlight. Peaceful, even. Looking at it, you’d never know it was a grave. It made a girl wonder how many more bones were down there.

She stood for a while, just staring at the moon’s reflection in the water, but only for a while. Time was marching on, with or without her. She had things to do.

She went home and, after some internal debate on the subject of her ass-headed priorities, hauled Blue’s body from the back of the box truck and took him to her garage. Taking his arm off gave her unexpected trouble, but not of the mechanical kind. She found the release button and held it for a long awkward time, listening for the beep that meant it was safe to detach before realizing that dead bots don’t beep. With the arm off, using it as a guide, she was able to find the parts to assemble a new one, and even though he was dead and she could never know for sure, she felt confident that it would have worked. It had no skin—there had been no spare casings of any kind in the basement, apart from the trophy heads—but it would work.

She supposed she should bury him now, but the task of digging a grave that size in the stony mountain soil was too overwhelming, and to just dump him in the quarry was too depressing (and never mind that she’d done exactly that with over a hundred actual human remains). Not knowing what to do, she did nothing, just draped a tarp over him and left him in the garage.

She emerged to find the morning well underway, not a trace of dawn’s color lingering in the sky. Nearly ten o’clock, according to her watch. It was Sunday, and for Mammon, that was usually a day of rest, family and church, but some dark whisper at the back of her mind warned her to be ready, because for her, the night wasn’t over yet. She headed inside and upstairs to Aunt Easter’s bathroom to get cleaned up.

Thanks to her years of flipping houses for Rider (not to mention everything else she’d done for Rider), Ana was well experienced with getting gasoline fumes and smoke out of her hair and clothes. A baking soda soak reduced the bulk of the smell, followed by several head-to-toe scrub-downs with her aunt’s scented bath products, and a final shower to rinse it all down the drain. Her shoes went into a baking soda bath of their own, her clothes went into the trash, and she spent the next hour in front of her aunt’s vanity concealing bruises. Not that she was planning on going anywhere, but if the young thugs of Mammon had thrown a toilet paper party down at Primrose Park or Jewel Lake, she might get called out to clean it up, so better she prepare herself to be seen now than be forced to choose later between doing a sloppy rush job of it or having to explain why it took her an hour to make a ten-minute drive.
Most of her clothes were in her room at Freddy’s, but she had a spare tee and jeans in her day pack and Aunt Easter’s old gardening sneakers on her feet. With her hair braided, she almost looked normal. Her eyes were a bit bloodshot, but so what? It was the weekend. No one who saw her would ever connect her to the burned-out pizzeria on Mulholland just because she looked a little hungover the morning after. The arson itself was unlikely to be investigated too thoroughly. The loss of a derelict building was a whole lot less exciting than the murder-suicide in Big Paulie’s kitchen and no one cared about that anymore. No one was going to pick through the ashes looking for fingerprints and DNA that could be traced back to her. She had nothing to worry about.

She wasn’t worried. This leaden stone of sickly emotion sitting in her stomach was not worry. In one night—one—she had drugged an old man who trusted her, broke into his house and robbed him, broke into some of his other properties, incited someone who could not by any means be considered of sound mind to kill his only companions, then killed him herself and burned the building down. Anyone who could do any of that didn’t worry about it afterward. Anyone who could do all of it…

Ana turned away from the mirror where she had been staring into her reflection’s unemotional eyes, picked up her day pack, and left. She still hadn’t developed the habit of locking the front door—not here, in her childhood castle where the doors had always been open to her—but she locked the garage, then drove to Freddy’s, fighting the urge to turn around and make sure Blue was still under the tarp and that his arm was on right and his ears weren’t crooked and his eyes were closed.

“The dead don’t care,” Ana told herself, as once, long ago, Rider had told her the very first time she had stood beside him out in the desert, a shovelful of sandy earth in in her trembling hands, hesitating to throw it down and cover a face that looked, despite the huge bloody hole in the middle of his forehead, like he might just be sleeping. She felt worse about the inert machine in her garage now than she felt about that dead man back then. What the hell was up with that?

She had a guilty conscience. Who would have thought? After all the flesh-and-blood bodies behind her, this was the one weighing on her. And why, for God’s sake? It was him or her and she knew it. He’d flat-out told her he was going to kill her. He only hadn’t done it right away because he wanted to savor the moment. And as much as he’d said they were friends there at the end, he would have torn her head off as soon as he was one hundred percent sure she was lying to him instead of just ninety-nine. How was it even possible that she could feel so much relief that he was dead and so much guilt at the same time? Over Blue, of all goddamn people.

Bonnie. Not Blue. Cutsie-poo nicknames were only all right between friends. She’d killed him. She ought to call him by his name.

She could actually feel her soul shuddering away from that idea. Why? Just because it was the same name as the real Bonnie? Hell, how many Davids had she met in her life? She wasn’t stealing anything away from her cousin just by calling someone else the same name. Melanies, Marions, Eriks—they were everywhere. It was just a name.

But that was it, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just his name. Blue was Bonnie. His voice, his mannerisms, his personality…his soul. Somewhere, somehow, Erik Metzger had gotten his hands on the core programming that made Bonnie Bonnie, and changed it to better suit his own twisted nature, taking away the gentle good humor and filling the gaps with sadism and spite.

To think that the line between good and evil might only be as wide as a few lines of code, added or erased. Funny, right? You could just die laughing.

The pizzeria loomed over her from its perch on Edge of Nowhere. Ana turned onto the access road and climbed up, up and around to the loading dock in the back of the restaurant. There she sat,
listening to the wind as it buffeted the side of the truck and trying to work up the courage to go in and face the man whose tortured clone she had murdered.

The choice was taken out of her hands. The loading dock door shivered and rose, and there was Bonnie.

They looked at each other for a while, then Ana sighed and opened up her door. “Freddy would flip his top hat if he knew you were out here in bold daylight,” she told him, going around to the back of the truck.

“I won’t tell if you won’t. You, uh…You need help?”

“Yeah, probably.” Ana opened the truck and gazed morosely in at the stacks of boxes, drawers, rolled towels and loose parts. “It’s a mess.”

His metal feet wheezed and clanked as he carefully navigated his way off the dock and across the broken asphalt to stand at her side. His ears went up, registering surprised relief, and he even laughed a little as he said, “Oh, okay. You said mess and I was expecting more of a…you know…a ‘wet’ scenario. This is actually kind of—jumping jackrabbits!” he blurted, jerking back in a delayed double-take, ears snapping audibly straight up against the wind. “I mean, holy shit! How the—? Where did you—? Look at it all!”

Leaning in, he picked up a ball joint and turned it over in his hands. “This is really one of his,” he marveled. “You actually did it. You got the Press to work without the Hand Unit! Oh my God, Ana, even for you, that’s amazing!”

“No, I…Look, it’s a long story and I don’t want to talk about it now. Or ever. Please.”

“Oh. Okay.” Confused and contrite, Bonnie placed the joint back into the box where he’d found it and held up his hands to show her they were empty. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just help me carry it all inside.”

“Sure. Where do you want me to put it?”

“I don’t know, just…get it out of the truck. I don’t…” Her eyes blurred, turning the parts she’d nearly died for—and killed for—into a hulking, shadowy blob. “I don’t even know what half this stuff is yet. I’m sorry. I was supposed to sort it out. What am I doing here? I’m not ready for this. I need shelves, I need storage, I need—”

“Hey.” Bonnie touched her arm, then took her hand when she tried to pull away from him. His grip was too tight, a symptom of his failing sensors, but the pain helped her scattering thoughts come together and focus again on him.

His eyes were green. They’d always been purple in Aunt Easter’s tapes from Circle Drive, but Ana had made them green, like Blue’s eyes had been. Of all the fake New Faces she’d had to pick from, she’d dug the green eyes out of Brewster’s head. Was that a coincidence? Or had there been a tape from Mulholland after all? Had her first memories of Bonnie been the Toy model? Had she sung with him? Maybe danced with David in front of the TV to the Yum-Yum Song while Aunt Easter and Erik Metzger snuggled together on the sofa? And would she ever be able to look him in these green eyes again and not see Blue?

“Hey, you had other shit to deal with first,” Bonnie was telling her, only half-heard. “We understand.”
“Don’t,” she said hoarsely. “Don’t tell me it’s okay.”

“I won’t. It’s not. But…” His ears lowered. One shoulder shivered, either rolling out a small shrug or just broadcasting some internal error in his failing system. “…it’s better than it was. Sometimes that’s all you get. And sometimes, you know…that’s enough.”

“Sometimes it isn’t.”

“Yeah, I know.” He released his painful grip on her hand to gently touch her cheek, tucking some errant strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve had a lot of those moments. I know them when I see them. And this? This isn’t one of them. It’s not okay,” he said again, with an emphasis that oddly comforted her. “But it will be, baby. And we’ll have you to thank when it happens.”

She hugged him. She didn’t mean to. She knew she shouldn’t. She hugged him anyway, so close that it hurt. The heat of his battery burned through his rigid casing, but she pressed her cheek to his chest anyway and held on like he was the only thing keeping her afloat in a bottomless, invisible sea.

He asked no questions. He didn’t try to fix it. He didn’t attempt to cheer her up. He just put his heavy arms around her and let her take as long as it took.

In the end, she had to let him go, not because she felt better but because his acceptance and understanding just made her feel worse.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, climbing into the truck to pretend to look for parts while she surreptitiously dried her eyes. “I’m a mess.”

He looked like he wanted to protest, but all he said was, “You ready to load me up?”

She was and did, and soon they were moving together through the building, her with that last bucket of loose parts and a few rolled-up towels under her arm, and him with a veritable tower of fully-packed crates that, altogether, had to weigh about six hundred pounds. Well under his tested limits, he assured her, but she could hear something creaking inside him with every step.

‘I’ll fix it,’ Ana told herself, but even in her head, the promise felt hollow. She found herself indulging a bleak fantasy in which none of the stolen parts worked. It had all been for nothing after all, and the punchline was that carrying all this useless junk into the pizzeria was the proverbial straw that would break Bonnie’s back.

God, she wanted a drink. Or some oxy. Or both. Lots of both.

Coming into the dining room, Ana saw Chica sitting in the middle of the stage, but Chica didn’t appear to notice her, as all of her attention was directed down at the glowing screen in her hands.

“Is that my tablet?” Ana asked.

Chica jumped, letting out the first “Ba-gawk!” Ana had ever heard from her, her loose fingers and the intensity of her reaction combining to toss the tablet in the air. She fumbled with it, miraculously managing neither to let it fall nor slap it further out into the room, and once she had it, set it carefully beside her on the stage and pushed it away.

“Yeah,” said Bonnie. “I didn’t think you’d mind. I just didn’t want to leave her there with nothing to look at or do when I didn’t know…you know. When you were coming back.”

Before Ana could say anything, Chica loudly declared, “I told him to!”
“No, she didn’t.”

“Well…” Chica hung her head slightly, peeping up at Ana through her plastic lashes with profound remorse. “I didn’t tell him to put it back.”

“It’s fine,” Ana said, first to Chica and then to Bonnie. “Seriously, I don’t care. Just put it back on the charger when you’re done with it and you can borrow it whenever you want. What were you looking at?”

“Oh…um…Well, I couldn’t remember the name of that online library you showed me that one time, so I tried to look it up and, um, I found this place on the world wide web that’s like an encyclopedia, only on the internet? And, um, while you’re reading, it has certain blue words that when you touch them, it will take you to those pages, and also every page has footnotes with blue words that will take you to other pages with more information.”

“Would this be Wikipedia, by any chance?”

Chica blinked. “Oh! You’ve heard of it!”

The idea that there could be anyone out there who hadn’t heard of the internet’s most diverse and cohesive source of information brought the ghost of a smile to Ana’s lips, but there was nothing funny about it, really. Just another reminder that Chica’s whole world was here. “Small world wide web,” she said instead. “So what are you reading about?”

“Well, um, like I say, I started by trying to find that one museum, which led me to all this different amazing art and artists and artistic styles, and somehow, I don’t exactly know how…” Chica picked up the tablet and peered at it with an expression of perplexed chagrin. “Somehow, that led me to the Russian Revolution and the murder of the Tsar.”

“And his family,” Ana said with a nod.

“You know about that, too?”

“Oh sure. One of the princesses had my name. She and her little brother weren’t found among the bodies and for a while, there was this whole thing about how they might still be alive. Me and my cousin used to pretend we were the missing kids. Right around here, in fact,” she added, glancing around the dining room and seeing it as it used to be, before the pizzeria was built. “This was our imperial palace. Right here, where you’re sitting, we used to fight off the revolutionaries and escape down into the desert, our Siberia, and fight our way through bears and soldiers to the quarry, where we’d raise an army and then fight our way back to the top of the bluff, kill all the Bolsheviks and take back the throne. Next to the Count of Monte Cristo, it was our favorite game to play.”

Chica’s expression underwent several difficult-to-read changes, but it was Bonnie who said, “You didn’t really know how to ‘kid,’ did you?”

“I guess not. See if there’s a link to that guy Rasputin,” Ana suggested, nodding at the tablet in Chica’s hands. “He was a hoot and a half. Come on, Bon.”

“Right behind you.”

“I wish I could help,” said Chica, even as her fingers fidgeted along the sides of the tablet, restless to keep reading.

“I wish you could, too, but you have got to stay off that leg as much as you can. Me and Bon can
handle the scut-work."

“Born to scut,” said Bonnie, shifting the tower of crates he carried to one arm so he could flex the other. “Where do you want me to put it?”

The first Ana even knew that Foxy was there was when he snorted and said, “Ye never asks, ye guppy, ye just does it. If she’s keen, she won’t mind wheresoever.” And then he stepped out of the shadowed corner by the West Hall door and came over to lean up against the wall by the gift shop, peering at the crates Bonnie carried. “Quite a haul ye netted.”

“There’s more off the dock, if you want to help,” Bonnie said in a dry, knowing tone.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, right. Ana?”

“I don’t know,” Ana sighed, scanning the room with tired eyes. “Let’s just…fuck.”

“Shut up, Foxy,” said Bonnie.

“He didn’t say anything,” Chica called.

“He was thinking it,” Bonnie muttered with a sidelong glare at Foxy, who shrugged at him and winked at Ana.

“Just put it wherever you can for right now,” Ana said, ignoring him. “I won’t know where to put it until I know what I’ve got and I can’t sort through it until I’ve got something to sort it into, so…whatever. It’s going to make a mess no matter what we do. Just try to find a way to spread it out without stepping on it and I’ll figure out a more permanent situation later.”

“Sure.” Bonnie set his tower of boxes in the furthest corner. Something in his back made a shrill wheezing sound when he bent over and again when he straightened up. “You, uh…You want to go talk to Freddy for a bit? Let him know you’re here?”

“I’ll go tell him,” Chica offered.

“You move that leg and I’ll take it off, I swear to God,” Ana told her. To Bonnie, she added, “If Freddy can hear us talking, he knows I’m here and he doesn’t need to know anything else until I have something else to tell him. If he doesn’t, then he can continue being blissful in his ignorance until I finish unloading the truck and getting an inventory.”

“Uh, no offense, but you look a little tired.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Foxy murmured.

“I’m fine.”

Bonnie nodded earnestly, pressing even harder. “I’m just saying, if you want to lie down or something, you know Foxy and I can handle this.”

“I don’t recollect volunteering me services.”

“I said, I’m fine,” she snapped, then sighed and attempted to soften her tone. “I appreciate the concern, but I don’t need a nap. I need to work.”

“Okay,” said Bonnie, hands up and ears down. “Okay. Just…Just putting the offer out there.”
“Ye give up too easy,” Foxy said.

“He isn’t ‘giving up,’” Ana said before Bonnie’s ears could finish registering the sting of that deceptively offhand jab. “There’s nothing to give up. This isn’t a fight.”

“No, it ain’t.” Foxy shrugged himself off the wall and advanced on her two steps, snapping his patch down so only the yellow eye showed, coldly gleaming. “But it will be if’n ye push yer luck with me, girl. Shut it, ye had yer turn,” he added as Bonnie started to speak, but he said it without ever breaking his stare. “Look at ye. Yer frazzled to a thread and all but falling down on yer feet. What ye ought to do is get ye some sleep, but if’n ye promise to be good, I’ll let ye sit on the stage.”

“You’ll let me?”

Foxy paused and deliberately cocked his head. “Aye. Unless ye piss me off. In which case, I won’t let ye, I’ll just put ye to bed like the cranky wee brat that ye are, and what are ye going to do about it? I said shut it,” he said in a growling aside as Bonnie again opened his mouth. “Hackle up at me all ye likes, lass, but ye let us do the fetch and carry what are made to carry a thousand pounds at a go and let us do the sorting what actually know what all this kit is. Only thing ye can do is get underfoot, so sit yer ass down and stay out’n our way.”

“Oh fuck you!” slipped out of her before she could think better of just what a stupid thing that was to say, to him of all people, and what he might say back, here in front of Bonnie.

But all he said, in that same growling voice with the same unblinking stare, was, “One thing at a time.”

A long prickly silence followed, broken at least by Chica’s whisper, “Please don’t fight.”

“We ain’t fighting, luv,” Foxy drawled, narrowing his one eye. “Or are we?”

Ana stared at him, but animatronics don’t need to blink and in the end, she looked away. After a moment, she roughly shoved past him and stomped over to the stage. She sat, tight-lipped.

“Guess we ain’t.” Foxy lifted his eyepatch and strolled away without another glance in her direction. “Bonnie! Work to be done, mate! Hop to it!”

“Hop?” Bonnie echoed, clanking after him with his ears flat. “Is that a rabbit joke? Fuck you.”

“Oh, everyone wants a piece o’ the fox today. Move it.”

Ana waited just long enough for them to get out of the kitchen before she got up.

“Where are you going?” Chica whispered, eyes wide.

“Just getting a drink. Relax. I’ll be right back.” Walking fast, wanting to be back on the stage before Foxy reappeared, Ana went to the liquor cabinet. Cupboard was looking pretty bare these days, but she had half a bottle of peach vodka on the top shelf that would go down pretty smooth with a Red Bull. She rinsed out her work thermos, cracked the can and poured it in, added half the vodka…then the other half of the vodka, and a couple ice cubes to compensate for keeping the vodka in the cupboard like a damn barbarian. She put the empty bottle back in the cupboard so nosy animatronics wouldn’t find it in the trash and returned to the dining room, shaking the thermos.

“Are you okay?” Chica asked in a small voice, tapping her fingers.
“Yeah. Sorry. Been a long night and I’m feeling it. Fucking figures,” she grumbled, holding up a hand against the piercing light of the camera as it suddenly snapped on. “Now I’m going to have that stupid thing shining in my face.”

“Are you sure…I mean, please don’t get mad, but are you sure you don’t want to have a little nap? You do look very tired.”

Ana was beyond ready for a fight at this point, but Chica so obviously expected to have her head bitten off for expressing her concern that the breath Ana had already taken for a shout became a sigh.

“I’m not mad,” she said, and mostly meant it. “But I don’t have a lot of time. I’ve got work tomorrow morning, and as fucking surreal as it is to think that my job even matters, it does, and me acting like nothing happened last night matters even more. I’ll sleep later, I promise. Right now, just…just let me get out of my head for a bit, okay?”

Although obviously troubled, Chica nodded and picked up the tablet again, poking listlessly at the screen with a spare feather while watching Ana pace and drink out of the corner of her eye.

Foxy and Bonnie came in with their first loads. Coming from the back of the truck, the last to be packed away, this meant three or four hundred pounds of miscellaneous junk carried in whatever would hold it—mop buckets, kitchen drawers, rolled-up towels and even a filthy backpack from the prize corner. The backpack was red and white, with a picture of Blue’s grinning face on the back and his guitar on both sides. She couldn’t remember packing that; Blue must have done it.

And just like that, she was standing over him again, Mammon’s foul wind blowing hard against her face as she lifted his skull away from his body and turned it so the clear, snotty liquid inside could dribble out. She could still smell it—a sharp, mineral smell…a little like machine grease…a little like blood.

Ana turned her face to the wall at the back of the stage and waited until they were gone again.

“Do you want to look at my leg while we wait?” Chica asked suddenly. She shrugged when Ana looked at her. “The three Ms, remember? I don’t think it’s a good time for medication and I did all the math puzzle books, so all that’s left is fixing broken machines.”

Ana’s cheeks burned guiltily. “I didn’t mean you guys when I said that.”

“Don’t be silly,” Chica said lightly, scooting to the edge of the stage and giving her knee an inviting pat. “We’re machines. Of course it’s not all we are, just like you’re a complex biological organism, but you’re more than a multicellular structure. It’s an accurate taxonomical definition, that’s all. It describes you. It doesn’t define you.”

“Vocabulary power,” said Ana and sighed. “Sorry. I’m not trying to make up new problems. I just don’t want to be insensitive. I would have thought the m-word would be one of the worst ones around here.”

“I don’t really believe in good words or bad words,” Chica told her. “Just words used respectfully or disrespectfully. And we’re friends.”

_Are we friends? Do you like me a little?_

“I know you’re upset,” Chica said softly, bringing Ana out of that memory before she could fall too far. “I only want to help however I can. If you want, we can watch a movie or just sit and talk, but I feel like you’d rather do something more proactive. And so would I.”
Ana hesitated, uncomfortably aware that her hesitation had nothing to do with any uncertainty. She knew exactly what she should do next—try to fix Chica’s leg and see just how compatible these Toy parts really were with the real ones—and she knew what she wanted to do—get drunk and pass out. She couldn’t do both and now she was hesitating because the low side of her actually thought this was a difficult choice. That was addict-thinking. And she was not an addict.

Disgusted with herself, she set the thermos down on the tray return window ledge and walked away from it.

With Chica’s enthusiastic consent, she knelt and popped the leg’s casing segments first open, then off, setting them to one side on the stage. Next, she stripped whatever remained of the layers of padding and framework beneath until she had exposed the entire leg.

She studied it, becoming less aware of the physical world around her as her Other-vision opened up. At first, as always, she could only admire it. She could never have explained the science behind Faust’s design, but she could see how it worked and it was a thing of indescribable beauty. Chica’s metal bones were so much like Ana’s own, just bigger. Pumps, springs and sensors did the work of human muscles, ligaments and nerves—hundreds of individual components, each doing their own thing, but in the sum of these separate parts, there was one leg, which was itself only part of a far greater and even more elaborate whole.

Ana unplugged Chica’s foot and sat down beside her on the stage for a closer examination, but she already knew there was no repairing it. It had to be rebuilt and that raised one big problem, or, ironically, a smaller one: The Toy animatronics were shorter than the real ones. Most, if not all, of their parts were sized accordingly. This meant that while, say, a Toy toe would fit in the hinged socket of the foot just fine, it was noticeably smaller than the other toes. Amplify that minor variance across the entire endoskeleton, and everyone except Foxy, whose endoskeleton was already mainly comprised of Toy-sized parts, was going to lose a lot of height.

Why did that matter? Apart from the purely aesthetic reasons, there was a lot of math involved in movement, problems that the marvelous human brain solved largely without consulting its stupid meat. But that was a human brain. An animatronic brain was a computer. ‘Balance’ was a fixed equation where height mattered and wasn’t very damn often a variable, not to mention the undeniable fact that if she misaligned one component’s fitted angle by a fraction of one percent of a degree, it would all fall apart.

‘It’s already falling apart,’ she told herself. ‘And she’s counting on you to fix it, so get your head in the game.’

Chipped yellow fingers reached out to pat at Ana’s knee. “It’s okay to be nervous,” said Chica. “I know you’ll do your best.”

“Did I say that out loud? Never mind,” said Ana, straightening up and handing Chica her foot. “Hold that. I’ll be right back.”

“Ew! I mean, okay! Also…ew.”

Ana left Chica poking at her toes with a queasy fascination and took the pump with her to look for parts, not always sure what she was looking for, but confident she’d recognize it when she saw it.

Foxy came in with another load before she’d found it all, however.

“I told ye to stay out of here,” he said.
“I don’t even let Freddy boss me around, what makes you think I’d listen to you?” she retorted, pocketing a few valve plates before moving on to the next heap.

“What are ye looking for?”

Ana held up the broken pump, still rifling through a bucket.

“That for Chica?”

“No, I’m going to make a bong out of it. Yeah, of course it’s for Chica. And I’m also going to need a knee. And an ankle. And everything else below the ankle.”

“Ye thinking to build her a whole new leg?”

“I’m going to have to, aren’t I? But I need to test something first and the sooner I have those parts,” she added meaningfully, “the sooner I can do that.”

Foxy set his boxes down and went into the gift shop, where the loose parts had been collecting on the remaining shelves. He returned in short order with the ball joint that made up the base of the knee, but didn’t give it to her when she tried to take it. Once he had her attention, he started to speak, stopped, started again, stopped again, then huffed out some static and bluntly said, “It ain’t gonna fit on her, luv. I hate like hell to have to say it. God knows what ye went through to get all this, but—”

“Foxy, damn it!” In the kitchen, Bonnie banged something down on the counters and came stomping in, empty hands in fists. “We agreed!”

“Aye, but she’s asking now, ain’t she? Ana, these things come from Mulholland. Them models were smaller. My size,” he added, tapping his hook against his chest. “Ye might be able to hammer bits together, and they might even work for a while, but they ain’t meant to fit on Chica. Nor Fred neither, if that be yer next plan. When they fail—and they will fail, I’ll wager me eye on it—the powers alone know what kind o’ damage it’ll do.”

Ana acknowledged this confirmation of her own thoughts with a grim nod and tried to take the joint from him again.

“Don’t ye bob yer head at me, listen! Ye can’t do this!”

“Thanks for the encouragement. I know what I’m doing,” she said, wrenching the joint out of his hand. “You’re the one who insisted I step off you while you hauled shit in here, so get to hauling and let me do my job.”

His ear rotated around to an irritated angle, but his gruff snort had real humor in it. “Lord, yer pretty when ye gets yer bitch on. Brings out yer eyes.”

“Oh shut up,” she said, shouldering past him.

While Foxy catcalled her retreat, she dropped off the ball joint on the stage and continued on to the Quiet Room, where she gathered her tools, geared up, and grabbed some extra snake lights in case the camera timed out on her.

She needn’t have worried on that regard. The camera was waiting in the hall when she emerged, toolbox in hand, and it stayed with her all the way to the dining room, switching off only to jump ahead of her to the stage, as if it were eager to watch her work. Certainly more eager than Chica herself, who, in spite of her broad smile and encouraging words, betrayed her true feelings with
tapping fingers and spastic twitches at the joints.

“Relax,” Ana said, laying out the instruments for this particular surgery—screwdrivers, picks, pliers, cutting torch, spot welder. “You’re going to be fine.”

“I trust you completely,” Chica said, wide-eyed, and hugged her foot to her chest as a child hugs a doll for comfort.

“Find your happy place,” said Ana, placing one hand under Chica’s knee and the other high on the thigh, her thumb resting to one side of the connecting switch.

“Oh. Um, okay.” Chica took a deep ‘breath’ and vented it slowly, closing her eyes. “I’m in…the yellow kitchen.”

It gave her a start. Aunt Easter’s kitchen had been yellow, before Ana’s renovations.

‘Yeah, no shit, Sherlock,’ she told herself roughly. Next to white and off-white, yellow was the most popular color to paint a kitchen.

But all the kitchens at all the pizzerias had only ever been sterile white walls, industrial steel surfaces, and black-and-white checkerboard tiles. Where had Chica seen a yellow kitchen?

“I’m baking,” Chica was saying dreamily, her eyes still shut and a smile on her beak. “We’re having a party. There’s decorations everywhere, all pastel colors and paper flowers, and I’m baking cupcakes. A tower of cupcakes, as tall as I am, all rosy pink and lemon yellow and turquoise and minty green and lavender.”

The camera shifted from Ana to Chica.

“Mostly lavender,” said Chica. “I like them best, I think. I decorate them the nicest. Which is funny, because I always thought pink was my favorite color.”

“When was this?” Ana asked curiously.

“Oh, it never really happened,” Chica said with a hint of cheerful embarrassment in her voice. “It’s just a silly daydream I made up. We used to have a poster for the children to color that said ‘My happiest day.’ Everyone should have a happiest day and…that’s mine. Does it matter that it never really happened?”

“No,” Ana assured her. “The only thing that matters is that it makes you happy.”

“Then I’m there.” Chica squared her plastic shoulders and sat up a little straighter, lifting her beak. “Go ahead with…whatever you’re doing.”

Ana pressed the disconnection button, waited for the beep, and pulled Chica’s leg off. “You can’t feel this, can you?”

“No. I can only feel that it’s not part of me anymore. All the errors are quiet.” Chica’s eyebrows pinched above her still-closed eyes. “Except the one telling me my left leg is no longer in the system.”

“Do you want to watch?” Ana asked, pulling the pump away from the knee.

“No! No. It doesn’t hurt,” Chica said again, “but it’s still a weird feeling to see part of you being taken apart.”
“Sorry. I’ll be quick.”

“As much as I want this to be over, this is one case when I’d really rather you took your time.”

“Relax,” said Ana, pulling her magnifying goggles down and picking up her tools. “This is the easy part.”

And it was. So easy. She didn’t have to be strong now. There was nothing to escape here, nothing to outrun or outwit, nothing that could kill or be killed. Despite the intricacy of the pump’s design, at its most basic level, it was instroke/outstroke and nothing more. If she could create the conditions for compressive force to provide the flexion and retraction necessary to fulfill its purpose, it would, but it neither knew nor cared whether that purpose was ever fulfilled. It didn’t even know she was there.

Ana found that comforting.

This was her happy place, she thought, glancing aside at Chica, who sat beside her with her eyes closed, daydreaming of pastel-colored cupcakes in a yellow kitchen. And after that, there were no thoughts, not really, only pistons and wheels, sockets and shaft. The sounds of the world—the maniacally cheerful music piped through the speakers, the whine of the camera, the steady puff and wheeze of Chica’s cooling system—all blurred together, white noise, of no significance. She fidgeted around for a while, ending up with her back against Chica’s side, one foot on the stage and the other on the floor, so that the camera’s light worked to her best advantage, shining over her head and down on her hands. The small part of her that was still aware of her physical surroundings expected the camera to time out and move on at any moment, but it never did.

It took no time to rebuild the pump, or at least, no sense of time, and when she was done, she set it aside and got started on the knee, and as the old song said, knee-bone connected to the shin-bone, shin-bone connected to the ankle-bone, and so on and so on. She kept the old knee and foot close as she built the new ones, looking at it often, but rarely seeing it. Now and then, she had to get up to find parts, but she barely saw those either. Wherever the old parts connected to the new ones, adjustments were needed—lengthening, cutting, reshaping. The end result was an ugly perversion of Faust’s beautiful plan, and Ana had to keep reminding herself that it didn’t have to be pretty, it just had to work.

“Looks aren’t everything,” Chica said encouragingly, wrenching Ana out of her peaceful inner world.

“I said that out loud too, huh?” she muttered and shook her head. “I swear I’m not crazy.”

“That’s what all the crazy people say,” Foxy called from the back of the room, managing to look as if he were only casually bending over to place a part in a most particular spot as he ducked Bonnie’s slapping hand. Ana wasn’t sure quite when they’d finished unloading, but it looked like they’d been doing the sorting for a while now. They’d brought in some spare tables from Pirate Cove and some more drawers and plastic tubs from the Craft Room, and now they walked along the narrow aisles between them, like reverse farmers in a mechanical field, taking parts from the buckets they carried and ‘planting’ them back in the rows.

She hadn’t even noticed. The new rubber floor softened their footsteps more than the old tiles had, but they sure weren’t that quiet. She’d just been deep, deep in her own head.

Ana got up to stretch and, since she was up, headed over to the tray return window to reclaim her thermos. It had been almost two hours, but it was a good thermos and her Red Bull Cocktail was nice and cold. When she took a testing sip, the punch of artificial fruitiness was much stronger than
the vodka she knew was in there. She restrained herself to a single responsible swallow, knowing she hadn’t eaten or slept in more than twenty-four hours. On the other hand, she was almost done with the leg and she didn’t have to do anything else today. A little more wouldn’t kill her. It wasn’t the alcohol she needed, just the caffeine.

“Don’t listen to him,” Chica said, apparently misinterpreting Ana’s retreat as hurt feelings. “Talking to yourself is a sign of intelligence.”

“I’ll wager a million doubloons whoever said that talked to himself,” Foxy commented.

“Hey,” said Bonnie, ears flat. “Can you try real hard to not be an asshole for five whole minutes?”

“Chill, Bon,” Ana said. “If he hadn’t said it, I would have. It was a joke.”

“Aye. Mayhap if ye take the stick out’n yer arse, ye’d have room to grow a sense o’ humor.”

“Okay, now you’re being an asshole,” said Ana. “But you know, Chica, when it comes to talking to yourself, you have to consider the whole picture.”

Chica frowned, her eyelids aligning into a concerned slant rather than a confused one. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m not sitting in my penthouse, surrounded by awards for excellence, talking to myself while I sketch out my five-year-plan for early retirement,” Ana replied dryly. “I’m talking to myself in an abandoned pizza parlor while I dismember my friend and play with the body parts.” ‘And getting buzzed while I do it,’ she thought and shook her head. “The correct conclusion to draw here is not ‘genius’.”

“Please don’t,” Chica said softly.

“Don’t what?”

“Say things like that.” Chica’s fingers tapped. She glanced at the leg beside her on the stage, flinched a little, and looked at the wall instead. “Those hurtful things.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Ana asked, honestly confused.

Chica picked a bit of stained padding fluff out of her empty hip socket, avoiding her eyes. “You never have anything nice to say about yourself, it’s always about how awful you are and it’s so hard to listen to.”

“Oh for…Chica, I’m not a damn kid. You don’t have to bolster my fucking self-esteem. I know who I am.”

“So do I and you’re not a bad person.”

Ana huffed out a humorless laugh without a smile, then suddenly thumped down her thermos. She crossed the room in long strides, picked up the rebuilt pump and held it unavoidably up in front of Chica’s face. “I killed someone to get this,” she said. “Did you know that?”

The camera on the wall whined softly.

Chica didn’t answer, but she didn’t look shocked either. She knew. Of course she knew. Ana had told Bonnie and that meant they all knew.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Ana insisted, annoyed by Chica’s sympathetic silence. “I didn’t panic. I
can’t even really call it self-defense, because he sure never saw it coming. I killed a man. Quit trying to make me feel better about myself. I killed a man last night.”

Chica said nothing, but behind her, Ana heard Foxy’s gruff, “First time?”

She looked around, annoyed, to see Foxy and Bonnie listening in. Bonnie immediately moved on, but Foxy held his ground, looking for all the world like he expected an answer and when he didn’t get one right away, he elaborated: “Killing a bloke. First time?”

“Are you serious?” Ana shook her head, not in answer as much as disbelief that he’d even asked, but it was the same answer anyway. “I popped that cherry a long time ago.”

“Then what’s got yer knickers in a knot? Ain’t no point grieving any but the first’n.”

Ana shook her head again and went back to work.

Bonnie rattled around putting parts away, ears down and trying to be invisible. He muttered at Foxy, too low for Ana to make out words, but Foxy just blew static back at him.

The camera stayed focused on Ana, her quick angry movements as she fit parts together just enough to keep it from timing out.

Bonnie sorted parts. Chica sat, tapping her fingers now and then, but mostly silent. Foxy did not move.

“You going to stand there all day?” she demanded, keeping her eyes fixed on her hands.

“I can,” he shot back. “Amazing how often ye seems to forget that.”

“Do what you want then, but I’m not talking about it and I wouldn’t talk to you even if I did.”

“Now yer just trying to hurt me feelings,” Foxy said, flattening his one good ear.

Was she? Her stomach clenched, but her mouth spat up, “No, if I wanted to do that, I’d just tell you to shut the hell up about stuff you know nothing about.”

“Nothing, eh?” Foxy’s eyes narrowed and got a little darker. Parts rattled in the box as his arm shook. “Girl, I ain’t all stories and shanties, and ye ain’t dumb enough to think I am.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know all about the things that happened at Freddy’s after hours,” Ana said. The camera had started to swivel toward Foxy, but at the sound of her voice, it came back to her, shining its damned light full on her face. She refused to flinch back or put a hand up to shield it, but stared blinded in the direction she knew Foxy was standing and said, “And I’m sure you woke up plenty of times with a mess you had to clean up, but unlike you, I have to make the mess. I didn’t get to sleep through it and I didn’t even get to ride along and watch while my body did things I didn’t want to do. I did it. I had to make it happen.”

“Oh, what is this woeful piss yer swilling?” Foxy thumped his bucket of parts down and pointed his hook at Ana. “Get over yerself! Ye ain’t some devil. If ye chose to kill a bloke, it be only on account of said bloke giving ye no other choice! And that’s more his choice than yers, ain’t it? The hell with him anyway. Why are ye letting it eat at ye like this? It ain’t like ye knew him.”

Ana looked at him.

Slowly, Foxy’s ear came up and his arm lowered. “Ah,” he said and vented his cooling system.
“Ye did know him.”

And Bonnie was there. Bonnie was right there, watching her.

Tight-lipped, Ana resumed work.

“Well, hell, girl. Ye should have led off with that. That’s different.”

She shook her head again and then, to her own bitter surprise, she laughed a little. “Yeah, that’s different, all right. He thought we were friends, you know. And do you know why he thought we were friends?” Without waiting for an answer, Ana said, “Because I told him we were. And I told him that for no reason except to get him to let his guard down so I could kill him. And you’re right, of course. I had no other choice. None. I had to kill him, but oh…if I had it to do all over again, I would do things so differently.”

The camera whined on the wall, focusing on her as Chica reached out to offer a sympathetic pat.

Ana didn’t pull away, she just looked Chica in the eye and said, “I’d plant that prybar in his brain before he ever had a chance to stand up and talk to me. You want to know what’s eating at me?” she demanded, now aimed at Foxy, whose attention had wandered to the camera. “That’s what’s eating me. Not what I did. What he said. All the things he said. Especially at the end, when he knew he was dying. I have to live with that. You get to wake up after it’s all over, but I have to live with that! And you know what? Huh?”

Foxy finally stopped pretending the camera was interesting and looked at her.

Ana said, “I can.”

The camera whined.

“Ye need to hush now,” said Foxy.

“That’s who I am,” Ana said, ignoring him. “I killed a man last night and you think I’m letting it get to me too much. Joke’s on you, Captain. Joke’s on all of you, because I’m fine.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that if’n I were you.”

“Oh yeah?” Ana put her precision tool down, leaned over, and plugged the ugly amalgamation of old and new parts into Chica’s hip. There was a click, an almost subaudible hum, and then its considerable weight seemed to lift even as she held it. When she took her hands away, the leg stayed suspended under its own power for a moment before Chica slowly lowered it.

For the first time, the camera was more attracted by an animatronic’s movement than a human one. Its spotlight swiveled and fixed on Chica’s foot as she bent her leg, fully extended it, rolled the ankle and wiggled the toes. Although the new foot was indeed much smaller than the old one, the leg was roughly the same length and, far from looking stubby or cartoonish, her new proportions were almost human. Skinless, splattered with solder and bristling with pins where she’d had to flare out the connecting socket between the old and new parts, the bare metal bones were a grotesque sight, but it worked, and when Chica tentatively stood up, Ana didn’t even watch her take her first steps.

The camera did.

“Does that look like I’m freaking out?” Ana challenged, lifting her chin. “I’m tired, sure, I’ll give you that one, but I’m fine. I killed a man last night. A man who liked me. A man who thought that
I liked him. He thought we were friends right up until I killed him and the only thing that’s getting
to me is how easy I’ll get over it…and I’ll get over that too. Stop trying to make me feel better and
stop trying to make me feel worse and you know what? Just stop.”

“Hell, girl, I’m only trying to help!”

“I didn’t ask for your help and I don’t need it! Just leave me alone!”

Silence, broken only by the tapping of Chica’s fingers and the whining of the camera as it looked
back and forth between them.

“Right,” Foxy said at last. “I knows when I ain’t wanted. I’ll just bugger off then.”

Ana’s cheeks burned and her heart sank, but her pride said, “You do that.”

“Knew better than to trouble meself on yer behalf anyhow,” Foxy said, turning around. “What do
ye need me for when ye has yer big purple puppy to do yer fetching?”

Bonnie swung around with an affronted, “Hey!” but as a consequence, his elbow hit one of the
sorting drawers. It only knocked it a little askew, at least until Bonnie grabbed at it and
inadvertently slapped it off the table. He backed up, both hands raised, and hit the table behind him
hard enough to knock everything remotely close to the edge right off. Easily two hundred pounds
worth of parts hit the floor with a deafening metallic crash and one long rattle as a lone cog rolled
halfway across the dining room before falling onto its side and taking for-fucking-ever to wobble
to a stop.

“Leave it,” Foxy called as Bonnie stood staring in dismay at the carnage heaped around his feet.
“Let her clean it up. She says she’s fine. Says it a lot for someone who actually is, but what the hell
does I know?”

“Not a goddamn thing,” Ana snarled, stomping over to clear a path for Bonnie. “Watch your feet
and don’t let that asshole—” she called loudly over her shoulder.

“Ha!” Foxy bellowed from the hall. “I’ve heard worse!”

“I’m not fighting yet, but if he wants to start, believe me, I’ll finish it. Are you okay?” she asked,
leading Bonnie out of the disaster zone.

“Yeah. Um…You gonna get mad if I ask if you are?”

Her temper flared, only to die back into resignation. “Not at you,” she said wearily. “Never at you.
Look, I…I don’t need your help, but I do appreciate it and I’m sorry I’m such a fucking mess.
Believe it or not, I’m actually trying real hard to hold it together.”

“I know,” he said, searching her eyes. “I do. I’ll be here.”

She nodded, neither grateful nor relieved, but only tired. “Thanks. Hang on.” She bent and picked a
fastener out from between Bonnie’s toes before it could jam itself in and create more problems
than he already had. “There. Be careful.”
“I am,” he said, his ears projecting a tinge of hurt and defensiveness.

“I know, but just…be carefuller. It’s almost over, and it’s always at the finish line when people trip.” Her hand found its way of its own accord to his chest, tracing the cracks that would never be stronger than the shellac she’d used to seal them. “You don’t have another fall in you, my man. And…And neither do I. Not today. Today…I’ve fallen about as far as I can.”

There wasn’t anything he could have said to that to make her feel better. She knew it even when she said it, just like she knew he wouldn’t try to tell her everything was going to be all right.

And he didn’t. He gave her half a nod, half a shrug, and said, “Tomorrow is another day.”

“Another day to suck,” she said, almost smiling.

“Yeah, maybe. But maybe not. Even here—” He looked around, his eyes lingering on the camera watching them before he looked at Ana again. “—there’s been some good days.”

That wasn’t saying much, and hearing it shouldn’t have helped as much as it did.

“When all this is over, remind me to apologize for the colossal bitch I’m being right now,” she said, giving him a pat before turning away from him.

“Sure thing.” He started cleaning up, glancing back with crooked ears and a shadow of a smile. “What do you want me to do about all the other times?”

“Yeah, yeah. Come here, Chica,” she sighed, falling into a slump on the stage next to her toolbox. “I need to get that thing off you.”

“I think it’s okay,” Chica said, walking a little further away.

“No, it’s not. Seriously. It’s not safe, come sit down.”

“I’m getting some recurrent friction errors, but localized stability is at seventy-seven percent and that’s almost as good as my old—” She halted mid-step, looking down at her foot. “Um…”

“Seventy-six?” Ana guessed.

“Seventy-three,” Chica said, carefully making her way back to the stage with one hand on the wall to keep her weight off her leg as much as possible. “Um…sixty-seven…but you still did an incredible job! You can always try again. I know you can do this!”

“No, I can’t,” said Ana, not with disappointment or anger, but just as a statement of fact.

“This was just your first try! Please, don’t give up,” Chica said, clutching at Ana’s arm. “Please!”

“Relax, sister. You’ll pop a pressure valve or something. Who said anything about giving up? Just because I can’t do it doesn’t mean it’s not getting done. Sit tight and let me borrow this for a sec.” She disconnected the experimental leg and got up. grim-faced. “It’s time to talk to Freddy.”
Ana had been awake for thirty hours by this time, and to say that she was running on fumes was putting it lightly. Her body was feeling it; exhaustion amplified the ache in every strained muscle and bruise. Even the slightest light stung her eyes like needles, and her mouth was sour with the taste of blood and burned adrenaline. Stress, lack of sleep, and squinting through her magnifying goggles for the past two hours at the delicate workings of Chica’s foot had joined together into a hammering headache that threatened at any moment to split her head wide open and tear her entire body in half right down to the ground. Also, she was thirsty, so before she did anything else, she went to the tray return window where she’d left her thermos full of Red Bull and vodka.

She only meant to have a sip, just to rinse her mouth out and wake up a little. She meant that right up until she put the thermos down again, empty. That was probably going to hit her pretty hard in a very short span of time, she thought, but it seemed the Red Bull hit first. Her mind felt clear as she approached the gymnasium where Freddy kept watch, clear right up until she opened the door and saw Toy Freddy instead, slumped in the far corner, staring back at her accusingly with the eyeless sockets in his broken head.

She blinked and it was Freddy, just Freddy, not looking at her at all, but down at the hat in his hands.

‘I’m tired,’ she told herself, ‘and probably a little buzzed. Just get this over with, get something to eat and go to bed.’

The camera on the wall switched on. With the autumn sun streaming in through the ceiling and south-facing wall, its light went unnoticed, but Freddy’s ears twitched at the high-pitched whine as it panned around, looking at him, looking for her.

“You okay, big bear?” Ana asked.

“It was a difficult night.” He glanced out the window. “And it’s turned into a difficult day. You?”

“Same. But I’m still standing,” she said without thinking, and winced.

Freddy grunted. “Well, that puts you over me,” he said, then paused. The exposed mechanisms where his muzzle used to be shifted; if he had a face, he’d be smiling. “One might even say, head and shoulders over me.”

“You just had to go there.”

“Force of habit. Come in, Ana.” He pulled in a little air, vented it hard, and put his hat on. “Let’s hear the bad news.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Ana, heading over.

“It’s not that good,” he countered archly, “or you wouldn’t have waited this long before coming to see me. Not to mention hosting shouting matches with everyone under this roof first.”

“Not everyone,” argued Ana. “Just Foxy.”
“Ah. Well. That’s understandable, then.” He watched her approach, displaying some curiosity at the leg she carried, although it didn’t hold his interest long. His gaze wandered over her, lingering anywhere her makeup had thinned or been carelessly rubbed away.

Before he could say anything about the bruises she was surely showing, Ana said, “Freddy, you’re in pieces. Let’s not talk about me, okay?”

He had to think about it before he nodded, and the set of his ears made it clear that the talk was only postponed, not cancelled. However, he merely gestured at the leg when Ana sat on the floor beside him and said, “Is that for me?”

“No, it’s Chica’s.”

“Is it?” He took it from her and switched his eyes on for a closer examination. It wasn’t long before he obviously focused his attention on the foot. His plastic eyebrows rose, then slowly lowered into a deep V. “Not all of it.”

“The parts are compatible. She was able to stand on it. Walk with it.”

“I should be more surprised than I am to hear that. You’re good, you know,” he said mildly, now studying the knee. “I sincerely doubt our creator could have done better himself, given the conditions here.”

“Yeah, well…I hate to say it, but given the conditions here, it’s just not good enough.”

Freddy’s only response was another nod. “So where do we stand?” he asked, and glanced down at his absent lower half. “So to speak.”

“I haven’t been through everything I got yet, but I’m confident I’ve got enough parts to do everything I need to do, several times over, if I have to. That’s the good news. Brace yourself for the bad news, big bear, because there’s a lot of it to unpack.”

Freddy put Chica’s leg aside and managed to turn himself around enough to fully face her. “Let’s hear it.”

“First off, I’m sure I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but you guys are in terrible condition. You need so many parts replaced that it’s literally a shorter list to name the ones I’m not replacing. Literally. Your CPU, your battery case, and the cable cluster that connects them. Question: Is your height a variable factor in the program that lets you walk or a fixed integer?”

Freddy’s facial pins twitched and arranged themselves at frowning angles. “I don’t know. We can’t actually see the code by which we operate. You’ll have to ask Foxy. He’s the only one of us to receive such an extreme adjustment to his endoskeleton.”

“And you don’t remember if he had to be reprogrammed afterwards?”

“Oh, he did, but for that specifically? I can’t be sure. There were numerous other programs that had to be patched in for…various other elements of his installment at Mulholland.” He glanced at Chica’s leg and his pins moved to steeper angles. “Is that what these are? Parts from Mulholland?”

Ana nodded.

“I see.” He rubbed at his cracked brow for a few stifling seconds, then vented his cooling fan not quite loudly enough to cover a hiss from his speaker in the form of a discreet, frustrated expletive: “Hell.”
“It’s all I’ve got,” she said. “It’s all there is.”

He nodded, still rubbing.

“I can make it work,” she promised, “but I’m not going to lie to you, bear. It’s not going to be easy. Roughly ninety percent of your body has to be rebuilt and most of the parts I’ll need to do that also need to be built, using components that were designed for a different model, not to mention the fact that the closest thing I have to a guide for how to put all this together are the failing units I’m trying to fix.” Ana patted the leg between them. “This was my practice run and while I may not exactly be at the top of my game right now—”

Freddy vented his cooling system again and lowered his hand to give her what was probably meant to be an encouraging, if distracted, smile. “I’m sure you did the very best work possible.”

“Under these conditions,” Ana finished for him. “I did. But my very best work only gave Chica seventy-seven percent stability for a few walking steps, and that had dropped by ten points by the time she got back to the stage. And that’s one leg, Freddy, with only one leg’s worth of things that can go wrong. Now I know you’re going to tell me not to change the whole thing out then, just to do one part here or there only as necessary—”

“No, I’m not,” Freddy said heavily. “There is no such thing as a superficial flaw in the core structure’s permanence, especially when it concerns the legs.” He glanced broodingly down at himself, gesturing at the emptiness below his hips. “I’m fairly sure this started out as a bit of glass that got wedged between the joints of a toe last year. I got it out eventually, but I…did some damage in the process. Something bent. There were friction errors, stress errors…but as you say, nearly every moving part is throwing out errors these days. I go slow, I watch my feet, but in the end…” His gaze wandered back to his own legs leaning up against the wall behind him. “Collapse was inevitable. Is inevitable, for the rest of them. My family.” He scraped a hand across his brow, breaking off small shards where the plastic had already cracked. He looked at his hand, then at her. The lenses of his eyes dilated, pools of black ringed by just a little anguished blue. “Ana…Ana, what am I going to tell them?”

“It’s bad, bear, I’m not going to lie, but it may not be as bad as all that. See, the problem isn’t that we don’t have the parts and it’s not that I can’t put them together. It’s that we don’t have the equipment we need to do it. It’s like surgery. It’s not enough to have a doctor, you still need the operating room and the surgical instruments.”

“But Father’s workshop is empty,” Freddy said, shaking his head. “Or did you find his equipment with the rest of these parts?”

“No, but…no offense, because his gear must have been spectacular, but really, we don’t need it. This.” She picked up Chica’s patchworked leg and gave it a little shake. “This is what we need, what no one else in the world has or can replicate. The equipment it takes to slap it together correctly is highly specialized, but not unique. Any animatronics engineer out there who can manufacture top-tier product can do this job.” She gave him a moment to absorb that, then said, “Remember that guy Yoshi who helped me fix Bonnie’s voice after he got dropped into the quarry?”

Freddy’s ears twitched, although his face remained impassive. “You want to bring him here.”

“No. The kind of equipment we need doesn’t travel well. I need to take you guys to him.”

“Impossible.”
Ana nodded, but said, “Not if I shut you down.”

He slapped a hand over his chest at once, like a prissy old woman scandalized by a short skirt, and the blue in his eyes got even thinner.

“Not without your permission,” she told him. “Never again without your permission. All you have to say is ‘No,’ but please, hear me out first.”

His eyes fluxed black and blue, black and blue. Slowly, twitching at the joints, he lowered his hand. “I’m listening.”

He was, but Ana didn’t start talking. Her head had begun to feel distinctly swimmy—it had been a bad idea to drink on an empty stomach—and this was going to take tact, something Ana didn’t have a lot of skill with, even when she was sober.

“Why’d you let me fix the roof?” she asked at last.

The question obviously caught him by surprise. He looked up, even though the ceiling in the gym was mostly glass, and frowned at her again. “That has nothing to do with this.”

“Then it ought to be an easy question to answer,” she retorted. “You didn’t like me back then. You sure didn’t trust me. With every fiber of your being, you did not want me here, but you let me fix the roof. Why?”

“It’s not the same thing,” he insisted.

She waited.

“It was going to fall,” he said and shivered.

“So are you. All of you. I don’t know how much time or how many falls you think you’ve got, but whatever you’re thinking, you’re wrong. Give me your leg.”

Freddy frowned, glanced at it, looked at her, then slowly picked one of his legs up and passed it over.

“Your battery case is made of glass. I’m pretty sure it’s good glass. Shatter-resistant, scratch-resistant. Kind of like how Bonnie’s vocal coil was water-resistant. But when there was enough water, his vocal coil broke and I’m telling you now, with enough of an impact, your battery case will break.”

“I know.”

“Good. So. Your battery is dependent on three layers of protection. First, your casing,” she said, working her fingers under the edge of his shell, just above the ankle. Instead of finding the tab that would allow her to pop it open, she simply broke off a chunk. And another. And some more.

“I imagine your fur was supposed to give you a little extra defense,” she remarked, snapping off bigger and bigger pieces while Freddy watched, silent. “But it really wasn’t the right stuff to help with that and it’s mostly gone now anyway. So it’s just plastic now. And plastic gets really brittle as it ages. Even the good plastic, which this is not. Under that, you’ve got your second line of defense,” she went on, brushing off crumbs of his casing so he could clearly see the padding underneath, tattered at the edges and stained mottled grey, black and brown by years of damp.

He said nothing, not even when she ripped it up along the seam and then tore off a wide, ragged
“Looks like some kind of vinyl outer lining,” she said, peeling down through the layers of the piece she held. “Vinyl’s good stuff. Non-porous, good moisture barrier, but the thinner it is, the more permeability issues you’re going to have. This is really thin. And probably around the first or second year that you had it, it started splitting in places where the plastic rubbed on it. Moisture got in. And whatever this flossy stuff is—” She pulled some away. It was easy, as much as if it were cotton-candy, just in some disgusting flavor, like sewer or spittoon. “—it takes to mold and fungus like a motherfucker. And that garbage has been growing inside this layer of what I’m assuming is orthopedic foam padding or something similar to that, and has just been eating it for years.” She tore a chunk of that off and crushed it in her fist. Some of it slipped through her fingers like gritty sand; what was left when she opened her hand stayed in its new mangled shape, looking like a browned apple core. “This is your main shock absorber,” she said as Freddy stared at it.

The camera on the wall whined softly to itself, a blind witness.

Ana clapped her hands clean and tapped the exposed cage of Freddy’s internal support structure. “That leaves you with this. And this is actually in much better condition than Chica’s was. That infestation she had in her legs really did a number on her. But still.” She found a place on the scaffold rusted out to lace and gave it a poke with the tip of one finger, easily breaking through.

Freddy’s cooling system vented.

“Even if I could fix everything that’s wrong with your endoskeletons and put every part into perfect alignment, you are always, always, going to be one bad fall away from a cracked battery,” she told him. “And short of duct-taping pillows all over you, there’s nothing I can do about that. You need new skins. Aesthetic reasons aside, you need that extra layer of defense. Now for the almost-good news.”

“There’s good news?”

“I said almost. New skins aren’t going to be too tough to manufacture. Hell, I could probably find a dozen garage-shop monster-makers in easy driving distance who could do that much, but they’d still need you there to do it and the odds of finding one who’s also an animatronics expert are damn slim. My point is, it’s an easy fix, but it takes—”

“Specialized equipment,” said Freddy and turned to the window. His eyes moved back and forth, tracking dust devils as they blew across the parking lot, then lifted and stared motionless at the sky for several minutes.

Ana waited, trying not to fidget. Her ability to go on sitting on concrete floors was getting smaller at the same rate as her headache was getting bigger. She needed to get out of here, away from the merciless sun, and eat something to absorb some of the alcohol sloshing in her stomach before it finished going to her head. She felt for Freddy, she did, but he needed to get on with it.

Eventually, he stirred and looked back at her. “Do you really believe this ‘Yoshi’ person can help us? What I remember of the man doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.”

“You’re remembering his bong,” she said wryly. “I’m remembering his years as an imagineer and all his peers showering him with awards. He got into some trouble somewhere along the way, clearly, but the man knows his shit. Plus, that dog-thing he showed us may not have looked too impressive to you, but that’s only because your standards have been unrealistically warped by the fact that you were built by the Nicola Tesla of animatronics.”
He conceded the point with a grunt.

“And you have to admit that even if the insides weren’t up to snuff, the outsides looked a-freaking-mazing. Until he took the head off, I’d have been willing to swear that was a real dog. A dead one, sure, but a real one.”

“He might not have done that part himself.”

“But he must have known who did,” Ana countered. “And I’ll take a professional’s recommendation over a thousand customer reviews any day of the week.”

He grunted again, clearly unconvinced, and went back to staring out the window.

“You won’t feel a thing,” she told him. “I’ll be there every second, making sure they do all the disconnecting properly. You just close your eyes and when you open them, you’ll already be home again and almost as good as new.”

“No.”

“Freddy—”

“No,” he said again, but then said, “Don’t shut us down. If I have to do this, I need to be alert.”

Ana knew she’d heard him right, but that made no sense. “I think Yoshi said something about being off the strip in Vegas,” she said and when that failed to make any kind of impact on him, added, “That’s over a hundred miles away, as the crow flies, and let me tell you, the crow doesn’t fly over Mammon.”

“I understand.”

Ana pressed, “This is going to take some time. I mean, I’m hoping, since we’ve got the parts and all we need is labor and calibration, it won’t be too bad, but there’s four of you. No way it takes less than a week, two is way more likely, and maybe even longer.”

He took his hat off and rubbed at his brow, like he had a headache. “Yes. I’m aware.”

His complete lack of confusion only served to confuse her even more. Slowly, she said, “Freddy, you’re homed here. Remember?”

He looked at her for a moment. Not a long moment. A second. Maybe two. Surely not as many as three. Just long enough for her to really notice the pause.

“I’ll manage,” he said. “I can order the others to temporarily home wherever we happen to be and…and I can override my own protocols until we’re back.”

Ana stared at him.

He held her gaze and didn’t flinch.

“Oh,” she said finally. “Well, that’s…that’s great.”

“When are we leaving?” he asked, so she guessed that was settled.

Her mind still reeling, wanting to emphasize all the wrong things right now, Ana could only shake her head at first. With effort, she pulled herself together and said, “I don’t know yet. Weather is always a factor in this stupid town, so if I can’t get it done this month, I might as well wait until
spring, and…I don’t think I can. I’ll need to talk to my boss tomorrow and either arrange an emergency leave or quit my job again, and then I’ve got to talk to Yoshi and see how much it’ll cost to get him to put us at the top of his priority list. There’s also the little matter of payment. I’m flush at the moment,” she said, thinking of her little heist in Faust’s giant safe on Halloween night, “but I have no idea how much something like this is going to cost, so I might need to get Rider in on this too, and that’s—that’s going to suck.”

Freddy’s frown deepened. “I thought he was your friend.”

“He is, he’s just…” Ana sighed, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know what the fuck is up with him lately. He keeps trying to talk me into going back to California.”

“You haven’t told him you’re staying here?”

“I have, like, a hundred times. He doesn’t want to hear it, for some stupid reason, and I don’t want to get into it again, especially if I’m going to be asking him for money.” Her mood gathered a few more thunderclouds. Pushing them back took a little more time and a lot more effort, and they sure didn’t go far, but she managed to keep it off her face and out of her voice when she said, “So…is this a ‘yes,’ Freddy? You’re okay with this?”

“Okay may be too strong a word,” he grumbled, looking back out the window. “But I don’t have much choice, so…yes. I’m saying yes. You’ll let me know what the arrangements are as soon as you’ve made them.”

It was not a request, but she nodded like it had been.

He nodded back at her and then something about his expression shifted slightly, out of his own troubles and into hers. “Now get some sleep,” he ordered, and as gently as he tried to say it, it still came out as an order. “I won’t ask you any questions I know you don’t want to answer. Just get some sleep. You’re home now.”

Home. Right.

Ana nodded again. Her throat was closing off. If she’d answered aloud, even for a single word, her voice would have been choked, and that would have definitely raised some questions she didn’t want to answer. Sure, he said now he wouldn’t ask, but he would. Freddy lied.

‘You’re drunk,’ the last rational part of her tried to say. ‘You’re drunk and over-reacting. He doesn’t mean it like that.’

‘He doesn’t mean anything he says,’ Ana thought in answer.

She got up, collected Chica’s leg, and left Freddy as she’d found him, slumped in the corner with his hat in his hands. Gone were all thoughts of food to clear her head. All she wanted now was a drink. None of that liquid candy in the kitchen cupboard. A real drink.

A bottle of rum.

* * *

Foxy heard Ana’s boots on the thin carpet of the Cove and then thundering down the amphitheater steps, not running, but taking long, heavy strides. Walking angry. Considering how they’d left things, he couldn’t claim surprise, but he was surprised just the same. Ana didn’t often let her
temper get the best of her and when it did happen, she let it burn hot and then burn out. Holding grudges wasn’t her style. Propped in the bow of his ship, Foxy waited, mics pricked toward Ana’s approach while his eyes stayed on the doubloon he was presently walking across his knuckles.

“Batten down the hatches, Cap’n!” croaked one of the crows, following the script for the set presently performing without him. “Storm’s a’coming!”

“So I see,” Foxy muttered as Ana tore through the curtain and onto the stage. He watched, wary, as she came up the gangplank and onto the deck, projecting a studied appearance of nonchalance. Damned if he’d ask what the hell she wanted. The first strike exposed the first weakness; he waited.

She went to the cabin door and banged through it without a word to him. He listened to her rattle around in the cupboards above his bunk, followed by a short silence, then an angry almost-laughing, “What the hell?” She came back to the door holding the little bottle of chocolate liquor that had been part of the little feast he’d laid out ages ago, when he’d been in the mood for winning her over. “Where are you hiding the real booze?”

“Ain’t none.”

“Horseshit. You’ve always got rum.”

“Ye drank it all.”

He caught a shadow of surprise and shame on her face before annoyance took over. She uncapped the bottle and brought it up, but turned her face away before it touched her lips. She tried again, then capped it with a curse and threw it into the ball pit. “Figures,” she spat, rubbing at her mouth and nose to clear them of the apparently foul odor of the stuff. “Perfect fucking ending to a perfect fucking day.”

“Day ain’t over yet,” said Foxy. “Not by half. And ye ain’t looking to get drunk at half-gone two in the afternoon anyhow. Admit it. That ain’t what yer doing here.”

“Oh and what do you think I’m doing here?” she scoffed, thrusting her wee chin at him.

“Come to see me, o’course.”

“You? The hell would I want to see you for?”

He flipped the doubloon a final time, then put it away in his pocket and went to her, taking long angry strides of his own. She backed up fast, hit the door of his cabin and, although he didn’t think she thought about it first, as soon as he was in range, she let a slap fly at him. He saw it coming, caught her wrist and pulled her stumbling against him. She must have realized what was coming now, because she turned away and he didn’t have another hand to catch her face and hold her still, so he had to chase her mouth down. Either he succeeded or she gave up, but however it happened, he finally pressed his muzzle to her lips.

He wished he could say it was nothing to him, just pressure and sensory feedback, but it wasn’t. He felt her, impossible as he knew that was. He breathed her in—he, who had no breath—and she was warm and sweet and so alive that she brought him to life along with her.

But she didn’t kiss him back. She tried and failed to wrest free of him, and then just stood, seething in silence.

Not the best indicator of things to come, but when he released her, she turned on her heel and went
in silence to his cabin.

He followed her.

Scarcely was he through the door than she’d slammed it shut, and if he still had a tail, he’d have left half of it on the other side. She tried to push him up against it, so he let her, just out of the spirit of the thing, and then he bloody well pushed her back. He tried to take her to his bunk, but she wasn’t having it. She tried to put him on the wall and he for damn sure wasn’t having that. He compromised and put her on the table, facedown, because he knew she didn’t want to look at him.

She fought and the fighting was good. He knew he’d win and that was better. She didn’t say anything, not one word, and that was…concerning. But this wasn’t a chat they were having, so he didn’t let it bother him. And when her struggles failed and her strength was gone and she could do nothing to stop it, he gave her what she’d come for.

He was a gentleman. He let her keep her clothes on, for the most part, and her back covered at all times, mostly with his own self.

A little rage, a flash of fire, and like all storms in Mammon, it surged, then died away and soon was still. All that moved in Ana was the blood in her veins and the thoughts in her head and perhaps a few involuntary trembles his unmaintained sensor plates could no longer detect.

“Well, that was fun,” said Foxy. He tucked up and zipped his jeans, but was quick to push Ana flat when she tried to do the same. “No ye don’t, luv. I ain’t decided I’m done with ye yet.”

“I’m not in the mood for games, Foxy.”

“I ain’t feeling too happy towards ye at the moment neither, which makes me considerably less inclined to indulge yer frillish fits.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not while there’s friendlier ports,” he said, giving hers a pat.

“I’m not feeling very friendly.”

“I can see that.” He kept his good hand where it was, but propped his hook-side elbow on the table, leaning off at an angle to better enjoy the sight of her in the fullness of her defeat without letting her up. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m out of whiskey and you’re out of rum. Other than that, I’m peachy.”

“Aye, peachy as a pear tree. Give, luv. Yer in a mood blacker’n me flag. What’s it all about?”

Ana checked her watch. “About six and a half minutes.”

“Going after me pride, are ye?” He gave her a none-too-gentle tap on the head with the back of his hook. “I goes until yer done, lovey. Ye want the race to last longer, start at a swagger, not a sprint.”

“I’m not complaining.”

“Ye sure ain’t praising.”

“What do you want, a round of applause?” She tried again to straighten her clothes, but Foxy didn’t budge. After a few fruitless attempts, she gave his thigh a slap. “Do you mind? Get off me!”
“Coo, listen to ye, so fierce.” Foxy leaned in, chuckling, and let her feel him on her back. “Before ye starts throwing yer weight around, luv, ye might want to remember I outweighs ye by three hundred pounds. Now what’s on yer mind?” he asked, easing up a bit. “Spit it out.”

“I don’t come here for conversation, you know,” she said, not quite teasing. Again she tried to get up; her fingernails scratched up splinters of frustration when he still refused to let her. She smiled at him over one round, fetching shoulder, showing him her cute little teeth. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

He looked her over, letting her see his roving eye and the pleasure in it as he mentally appointed himself lord over all he beheld. “I thinks I’m the one pinning ye to the table.”

Her lips curled in challenge, but didn’t voice it.

“And I thinks I can do it all night,” Foxy continued, combing the damp hair away from her face to better enjoy the sight. “If ye thinks different, yer welcome to shift me. Otherwise, ye best gets to talking. The longer I wait, the more apt I am to find—” His good hand traveled down her bare body and found a gripping place on her hip. “—wicked ways to amuse meself.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Foxy shrugged and settled in for a wait, shifting his weight onto his hook so his hand was free to wander over the more interesting hills and valleys open to his exploration. Her body responded, albeit reluctantly, but her thoughts remained stubbornly her own.

“Ye want to make this a battle?” he murmured, laying his speaker right up against her ear so every word would make her hum. “Ye’d best be prepared to lose, for yer in no position to fight.”

“I beat you once.”

“Aye, I thought of that. Hence the reason me front-sides are pressed to yer back-sides, and yer own pressed to the table.” And that was fine, but for some mad, unplanned reason, he went on to say, “We can neither of us get at the other’s heart,” and that was bad enough, but at least he kept the rest of it in his head: *That’s why yer with me, ain’t it? Ye knew I wouldn’t try.*

“It’s hopeless, isn’t it?” she murmured.

He wasn’t sure what she was asking, but he knew the answer all the same. “Aye.”

She lay quiet. He lay with her, touching, but not close. Outside, beyond the curtains, the crows were singing. The show would be over soon. Another would start and another after that, and then the sun would go down and the stars would come out. Another day over, another night coming on. Would he spend it here, with Ana trapped in his arms and ignoring him, or out at the base of the bluff trying to coax a lucid word out of Foxanne, or back in the bow of his ship, flipping a coin to pass the time? What the hell even should he hope for?

“Is it me?” he asked finally. “Is that why ye can’t tell me? I’m the trouble?”

“I wouldn’t fuck you if I was mad at you.”

“Ye sure ain’t doing it for fun.”

She looked back at him, her eyes brilliant with hurt. “Don’t say that,” she said in an odd choked voice. “Why the hell would you say that? Like I’m…just…using you. I’m not! I like you, damn it! I like you. I do.” And then she turned her face fast into the crook of her bent arms and hid from
him, shaking in silence.

Ah hell.

“I like ye too,” Foxy said, wincing at the inanity of those words in this situation. He tried to pet her, unthinkingly used the wrong hand, and cut a goodish-sized scratch down her arm instead. It wasn’t deep and didn’t bleed much, but it bled.

She did not react—didn’t yelp, didn’t hiss, didn’t even look to see what he’d done. Like it didn’t matter to her. Like he wasn’t even there.

“Give, lass,” Foxy said once her breaths had evened out. “We’re friends here, ain’t we?”

She moaned a little, wept harder, and at long, long last, nodded in her arms.

“Then talk to me. Ye used to talk to me, remember? Come on with ye. What’s on yer mind?”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t freeze over or go stiff either.

“Freddy,” she said at last.

“Eh?” Foxy pushed himself up so he could peer down at her incredulously. “What precisely about me lovemaking put ye in mind of him, lass? With specifics, because I want never to do that again.”

Humor was the wrong tactic. He couldn’t see her face, but he sensed her armor up all the same, even before she said, “Never mind. Get off me. I have to go.”

Foxy put his hook through her braid and leaned on her back, pressing her flat to the table, firm but hopefully not too tight. “Ye ain’t going anywhere.”

“I said, get off!”

“I heard ye,” he said mildly.

She went quiet again, but with Ana, quiet did not mean surrender.

“So what about Freddy?” he inquired.

Ana picked at the table some more, ignoring him as best she could whilst bodily pinned beneath him. Foxy had only to wait her out, giving her all the time she needed to realize the table (and Foxy himself, for that matter) was all unfeeling angles and splintery bits, and the air inside the cabin was stuffy and probably stank and that this was generally not a pleasant place to lay around, particularly when the opponent waiting on your answer neither got tired nor felt discomfort.

Inevitably, she began to fidget and then to sigh and finally speak. “When I invited all of you to come stay with me at my house, he said no.”

“Is that still bothering ye?”

“No! It didn’t even bother me then, it’s just…”

Foxy waited.

“I wish he’d just say what he means,” she muttered at last.

“And what is it ye think he means?” Foxy asked dutifully, tracing the delightfully rounded lines of
her shoulder from the nape of her neck to the solid rise of her bicep and back again.

“All that family crap.”

Foxy reared back just long enough to flip her roughly onto her back, then dropped atop her once more, eyes on and throwing yellow-white light over her face as he got right close, growling, “I told ye once, he don’t lie about that. If yer having a cut at his honor, I’ll have a cut o’ yers.”

“You’ve already had it,” she answered coolly, propping her heels up on the table’s edge to make a more welcome cradle between for him to settle. “And it was used when you got it.”

“But never half so well, I’d wager,” he growled, nuzzling at her neck. He tried to be careful, but a tooth must have caught her. She never made a sound, but there was a fresh bead of blood, like a ruby, on her skin when he drew back. “Fred don’t lie about family,” he told her, seriously now. “Maybe he don’t know how to talk about it to yer satisfaction, but he don’t lie.”

“Then why wouldn’t he leave with me? He gave me some line about how he couldn’t. He wanted me to think it had to do with your programming, like you were homed to this place and could only go so far from it.” Her face screwed up with disgust. “And I was stupid enough to believe it.”

“Ana—”

“Don’t even. He told me he got rid of that guy’s body, the one from the carousel. I doubt like hell he dug a grave, which means he can go at least as far as the quarry. But okay, whatever, maybe that’s as far as he can go. Maybe it means overriding his homing protocols or something. Maybe it’s dangerous. And then you followed me home!”

“I told ye—”

“Yeah, yeah, you all tell me things.”

“Oh don’t stop there, luv,” he said coolly. “If yer going to call me a liar, ye come right out and say the word. Tell me how me programming works. Tell me what I’m thinking while yer at it.”

She fumed in silence.

“Me own homing protocols were lifted,” he told her, making the lie seem that much more plausible for the curt way he spoke it. “And ye know the reason. As for the others, there were always going to be nights we were taken off-site for maintenance and such. Our homing protocols be triggered once we’re away a certain time, not a certain distance.”

“Oh yeah?” she challenged, thrusting her little chin up. “How much time?”

That was a trap if he’d ever heard one, but he couldn’t see any way around answering.

“Four hours,” he said. “A little more with some luck, but the risk of going black creeps up by the minute ‘till it’s all but a guarantee.”

Ana was already nodding. “Okay, sure. I figured it was something like that, which is why I was willing to believe him when Freddy said he really couldn’t come live with me. That he wanted to… ha…but he couldn’t.”

“It’s the truth, luv.”

“My ass it is!” she snapped, suddenly full of fire again. “You want to tell me how five miles up the
road for four hours is too far for too long, but when I offered to take you away to get fixed, suddenly *a week in Las Vegas* is okay?"

“Eh?”

“Yeah, suddenly, he can just order you guys to home wherever and he’ll just override it for himself and be fine. Suddenly, it’s a complete non-issue, just like it *always* was!”

And that would be the trouble with amateur liars, thought Foxy with a mental sigh and an invisible smile. It wasn’t thinking them up when it mattered that gave a man difficulty, but remembering them afterwards. And old Fred had seriously fucked up.

“Why can’t he just admit it? He doesn’t want me around all the time. And that’s fine,” she snapped before he could argue, not that he would have. No point in mopping up until it was all poured out. Besides…she was beautiful when she was angry. “There’s lots of people I can be friends with but wouldn’t want to live with,” she was saying as Foxy meditated upon her fiery eyes and the passionate color in her cheek. “He could have just said that! What the hell does he get out of watching me make a giddy ass out of myself?”

She fumed.

Foxy waited.

“Family,” she spat, like a curse.

More fuming. Her chest did fine things when her breath was heaving.

“I don’t know what he wants from me,” she said finally. “And it…I’m…It just pisses me off that he’s making such a goddamn game of it!”

“He ain’t.”

“He is!” she insisted. “He doesn’t want to come home with me. That’s fine. But if he doesn’t want to live with me at home, why does he keep saying he wants me to live with him here? He doesn’t mean it!”

“He means it. He just knows he can’t have it. What kind of place is this for a human to live?” he asked sensibly as Ana frowned. “He wants his family close, aye, and yer his family, for all that ye chafe at it.”

“I’m chafing? Me? He doesn’t want me!” Her voice failed her. She coughed, spat, “He’s never wanted me!” then shoved at him with both hands, rasping, “*Get the fuck off me!*”

He put a little space between them reluctantly, but only a little. “Ana, luv—”

“Don’t fucking Ana-luv me. Don’t fucking talk to me at all! You got what you wanted, now move!”

She wasn’t listening anymore, if she ever had been.

He retreated, watching with deep misgivings as she put herself in order. She struggled with the button on her jeans. Not a tight fit, by any means. Just shaking hands.

“Ye staying over?” he asked, knowing better.

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes as she tucked in her shirt. “I’ve got to get the truck out of
here before someone sees it.”

“Ye could drop it off and walk back. Ye’ve done that before.”

“I’m tired and I’ve got work in the morning. I’m just going to go home.”

“I could slip out,” he offered. “Keep ye company for a while.”

“I don’t need company.”

He gauged her mood, found it black, and plunged ahead anyway with, “Don’t reckon ye need to be alone neither.”

“You know what else I don’t need?” she shot back.

“Me,” he said before she could stab him with it.

She recoiled, bright fury fading out of her eyes, replaced by an awful confusion and shame. She shook her head, tried to speak, shook her head again and then reeled back, staggering out the door and slamming it behind her.

He could have followed her. Should have, maybe. But he’d fucked things up enough for one day and the day wasn’t even half-over yet. Foxy dropped onto his bunk, kicking the blanket to one side like he needed to make room, but really just wanting to kick something that wouldn’t break. He brought his doubloon out, walked it once across his knuckles and then tossed it out into his empty cabin and just sat for the rest of the night, trying not to think of all the things Bonnie would have said and how much she needed to hear them.
Ana woke in the dark with a sickly-sweet taste in her mouth, a whiskey hangover, and a ringing in her ears, and for a moment, had no idea where she was. She could remember driving angry and too fast (but not drunk; she’d only had the one drink and that wasn’t drunk; she was a thief, a liar and an occasional killer, but Ana Stark did not drink and drive) up the winding mountain road to her aunt’s house, seeing the porch light like a second moon through the trees just as she had when she was little and everything was simple. She couldn’t remember leaving it on the last time she’d been here, but hey, she couldn’t remember leaving the door unlocked either, and she’d clearly done that too. She was lucky the kids in this stupid town spent all their Halloween energy at the various Freddy’ses and not here, where she was sure they’d happily give up TP-ing and egging the outside of her house to do some real damage on the inside. Fortunately for her, the worst she came home to was trash and uneaten food stinking up the kitchen. She found a bottle of Fireball in the cupboard and sipped at it while she drank, so that her last clear memory was light reflecting off the wet faucets while she scrubbed out the scummy sink. She could sort of remember stumbling into parlor and putting herself to bed in the sleeping bag she kept there. After that, nothing but dreams and even those were so vague that she could only recall blurry images—the Puppet bending over her, long claws combing through her hair, and the Purple Man’s arms around her as she wept against his chest.

But that all felt long ago and far away. It hadn’t woke her. What had?

That ringing in her ears hadn’t gone away. It was, in fact, not in her ears at all, but under her pillow. Her phone was ringing.

Who the hell would be calling her at whatever-the-fuck-o’clock? Rider? Rider only called when he needed something and what could she do for him from Utah? Who did that leave? Shelly? Had there been a storm? Was she being called out early? Or, shit, had she slept through her wake-up alarm?

Ana fumbled toward the sound of the ringing, processing a papery crackle as she felt around the mattress way before she processed the fact that she was on a mattress at all. Not her bed at Freddy’s, it didn’t feel right…or smell right…and unless she’d drunkenly stumbled all the way into town and crawled into some rando’s house, there was only one other bed this could be.

She found her phone, thumbed at the answer icon and panned the light of its screen around, shading her sensitive eyes from its brilliance.

The pirate-ship-shaped bed in the basement playroom. She’d done this so many times, she couldn’t even really say she was surprised anymore, but this time, she’d also squeezed herself into some Spiderman pajamas that might have been too big for an eleven-year-old boy, but were definitely too small for her. And if that wasn’t weird enough, she’d found some ancient candy bar stash down here at some point and actually eaten some of it, hence the chocolately overtones to her usual whiskey-puke morning mouth.

What the fuck even was her life?

Ana picked a melted, squished Snickers out of her cleavage and tossed it onto the Batman blanket,
collapsing onto the pillows. “Stark,” she sighed into the phone.

“Hey. Uh…did I wake you?”

A man’s voice. Not one she could put a name to, but familiar enough to keep her from cussing him out and hanging up.

“Yeah,” she said, checking her watch. “But it’s cool. My alarm’s going to go off in, like, twenty minutes anyway. Who is this?”

“This is Yoshi. Uh, Lawrence Shinuyzaki? From MechaTech? You called me last night about a job, remember?”

She didn’t, but she wasn’t going to admit that. She could still remember meaning to call him anyway, and that was what mattered.

“Yeah, yeah,” she lied, rubbing her face like she could push clarity through her skin and back into her brain. “Sorry, man. I’m always a little slow to reboot in the mornings.”

“Yeah, sure, totally understandable. It’s just that your message last night said to get back to you ASAP and I got some pick-ups scheduled that’s going to eat up most of my day, so this is the AS of my AP. I can call back this evening or…”

“No, this shouldn’t take too long. Either you can help me or you can’t, and either way, I’d rather find out before I got to go to work.” She stopped there, took a moment to pull her widely-scattered thoughts into some kind of focus, and sat up. “I guess I should start at the beginning, huh? Hi, this is Ana Stark. A few months ago, you helped me get my animatronic’s voice back. You remember me at all?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, laughing like you do when the answer is so obvious, the question becomes something of a joke. “Yeah, I remember you. And your bot. Please tell me the job is that you’re putting it up for sale and looking for a buyer.”

“Fuck, no. I mean, no. Just no. Sorry. Morning-me doesn’t have much of a filter.” Ana disembarked from the ship of bad dreams and felt along the wall until her fingers touched the switch. Getting stabbed through both eyes with light helped clear the mental cobwebs, as well as helping her locate yesterday’s clothes. She put the phone on speaker on tossed it on the bed, then heaved herself onto her feet. “The job is this,” she said, peeling herself with difficulty out of the strangling grip of her too-tight pajamas. “The ‘bot’ you helped me with last time is one of a set of four—”

“Oh my God,” Yoshi whispered with so much intensity that she whipped awkwardly around, both arms trapped in her Spiderman top, to make sure she hadn’t somehow accidentally put this damn thing on video-call. She hadn’t. “My fortune cookie told me good things were coming, but I thought it meant in bed. Have you actually got all four of them?”

“Yeah.”

The next sound she heard was a kind of happy, low-pitched, hooting squeal. She decided it was a chortle. Until that moment, she thought chortling was a word that only existed in books, like hooligan.

“They all need some extensive part replacement,” she went on. “I have the parts—”

The chortling ramped up into a gleeful caterwaul.
“—but I don’t think I have the right tools to install them correctly.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, please don’t try, because I guarantee you don’t!” he said and laughed nervously. “I’m sorry, but seriously, there’s no margin for human error on those things. My workshop is top of the line. If you can get them here, I’ve got you covered.”

“Speaking of covered, they all need new skins,” she began and had to cover her ears to protect her tender hangover from Yoshi’s celebratory squealing. “I was hoping you could help me with that too, or at least point me in the direction of someone—”

“Masks, prosthetics and molds is, like, ninety-nine percent of what I do,” he said quickly. “Silicone, plastic, fur, scales—whatever you want, I got what you need. I got a massive catalogue of molds in-stock, or I can custom-sculpt something for you in no time. I’m a great sculptor. Give me your email, I’ll send you some pics from my portfolio to prove it.”

“Thing is, I know you’re a busy guy and all that, but so am I,” said Ana, “and I need this done as soon as possible, as fast as possible, so…what’s the earliest you can pencil me in?”

“Lady, I kid you not, if you showed up on my front porch in the next ten minutes, I would make the time. When do you want to do it?”

“As soon as I can get the time off from work,” she said. “I’ll call you tonight and give you a date, but for real, man, if I can down there next week…?”

“I’m serious. Next week, tomorrow or ten minutes from now, I am there. Halloween season’s over. Once I get all my rentals picked up and stored again, you’re at the top of my list.”

“And how long will it take you?”

“When it comes to the builds, I really can’t say until I see them. What I can tell you is that what takes the most time is ordering or manufacturing the parts, so if you’ve really got everything I need, the rest of it should be a breeze.”

“I sense a ‘but’.”

“But these bots are unique and from what I remember, so are their parts. That presents a whole new world of problems, the biggest of which is that their specs aren’t in my system. I don’t care how good you are, if we attempt a manual rebuild of those guys without any kind of schematic, we won’t just damage them, we’ll kill them.”

“I don’t have schematics,” Ana said, thinking of the computer in the basement of Faust’s mansion. They’d be there if they were anywhere. Get a flash drive, break in again…she ought to be getting frequent-felony points.

“That’s okay,” Yoshi said cheerfully. “We can make one. All we have to do is strip your bots down, scan everything into my system and build a virtual model. The computer optimizes it and sends that information to the assembly rig, and then it’s all about putting it together, which is usually the quickest part of the job.”

He sounded so pleased with himself, and no doubt that pride was justified, but Ana wasn’t sure how to feel. Part of her recognized that this was the best case scenario, far better than she had any right to hope for, and that she had no other real options. The rest of her was hung up on the idea of leaving Yoshi with a full set of Fazbear schematics and, by the sounds of it, everything he needed to stamp out an army of Freddys.
‘Don’t get paranoid,’ she told herself grimly. Reality check. He wouldn’t have the parts themselves, or the AI that brought them to life, so at the most all he’d be able to build was knock-off replicas. And on the other hand, if there were schematics, they could be printed out and sent home with her. Whatever gear he had, Ana could always get. If she did this once, kept her head straight and paid attention, she’d never have to do it again.

“As far as the skins go,” Yoshi was saying, “drying and curing time is always the biggest delay, and custom jobs usually mean a little extra drama, but I’ve got mats and molds on site, and all ego aside, I’m good. I’m probably not the best alive anymore, but I came damn close once and I’m still the best in this one-horse town.”

“Uh huh. So what does that translate to? One week? Two?”

A long silence on the other end of the phone told her she wasn’t going to like the answer that eventually followed.

“I’m not sure,” Yoshi hedged, audibly wincing. “Standard operating procedure is for you to send the bots to me and then I send them back when I’m done—”

“That’s not happening,” Ana said firmly.

“Okay, but you have to understand what it means when I say these guys are unique. It means I don’t have a frame of reference for how long things are going to take. You giving me a deadline is pretty much setting us both up to fail.”

“Hey, me giving you a deadline is just me figuring out whether I should ask my boss for time off or just quit. If it ends up taking more time than I ask for, I’m not leaving my guys with you and going home, so forget that. I’m just losing my job, which is not ideal, but hey, shit happens and I’ll live. I’m not trying to put you in a corner, I’m just trying to plan my day.”

“Well…okay, if the software is up to the task and my building rig does the heavy lifting, and if you’re willing to buy my undivided time and attention, we might be looking at a best-case scenario of two weeks, but—”

“But it could take longer,” she finished for him. “I get it. I promise you, I will not hold you to that. And now for the fun question. How much do you cost?”

“Depending on how you want to go with the skins, we’re probably talking between four and six figures apiece for mats. There’s a little wiggle room on that, but probably not much, if you really want the best. As for the builds themselves, if you’ve really got all the parts, all that’s left is my labor. My going rate if you want me to go steady, meaning I see you and nobody but you until the job is done, that’s two hundred an hour, and hey, I won’t even charge extra for overtime.”

So…assuming an average of a ten-hour workday—which was probably going to prove to be a light estimate, particularly as time ran out—for two weeks, including weekends if she could squeeze it out of them, plus twenty or thirty grand for the skins…

Maybe she really should go back to Faust’s. Forget the computer in the basement, she needed to take another dip in his safe.

As if he could hear her troubled frown, he followed that up with, “Hey, we can work something out. I just want to get my hands on your bunny. Okay, that sounded less pervy in my head,” he remarked.

“All right,” said Ana, mentally putting a check in the box beside Yoshi’s name. “I’ll talk to my
boss and get back to you tonight, but just so you’re aware, I’m really going to be pushing for this week or next week at the very latest. Anything else I need to know?”

“Just my address,” he said and gave it to her.

Ana pulled a Freddy’s coloring page off the wall and wrote it down in purple crayon. Then she ended the call, hung last night’s pajamas back in the closet, and got on with her day. Since she was already down here, she took her morning shower in the playroom’s adjoining bathroom. The all-in-one shampoo and body wash came in a bottle shaped like a ninja turtle and smelled like fruit. The towel was red and came with snaps on one end so it could double as a cape. There were more candy wrappers in the bathroom-sized wastebasket and if she’d really eaten all those in one night, it was a good thing she’d been drinking to the point of puking and passing out, so she could wake up with a hangover and not in a diabetic coma. Even weirder, there were clothes in the hamper. Hadn’t she emptied it the last time she’d woken up in the playroom? She could remember…she thought she could remember…

Well, she didn’t have time to deal with it now.

She hung the towel back up, gathered yesterday’s clothes and her boots, and went upstairs, first to start half a pot of coffee and then on up to the second floor. She glanced around when she got there, but Plushtrap’s chair at the end of the hall was empty. He hadn’t been in the playroom either. Maybe in the attic or David’s room…or any one of the hundreds of hiding places in this house.

“Where you at, little guy?” she called and listened, but there was no answer, not even the pitter-patter of little bunny feet.

She didn’t have time to deal with that either.

Eventually, Ana found something in her aunt’s closet suitable to wear to work. She got dressed, braided her hair and spent way too goddamn long in front of the mirror concealing her bruises beneath layers of makeup. By the time she was satisfied with how normal and uninjured she looked, it was too late to eat, so she settled for filling her thermos with fresh coffee and pretending she wasn’t hungry anyway. She made sure the coffee maker was switched off, collected her day pack and headed to work. She didn’t look back as she drove away. Even if she had, she did not believe in monsters in the attic and so would never have looked up at the small round window, where two pale faces watched her go.

Ana’s morning commute from beyond the Edge of Nowhere to Shelly’s office on the other side of town took ten or fifteen minutes, depending on whether Mammon’s three traffic lights were with her or against her. Today, they were against her and she was already running a bit behind, but she didn’t let that weigh on her gas pedal as she drove. What passed for law in Mammon had nothing better to do than pull over speeders and she was already on the sheriff’s shit-list.

When she finally pulled into the parking lot at Shelton Contractor’s, she was annoyed but not surprised to see that she was the last to arrive. Given the attitudes of some of her co-workers, this meant she was not only last, but also late. That was going to earn her some finger-shaking from the boss.

Never mind. She’d take it on the chin like always and she’d even smile when he did it, because no matter how much of a hypocritical asshole Shelly was, he was the hypocritical asshole whose ass she had to kiss if she wanted to get two weeks off before she’d actually accrued any vacation time. After one more searching glance in the mirror to check her makeup, Ana gathered her patience and went on in.
The Monday morning meeting was already underway, but there were still doughnuts in the box (Halloween leftovers, coated in orange glaze and covered in purple and green sprinkles) so she couldn’t be that late. Ana clocked in, topped off her thermos and helped herself to a handful of sugar, listening as Shelly passed out work assignments. Bisano and Burtwell scored Chuck-Wagon duty, along with the added fun of scraping up smashed pumpkins and raking down soggy toilet paper wherever they found it. Hageman had a call to go wiggle wires down at Town Hall and see why a certain office’s lights kept flickering. Collins and Taylor had a roofing job that needed to get done before the next rain blew through.

“And Stark…for what remains of the day,” Shelly drawled, “you’re with me.”

Ana stifled a sigh and merely nodded. Once he’d chewed her out, he’d probably have her out clearing storm-logged ditches or some damn thing to teach her a lesson about punctuality. And as galling as that was, she ought to be grateful he was doing it in private instead of in front of the men she had, for however brief a time, called ‘her’ crew.

They all knew anyway. And while Bisano smirked (just like he wasn’t late five days a week), most of the others seemed sympathetic in a standoffish kind of way. Shelly was by no means the toughest boss Ana had ever seen, but he wasn’t all bluster and belt-hitching either. Doubtless, every man in this room had been called on the carpet a time or two.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Ana said as soon as the last man was gone and they were alone.

“Problem on the mountain road that the city should know about?”

“Just wasn’t watching the clock.”

He acknowledged that with a distracted nod as he swept through the office, shutting off the coffee pot and switching off lights. “I’ll overlook it this once, as long as you don’t make it a habit. My workers reflect on me, little miss. I need to know that I can rely on you, now more than ever.”

And on that note…

“There is one thing,” Ana began. “I’m going to need some time off. Two weeks. As soon as I can get it.”

He frowned and made a point of staring over at the big calendar behind the reception desk, like the rows and rows of empty days were filled in solid black with waiting orders. “Missy, you got a bad habit of leaving me in the lurch just when I need you the most, but I’ll tell you what. If you scratch my back today, I’ll consider scratching yours. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like you already got something in mind,” Ana said warily.

“Well, as it happens, I do. I got to make a house call today,” he told her, already at the door. “I want you to come along.”

“I’ll get my toolbox,” she said. “What do I need?”

“Nothing,” he said cryptically. “The only thing you need to do today is remember who you work for and act accordingly. We’ll take my truck. Let’s go.”

Ana had one long moment to think about how she was going to handle the situation if the ‘house call’ he had in mind was to drive her to his place, but she couldn’t really see it happening. Shelly considered himself a pillar of the community, beyond all reproach, which meant that if he was finally going to stop dropping hints and get sleazy, he’d take her to a motel out of town, not to his
own house in broad daylight in front of all his nosy neighbors. And if she was wrong, she still wasn’t worried. Shelly could out-muscle her if he pinned her down, but Ana was not above sucker punching a man…not that she thought it would come to that. If he made a move, she’d walk, and she was pretty sure that was all that she had to do. Bright side: she’d get all the time off she needed if she had to quit, no matter how long it took to rebuild and reskin four animatronics. And if she couldn’t get another job when she got back from her trip…?

Well, fuck it. She’d burn that bridge when she came to it. In the meantime, Shelly was waiting, so Ana got in his truck.

She rode along in silence while he drove into Mammon’s quaint (and overpriced) downtown shopping district. He stopped at a florist’s shop and left Ana in the truck while he went inside and returned in short order picking glittery plastic pumpkins out of an arrangement of chrysanthemums and carnations in subdued autumn colors. From there, he turned the truck around and headed for the canyon and then off it, onto the long and winding road that led up to Faust’s solitary house.

“What are we doing here?” Ana asked, trying not to let her conscience get the better of her. This was not the movies; no one knew she’d been breaking in and even if they did, the sheriff would not get her boss to bring her back to the scene of the crime just to dramatically arrest her. “I thought he was still in the hospital.”

“Not anymore,” Shelly said. “Saw the medical van roll by Gallifrey’s this morning at the crack of dawn and there’s no one else in this town who’d be riding in it. Relatives showed up last night, so I can’t say we had no warning.”

Relatives? Plural? More than just Chad?

“So…are we installing something for the wheelchair?” Ana asked, knowing full well that if that were the case, he’d have told her to bring her tools.

“Nope. We’re here on what you might call a fishing trip.”

“What are we fishing for?”

“I’m fishing for work,” he said, stressing the first word.

“Okay. And what am I doing?”

He pulled up to the gate without answering, rolling down his window and leaning out to thumb at the intercom. After a long stretch of silence and another thumbing, the speaker crackled and a woman said, “Hello?”

“Well, hello there!” Shelly said, too heartily. “Lee Shelton here…and Ana Stark. We were in the neighborhood, as they say, and thought we’d stop on by and do the neighborly thing!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Faust is not receiving—” the woman on the intercom began, then paused and said, “Wait, did you say Ana Stark?”

Shelly motioned at Ana, who obediently leaned over and loudly said, “Yeah, that’s me. Hi.”

“Oh, okay, you’re on the list,” the voice said dubiously. “But I’m not supposed to let anyone else in.”

Shelly gesticulated silently, glowering under his bushy eyebrows.
“I’ll vouch for him,” Ana said.

Another long silence stretched itself out, presumably as whoever was on the other end consulted someone higher-up on the authority chain. When the speaker crackled again, it was a man’s voice, saying, “Miss Stark?”

Familiar voice. She searched her memory for the associated name and found it. “Mr. McCall?”

“Mr. Faust is in a meeting and I’m not certain how long he’ll be engaged, but if you’d like to come up to the house and wait, he will receive you at his earliest convenience.”

“Thanks.”

The gate rattled and began to open on its runners.

Ana leaned back into her own seat as the truck rolled onward. “So you’re fishing…and I’m the worm, is that it?”

“Whatever gets a bite,” he said, like it was a compliment. “Keep it up and I’ll see to it you get a little something extra in your next check. How’s fifty dollars grab you?”

Fifty? She bribed the garbagemen better than that. Cheap bastard.

“I’d rather have the time off,” she said.

“Always pushing for a little extra, aren’t you? You got to watch that, missy. I can’t be seen playing favorites. Especially since most of the people in town already think we got us a little something going on.” And he chuckled, like that was a joke.

Ana turned her face to the window and pretended to watch the river snake through the canyon on their right, reminding herself that she needed this job.

Shelly was no better at reading moods than he was at recognizing compliments and jokes, but it was a long slow drive up to the house and even he finally figured out that the temperature inside the truck had become somewhat frosty. He gave her several sidelong glances and as the glass house at last loomed near, he huffed to himself and said, “I don’t suppose you heard about that little mishap we had on Halloween night?”


“Nope. Someone burned down one of his little pizza parlors.”

“No kidding,” said Ana with what she hoped was an appropriate and innocent level of interest. “Who?”

“And that right there is why women don’t belong in this business,” Shelly declared, giving the steering wheel a slap of dramatic emphasis. “I tell you a thing like that and what do you do? You go after the gossip. What’s it matter who lit the match? What does knowing that do for you?”

“Tells me who the firebug is in a town where I happen to own a large, flammable house.”

Shelly shook his head at her in the manner of a man whose tolerance is being sorely tested. “See, there it is again. Firebug. Looking for the most dramatic label you can pin on what was just a kid having fun and hurting no one instead of focusing on what’s important.”

“What’s more important than arson? Sorry,” she said unapologetically when he looked at her. “I
meant, what’s more important than the innocent joy of children playing with fire?”

“Money.”

Ana puzzled that over as Shelly pulled up onto the flat top of the bluff and approached the house and finally said, “You think whoever did it…did it for money?”

Shelly sighed. “What did I tell you? Whoever did it, that’s nothing to do with you or me and it doesn’t matter.”

“But money matters.”

“Business matters,” he stressed and shook his head some more. “See, I told you a building burned down and you want to turn that into a story about a fire, when really, it’s a story about a big burnt mess that needs sweeping up. There’s a difference between men and women, never mind it ain’t politically correct to say so. Every now and then you might be able to find a woman who can do the…well, most of the physical stuff in this business, but she’s got no head for business. My Jill? Perfect example. My Jill could manage a house, a garden and three growing boys like it was nothing. Could pinch a penny until it cried, yes, sir. Never bounced a check in nineteen years of marriage. You’d think that would make her good with money, wouldn’t you? No, sir. No concept of where the money came from or what to do when it ran out. Good at math,” he said, thumping on the dashboard with one callused finger. “No good at business. God made you girls—pardon me, you ladies. God made you ladies second for a reason. So there’d already be a man to look out for you.”

And then he smiled at her, like this was a tender moment they were having, and said, “You got no one looking out for you, do you? All alone in that big old house…just like me, all alone in mine. Seems like Someone’s trying to tell us something.”

“I like being alone,” Ana reminded him.

“Well now, I wonder if you’re just saying that, just because you always have been. But that’s maybe a discussion for another day,” he concluded, cranking the wheel around as he pulled up to the house. “My point is, business sense. I got it, you don’t. Don’t get me wrong! You got some know-how and you can sweat with the best of them and you’ll never hear me say otherwise, missy, but contracting isn’t about doing the work.”

He shot her a few glances as he found an empty space in the front lot (no easy feat; there were several other vehicles there before them, including two rentals and the sheriff’s patrol car) and finally said, “Aren’t you going to ask?”

‘Are you sure my lady-brains can handle the answer?’ Ana thought with all the sarcasm in her mental voice that she could not allow to show in her real one when she said, “What is contracting about?”

He finished parking and shut the engine off, leaning close to her with the keys clutched in his fist to triumphantly say, “Contracts. Now I know for a fact there’s a job that needs doing and that old man has been home since yesterday and as of this morning, I still have not received that phone call requesting my services. So what do you do? Well,” he interrupted himself with an indulgent chuckle, “you try to raise a fuss over a fire that’s already over and done with. That’s all in the past. But me? I am looking to the future, always, and I am not leaving without a job order. You’re going to help me get that, understand?”

“How?”
“Any way you can. I won’t ask,” Shelly said and by-God winked before he grabbed the flowers and got out of the truck.

Asshole.

Ana followed him.

She expected the door to open either on Chad, who wouldn’t let her in, or some stuffy butler with a guest list, who wouldn’t let Shelly in, but she was wrong on both counts. It was a kid who answered Shelly’s knock—a little girl scarcely hip-high, sucking her thumb shyly as she hung on the latch. Other kids could be heard shrieking and laughing and chasing each other around somewhere upstairs, but oddly, the house seemed no less empty for having them there. Is a haunted house any less haunted just because a new family moves in?

Shelly bent over to push his broad, bearded face right in front of the girl’s, saying, “Where’s your mommy?” and understandably, the girl burst into tears and ran off crying.

Several potential mommies appeared as if by magic and converged on the foyer, along with a couple daddies, and one well-kept grandma, who Ana had last seen in the Tranquility Care Center right after the old man had been admitted.

“Hey, Abby,” she said. “Good to see you again.”

“It’s Ana, right?” Abby Mills or Wentmore, but technically Faust replied, and if she wasn’t bubbling over with warmth and welcome, she didn’t seem all that surprised to see her either. “I wondered if you might stop by today. It seems like everyone else already has. Do you know, you’re our third visitors this morning and it’s only—” Abby brought out her phone to check the time. “—nine fifteen.”

“I thought you told that girl not to let anyone else past the gate,” said one of the daddies, stepping up to loom impressively over Abby’s shoulder while he glared at Shelly. “Isn’t that her whole job?”

“No, her job is to be a nurse, Brian, not a parking valet. Why don’t you take Lourdes upstairs so us grown-ups can have boring grown-up talk? It’s all right,” she said when the man didn’t budge. “I know this one. She’s a friend. Go on now. I don’t want the little kids running riot over the house. Go put on a movie. Do you remember where the theater is? Third floor, left hall, last door on the right. The gaming room is right next to it. Try to keep them occupied and if Grandpa Freddy is feeling up to it, we’ll pack a picnic lunch and go to the park later,” Abby suggested, sending him a disarming smile that lasted only until the adults had herded the children away. Then she looked back at Shelly. “What do you want?”

“Sorry to disturb you,” said Ana.

“But we were in the neighborhood,” Shelly interrupted, giving her the shut-up eyes as he offered Abby his flowers. “We thought we should stop by and see how he’s doing.”

“How thoughtful,” Abby said, letting disdain drip from each syllable. She did not take the flowers.

Shelly shifted the vase to the crook of his left arm and offered his hand next. “Lee Shelton, of Shelton Contractors. You probably don’t remember me, little lady, but I sure do remember you and may I say, you haven’t changed a bit.”

Abby arched a perfectly-penciled eyebrow. “I don’t for a moment presume that’s a compliment, given what you used to say about me when I last lived in this house, and it isn’t true in any case.
I’ve changed a great deal. I’m certainly not as easily intimidated as I used to be. However, I can honestly say that you haven’t changed. You’re still the simpering, incompetent kissass you always were.”

“Well now!” Shelly began, taken aback but not quite daring to harrumph.

“Well yourself. Why my husband chooses to waste his time and resources on you, I shall never understand. I suppose men of a certain age must have their pet projects, and for that matter, I suppose it should be expected for a good pet like you to come groveling around your master’s heels, pissing yourself with excitement at the opportunity to lick the hand that feeds, but that doesn’t mean I have to let you in.”

Shelly flushed, shifting his weight, but didn’t back up. “I think your husband would have something to say if he knew you were keeping one of his most important business partners out on the stoop.”

“Partner? If you really think that’s what you are, I’ll have to add delusional to my list of your adjectives. As for business…” She paused and glanced back, momentarily distracted by kid-cries in another part of the house, then looked at Shelly again with a small, meanly satisfied smile. “Do you know who’s meeting with him right now? The heads of what passes for government in a shithole like this. They came here just like you, with their cheap flowers and their cheap sympathy, to talk ‘business’ with him. And what business is that, you may well ask? No secrets in a small town, they say, but I’m sure this is one they at least tried to keep, so I’ll tell you. The town is on the verge of bankruptcy. Oh yes,” she said as Shelly frowned. “Has been for years, apparently. I’m sure a savvy businessman like you can understand how that can happen…low income, hardly any population to speak of, and zero growth prospects. My husband has been padding the treasury, but he didn’t show up at the last few fundraisers due to his injury, and now the town coffers are dead empty. In a few weeks, they won’t be able to back the payroll. So they came here, expecting my husband to bail them out again. And do you know what he’s telling them?”

Abby waited, then laughed and said, “Well, you’d better hope he says yes. Because if he won’t help them, he certainly won’t help you. And you really shouldn’t expect him to. After all, he let your company go to auction once, didn’t he, Lee Shelton of T and S Contractors?” She let that sink in for several long seconds, then turned with a careless wave, saying, “Ana, dear, please follow me. He won’t be much longer.”

Away went Abby, leaving the door wide open. Ana looked at Shelly, who managed to be both red-faced and pallid at the same time.

“Women and business,” he said hoarsely, adjusting his white-knuckled grip on the vase. “She don’t know what she’s talking about.”

And with that rallying cry, he marched on. Shaking her head, Ana followed him.

Abby led them to the wide room off the kitchen, the one with a glass door looking out over the patio, and a long hall lined with windows and doors that ended at Faust’s office. A banquet table had been set up for a buffet breakfast, splattered now with pancake syrup and scrambled eggs, but otherwise picked down to a few oatmeal packets and muffins. Abby motioned toward it as she took a sentinel position at the mouth of the hall, saying, “Forgive the mess. The maid is feeling a bit overwhelmed this morning. One must observe the social niceties, so there’s coffee in the warmer if you want it.”

“No thanks,” said Ana, who wanted it.
Shelly managed only a bullish snort of negation.

Abby turned her attention outside, where a small group of older kids and teens sat around the empty pool, alone together and silent as they tapped at their phones and tablets. Shelly paced, looking at the severe white walls where normal people would have hung photographs or paintings, occasionally throwing a baleful stare at Abby’s back. Ana thought about what she’d need to get the truck ready for the trip—storage for the parts, safety straps for the animatronics...maybe cut a few holes in the sides so they could watch the landscape rolling by. When were they going to get another chance to see the world outside of Mammon? Because if Abby was right and the town really was bankrupt, in a few years, it could well be empty. For Freddy and the others, this was a dream come true—no more rattling doors at night, no more invaders with spray paint and baseball bats, no one to drag them out and drop them in the quarry just for shits and giggles. They’d be happy to stay forever at Edge of Nowhere. Would she stay with them?

God, it was unnerving how easily she could imagine that. The pizzeria was off the grid. A little regular maintenance would keep the power condenser in order, and she could go on enjoying hot running water and wifi when all the rest of Mammon was a ghost town. She knew for a fact that the gymnasium made a great greenhouse and if working for Rider had taught her nothing else, it had taught her how to make a world-class indoor hydroponic garden. She could drive to Hurricane for all her other needs, at least until the bridge collapsed and trapped her here, in the open grave she’d never been able to crawl completely out of. And she’d die here, after escaping all those years ago. She’d die and maybe then whatever curse that had been set on this town since its founding would finally be broken.

Happy thought.

They waited.

The door at the end of the hall opened, expelling a gaggle of town hall representatives, including Wendy Rutter, who stood a little longer in the doorway, looking back into the office. “I hope you're feeling better,” she said with the kind of flat surface cheer that almost certainly overlay defeat of some kind. “And I hope to hear from you soon.”

“Oh?” Mr. Faust’s voice. It was hard to tell from his tone, but he seemed genuinely perplexed. “Forgive me, Mrs. Rutter, it wasn’t my intention to give you hope. Good day.”

Her companions sent out several hearty goodbyes which lasted only until Mrs. Rutter shut the door. Silence dropped over them at once. Smiles fell away from their pale faces. “What do we do?” one of them asked. Rutter looked at him, shook her head and started walking.

Almost at once, her swift, professional stride faltered. Her gaze, which had been stonily fixed straight ahead, focused on Ana. “You,” she said, calmly and conversationally.

And then she dropped her briefcase and ran up the hall screaming.

Ana was spared having to decide between getting her eyes clawed out by an insane old lady or getting arrested for punching out a senior citizen only when one of Rutter’s tasteful heels snapped off and sent her crashing to the floor. Marble floors being marble floors, she then slid on her face on out into the middle of the room, where she would have fetched up literally at Ana’s feet if she hadn’t stepped back out of grabbing range.

“You did this!” Rutter shrieked and by God began to beat her hands and feet on the floor—the world’s oldest toddler, throwing a tantrum. Her shoes flew off, one nearly hitting Shelly in the balls and the other landing in the muffin tray on the buffet table. Her hair whipped around her head
with the force of her shaking. Saliva specked the tiles.

Ana raised her eyes off this astonishing spectacle and saw a neat row of kids lined up on the other side of the glass, phones in hand, filming.

She walked over and drew the curtain, eliciting a short chorus of groans and receding grumbles.

Behind her, Rutter’s energy was flagging, her screams becoming sobs. She rolled slowly onto her side and curled up, covering her face with shaking hands. “You did this,” she moaned. “I sacrificed everything I had to this town! My sister! My marriage! My whole life! Why did you have to come back? You ruined everything! You…You…You harpy! You come flying in and grab anything you want and then shit on everything that’s left!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m the devil. Come on,” Ana said, easing back around to offer Rutter a guarded hand. When Rutter predictably slapped it away, she gestured instead to the wide-eyed councilmen (not failing to notice that the door at the end of the hall was once again open and the old man was watching from his wheelchair in the shadows). “Someone want to jump in here?”

Someone did not.

“You harpy,” Rutter said again. “You and your mother and her sister and all of you Blaylock bitches!” she shouted with another spate of rocking, slapping violence before she sagged back into moans. “You coven of filthy cunts! You seed of evil! Your family blighted this town. I gave my whole life to build it back and now here you are…here you are…and you won’t be happy until there’s none of us left.”

“Okay, come on. Get off the floor, lady. Here.” Ana offered her hand again and again was smacked away, but afterwards, Rutter finally started pulling herself together.

She wiped her face, smoothed back her hair, straightened her clothes, and slowly gained her feet. She took the shoe Shelly handed her, but left the other one in the muffin tray. Once more composed, however disheveled, she looked Ana in the eye and said, “You’re going to burn in hell someday.”

“Okay,” said Ana, because seriously, what did you say to that?

“You will.”

“I heard you.”

“God will judge you.”

“I assumed that’s what you meant, yeah.”

Rutter’s lips thinned. Without another word and with great dignity, she walked away. One by one, Mammon’s other fathers and mothers followed her, avoiding Ana’s eyes.

“Well, that was exciting,” said Abby. “Freddy, you have a guest. And a visitor,” she added as Shelly came around the corner into view.

Faust, already humming forward, halted his chair. “Mr. Shelton,” he said, as polite as ever, but with undisguised surprise. “What are you doing in my home?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” Abby inquired as Shelly began to stammer some kind of answer. “He’s one of your most important business partners.”
Faust took a long time to think that one over while Shelly stood at the opposite end of the hall with his discount Halloween flowers in hand and nowhere to hide. “And have you business to discuss with me?” he asked at length.

This was the perfect opportunity for Shelly to plausibly claim he’d only come to welcome Faust home after his long lie-in at the care center and leave before someone showed him the door. Even he had to see this was not the time to push for favors. But no. Shelly had vowed not to leave without a job order and plainly, he meant it.

“Yes, sir,” he said, stepping forward and not coincidentally in front of Abby. “I believe what I have to say will benefit both of us. Why don’t we step aside where we can talk man to man?”

Faust thought that one over too, but in the end, he did back the chair up and clear the doorway. “Miss Stark, if you’ll be good enough to wait?” he called. “This won’t take long.”

Hardly a promising statement and Shelly knew it. Thrusting the flowers at her, he lowered his voice to private volume and hissed, “I’m counting on you to close this deal for me, missy, no matter what that takes. Don’t make me sorry I took you in. It’s never too late to turn you out.”

Ana contemplated quitting right there on the spot, just to see the look on his face, but all she said was, “Yes, sir.”

Shelly gave her a final squint and a belt-hitch to hammer home the seriousness of the situation, then went to the office. The door closed.

“I didn’t want to mention it in front of him and give him ideas, but you don’t have anything to worry about.” Abby remarked, pulling the curtain aside to check on the kids outside. “Freddy’s very fond of you. I’ve no doubt he will take care of you when this town blows away.”

“I don’t need taking care of. I’ll survive.” Ana took the flowers over to the banquet table, and since she was there, seized the opportunity to remove the shoe from the muffins. She hunted around, found a trashcan tastefully tucked away at one end of the table, and dropped it in. “Shelly means well.”

“Does he?”

“In his own self-centered way, yeah.”

“Would you still be saying that if you weren’t working for him?”

“Probably. He’s a sexist, belt-hitching blowhard, but he’s here for the benefit of the men working for him and depending on him for a paycheck, and that’s worth something.”

The other woman made a scoffing sound, but followed that up with sidelong, almost-smiling glance. “You’re an optimist, too, hm?”

“Me? No. I’m a relativist. Most of the time.”

“Freddy’s an optimist. I’m not sure he’d ever call himself that, but he is, you know. I don’t know how he does it, really. I can’t imagine he had an easy time growing up in this godforsaken place, with these people, and still, he tries to see the good in them, even when there is nothing good to see. If it were left up to me, I’d’ve burnt this town to the ground decades ago and roasted marshmallows over the embers, but Freddy has to give everyone the benefit of the doubt.” She glanced down the hall at the still-shut door. “And a chance to appeal. But it won’t do any good anymore. His mind is made up. He’s finally washing his hands of this town and it’s about damn
time. Are you sure you won’t have any?” she finished lightly, waving at the buffet table. “There’s more in the kitchen if you’d rather have something untouched by toddler hands. His cook made enough to feed an army.”

“Looks like you brought one,” Ana remarked, glad to change the subject.

“I wanted them all to meet him in person. Most of them never have. Even I don’t come that often anymore. The last time...before the last time, I mean...was over ten years ago. I invite him to our house every year for the holidays,” she added with a defensive side-glance. “But he never comes. He’s never left Mammon in his life.”

“No, he went to Disneyland once,” Ana replied without thinking. At Abby’s startled look, she added, “It was way before you knew him. He was only twelve.”

“Oh. I had no idea.” Abby studied her for a moment, then shook her head and went on, “Anyway, I asked Freddy to charter a private jet for us in the hopes I persuade the entire family to join me. And it worked. Even in our neighborhood, not many of their friends have ‘private jet on command’ bragging rights, and let’s be honest, Mammon isn’t the sort of place anyone would ever want to go.”

“That’s for damn sure. How are they adjusting?”

“Oh, they hate it, although they’re all putting on a brave face, for Freddy’s sake.” Abby spared the kids on the patio an indulgent smile. “Despite the distance, he’s always been very present in their lives. He calls, he writes...never a card, always a handwritten, carefully composed letter. The children love that. Their own mail. It’s exciting, you know, when you’re a child. Most of them don’t write back,” Abby concluded, watching the teenagers outside stare in silence at their screens. “But they love him. I hope he knows that.”

Ana uncomfortably made some affirmative noises.

“I know what you’re thinking, but it isn’t just the money. He keeps us comfortable, but he’s always been very open about the fact that there won’t be a huge windfall after he goes and he encourages them all to develop their talents because they will be making their own way someday. I won’t deny his financial support makes it easier for them to pursue their goals, but they have, every one of them, earned their success.”

“I’m sure they have.”

“I sound defensive, don’t I?” Abby smiled, her gaze unfocused and a little sad. “I’m the one who hasn’t earned it, any of it. I was a child when I met him. A stupid child who thought she was all grown up. A lost child...and he wanted to save me, he just didn’t know how.”

She lapsed into silence, giving Ana four or five seconds to try and fail to think of some polite way to change the subject, and then said, “I’m talking too much. I’ve been drinking. I’m not a drinker, you understand, and never this early, but...it’s this town. I hate this town. Coming back here always feels like waking up into a recurring nightmare. Not out of, in to. Like all my waking life, that’s the dream, and this...this is always waiting for me. I know just how it’ll go, all the snide comments and whispers and...memories...”

Another silence, longer than the first.

“But I had to come,” she said at last. “Freddy told me the doctors would be releasing him sometime this week and I wanted to be here whenever that was. I’ve left him so alone for so long, you’d think...
I wouldn’t even care, but I just…I couldn’t stand the thought of him coming home to an empty house. Silly of me. He has his cook in the evenings and his maid three nights a week, and now his nurse, and McCall, of course. He’s had McCall almost as long as he’s had me.”

“And Chad? Is he here?”

“Oh yes,” Abby said with a bitter sort of laugh. “The last I saw him, he was taking some of the girls down to the gymnasium to play tennis, no doubt with the idea of luring them into the sauna afterwards. Carter—that’s my ‘special friend,’ you understand—Carter is under strict orders not to let the little weasel out of his sight.”

“You should be able to trust him with his own cousins, though…right?”

“I wouldn’t even trust him with their corpses.”

Ana supposed, given that Chad had thought she was in high school at their first meeting and he’d still hit on her, that wasn’t a surprising reaction, but it managed to shock her a little all the same, maybe just by how readily Abby said it.

“You think that’s a terrible thing for me to say about my own grandson, don’t you?” Abby remarked. “It is. It’s also true. And while I would love to believe my grand-daughters have more sense than to let some smooth-talking snake slither out of the family tree and into their pants, Chad, he’s…he’s just…He’s so much like his father. And he was so much like his father. And he was…It’s like…It’s like the sequels to a horror movie. The first one is smart and intense and scares you, but after that, they just get worse and worse. Stupider. And more violent.”

Abby’s voice broke on the last word. Ana glanced at her, then awkwardly around the room, and finally went back to the buffet table for some napkins. She returned to Abby, but in that little time, the older woman had patched up all her cracks. She took a napkin, daubed once at each eye to be polite, and then just held it while she watched the kids outside.

“Have you seen him lately?” Abby asked finally, with a touch of real curiosity.

“Chad? Sure, around town. We’re not exactly on speaking terms.”

“No, I imagine you said it all the last time I saw you, but actually, I meant Freddy. I get my letters and phone calls like everyone else, and he knows all the things I like to talk about, but he knows…because I made sure he knew…how embarrassing I thought he was when I was young and stupid, so he’s been careful to maintain a ‘respectful’ distance ever since. I hardly know him, really, but we are finally friends, I hope. I hate to think of him in this awful place, surrounded by nothing but awful people who smile to his face and resent him behind his back. He thinks you’re different. So do I, for what that’s worth. I don’t suppose you care very much what I think about you, or what anyone thinks about you, for that matter, but Freddy genuinely likes you and I’m glad. I’m glad he has at least one person in his life who’s looking out for him.”

It was hard to know what to say to that, hard to know what she was feeling, hard even to stand here without fidgeting in the house she had robbed two nights ago. She had a good reason, and she still believed that, but it was hard just the same.

“So have you?” Abby wanted to know.

“Yeah. Pretty regularly. Mostly weekends.”

“Did you see him this last Saturday? Halloween?”
Ana nodded, muffled a cough to loosen her throat, and said, “Yeah.”

“That explains it. I called him on the pretext of double-checking our flight, but really…I don’t know. Brian was working and Alina was home with the baby, so I took the boys to a kind of haunted house thing and…I don’t know. There were children everywhere…the costumes, the screaming…” Abby shook her head. “I just thought I’d call. But he was in an odd mood. Very odd. I wondered if he might be drunk. And he talked about you.”

“What did he say?” Ana asked, trying to sound casual.

“Not much. He never says much. It was more how he said it. He wasn’t upset, just…emotional. Not that anyone else would have thought so, if they’d been listening. But I can tell. And he talked about you. Nothing bad, of course, but for Freddy…” Abby laughed and shook her head. “One simply doesn’t talk about other women to one’s wife. That would be the very height of bad manners and if Freddy cares about nothing else, he cares about manners. Oh, that was an ugly thing to say,” she said with sudden self-disgust. “And it isn’t true. He cares, he just…doesn’t express himself well.”

She lapsed into a short silence, cracked a thin smile and said, “Most people wouldn’t believe that. They hear the way he talks and think he expresses himself too much and at all the wrong times. They don’t understand him. He uses words because he can’t give feelings, you know? The way some people give flowers instead of tears at a funeral, because they can’t cry anymore or don’t want to be stared at, or just because it seems like the appropriate thing to do.” Another silence, longer than the first, and another smile, even smaller. “Freddy and his obsession with good manners. He knows he’s awkward, that’s the worst part. He knows, but he can’t understand how or why or what to change, but he knows, and he truly believes if he could just figure out the rules, he’d finally fit in. It’s so painful to see him trying, because he honestly thinks he’s succeeding and he never will. You think I’m making fun of him, don’t you?”

“What?”

“The way I talk about him. Hardly the attitude of a loving wife.” Abby heaved a self-consciously dramatic sigh and turned to Ana. “Ours was never a grand romance. Maybe it would have been different if he’d been madly in love with me, so I could have the fun of condescending to him, but he wasn’t. Love had nothing to do with it, for either of us. I was a pregnant teenager in a small Mormon town and the father of my child refused to marry me. I wasn’t in love, I was in trouble…and Freddy saved me. Did I appreciate it?” Abby shook her head scornfully at the past. “I was barely fifteen and thought I was starring in the romantic movie of my life with a young, fun, exciting…dangerous man. Freddy was old, odd, uninteresting and…and…and utterly indifferent to me in the way that I thought mattered most. And yes, I cheated on him!”

Abby waited for a few seconds, ready to be defiant in the face of Ana’s scorn. When Ana did not react, she didn’t seem to know how to go on. “From the first night,” she said, as if arguing. “I didn’t even think of it as cheating. I justified it by telling myself that he was gay, because he was quiet and polite and never seemed to have any trouble looking me in the eye when we talked,” she said, gesturing at her bosom. “We used to go driving—wild drives, and none of us with our seat belts on—and I’d look back and see Freddy and Marion tumbled together, her with no bra and her skirt caught up in the wind—” Her eyes flashed wide, dismayed color rising high in her cheeks. “Oh, I’m sorry, that’s your aunt!”

“It’s fine,” said Ana. “She was pretty. A lot of people remember her for how pretty she was.”

“I wasn’t suggesting she was throwing herself at him or doing anything…lewd. I’m just saying she was a beautiful woman sprawled across a young man’s lap and anyone else would be all over her
or at least staring, but not Freddy. Freddy was just having fun in a fast car. And to a young, sheltered…stupid, stuck-up girl like me, that meant he must be gay, so what did it matter if I cheated on him? It couldn’t hurt him if he didn’t want me like that anyway.

“I know better now,” she said suddenly. “I hurt him. I’m sure I hurt him. Even if he is gay, he didn’t deserve to be made to feel unwanted in his own marriage, his own house.” Her brow furrowed. “If he’s gay. I’m less sure of that than I was. He never seemed to have much of a sex drive, but he used to make an effort once in a while. For my birthday. Our anniversary. Christmas. I swear, he must have read it in a book on how to celebrate special occasions.” She shook her head, staring away with her eyes unfocused. “Is he? He was predictable in bed, but I can’t say he wasn’t passionate. And he didn’t seem any more interested in men, except for—Oh God, what am I even saying? You don’t want to hear all this. My point is, I may have been a terrible wife, but Freddy was always a good man. And it wasn’t because he didn’t know, because I never tried to hide it, but he never said a word to me until the other one broke it off, and even then, it wasn’t serves-you-right or anything like that. He held me while I cried it out and told me he’d always take care of me and our son. He called him ours, even then. He never called him anything but ours and he knew…I know he knew.”

More silence, choking up the present with the past.

At last, Abby looked at her instead of through her. “I suppose you think I’m a terrible mother along with being a terrible wife.”

“No.”

“Sure, you do,” Abby said, still smiling, but with challenge in her eyes. “The way I talk about my grandson, how could I be anything but? You don’t have to lie to spare my feelings.”

“I’m not. It’s just that that my standards for terrible mothers are set awfully goddamn high.”

Abby huffed, turning back to the window, but watching Ana in the reflection of the glass. “I’m not, though. I just don’t like Chad. He’s controlling and cruel and abusive, an irredeemable narcissist and a murderous little shit besides.” She was quiet a moment, then softly added, “He’s exactly like his father. But I loved my son, at least in the beginning,” she went on in a normal voice. “And he loved him too…or said he did. I sometimes wonder if he loved anyone or anything. If he even could…Listen to me,” she said, suddenly brisk and too-bright. “Playing the pronoun game like he was some kind of demon I could summon just by speaking his name.”

“I know who you mean.”

Abby’s broad smile held a little longer, then broke away in pieces. “Good. Because he was a demon. He really was. And there’s a stupid, superstitious part of me that’s really, truly afraid to speak his name, even though I know he’s dead…and he’d never come back for me anyhow. Not for me. Once he was done with someone, he never came back. After Randall…well! He was done with me. Not because I got pregnant. He was happy about that,” Abby said with a bitter laugh. “Oh, you never saw a man so pleased to be told he’d knocked up his fifteen-year-old girlfriend! No, he doted on me when I was pregnant and he was so good with the baby…but then Randy got a little older and…well…he had some learning disabilities. I…not just me, both of us really, but…I did some things while I was pregnant. Drinking and…other things.”

Ana nodded without further comment.

“He wasn’t stupid,” Abby insisted. “God knows, it might have been better if he was, but he wasn’t. He just…struggled…with certain things. He was a fussy infant. He was slow to potty train. He had
impulse control issues, ha, to put it kindly. All of that wore on me, but then he was dyslexic and that...that wore on his father. He kept telling me how he could read by the time he was four and his brother—that was what he called Freddy, although they weren’t—his brother could read and write when he was three. I kept telling him normal people don’t start that early, but then Randy was six and seven and still couldn’t manage the alphabet, and I knew something wasn’t right. His father was the one who kept pushing for a diagnosis and when he finally got one, he told me…Am I talking too much?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes. Please stop,” thought Ana. She said, “If it helps to talk, talk.”

“It does, actually. I’ve never said any of this out loud before. Not to Freddy. Never to Carter. I’ve had a few therapists, but...they could never understand. I don’t even understand, how could they? You probably don’t understand either,” she said, smiling hollow-eyed at Ana, “but I’m sure you have your own list of things that I could never understand and that you never talk about. Which is too bad, because I’m discovering that it actually feels good to finally talk about it. Do you mind listening?”

‘Hell, yes,’ thought Ana and said, “No. Go ahead.”

“We were driving home from the meeting with the pediatrician and I had all those stupid brochures they give you and I was just shell-shocked and trying to make some kind of plan, and he was giving me no input, none. I kept asking him what we should do and finally he said...I’ll never forget what he said...he said, ‘Do whatever you want, Abs. It’s not my problem anymore and neither are you.’ I got upset and he just laughed and said he had no use for me. I couldn’t make good babies…and that was all I was good for. He said that,” she said in an odd, distant voice, “and I still begged him to take me back…and tried to kill myself when he wouldn’t.

“Oh, what a mess that was,” she recalled. “There were pills, there was booze. I smashed everything in my bedroom, tore down the curtains, cut off all my hair, stripped naked and wrote my suicide note in lipstick on my chest and then...” She lifted her left arm, wrist turned up.

Ana didn’t see it at first. The scar was old, faint…but there.

“Poor Freddy picked me out of a pool of blood and drove me—he doesn’t even have a license, but he drove me himself to the hospital while I screamed at him and called him horrible names the whole way. Freddy put all my broken pieces back together, but it was him I wanted to see...and he came. He did. He came to my room and when Freddy tried to stand between us, I told him...I screamed at him to leave, just to get the hell out and let us have two minutes alone without him pestering us.” She put a hand over her eyes, the color high beneath her makeup. “God knows what you must think of me.”

Ana huffed. “I could tell you things about my personal life, too, but I won’t. Trust me, I’m not thinking anything. And I won’t be talking either.”

“Oh, like there’s anything that hasn’t already been said about me in this town.” Abby glanced at the napkin still crumpled in her fist and touched it to her eyes again. “It’s all true, though. Every word. I was a wretched, unfaithful, shameless little bitch, and when I succeeded in chasing my husband out of the room, my lover took me in his arms. He lay down on the bed with me and he kissed me...and he took my hand and kissed my wrist...and he unwrapped the bandages and he looked...and he told me, ‘What a stupid girl you are, Abs. Everyone knows you never cut across. You can’t do anything right, can you? If you really loved me,’” Abby said in a dull, dead voice, “‘you’d have done it right.’ I cried, of course. I cried and cried and swore I loved him. I’d do it right next time. I’d die for him. And when he told me it would be beautiful, I believed him with all my stupid heart. I was ready to die. I was happy to die. I was grateful to be given the chance to
die…for him. For his love. I would have done it right then and there, but he said no, not in the hospital. He’d take me to a special place…and I could prove myself to him there.

“But of course, I never came home from the hospital. Freddy sent me away. Just me and Randall, on a tour of the very best resorts in the world. To recuperate, he said. I thought he just wanted to get rid of me, that I’d finally hurt him enough to make him sick at the sight of me, but I went anyway, because I’d made such a mess of myself. I wanted time for the scar to heal, time to grow my hair out…so I’d be pretty when I came back to him. And then he died.”

Silence.

“God, I can’t believe it still hurts,” Abby said with a deceptive lack of emotion. “You’d think it wouldn’t. I know exactly what he is now and he was never worth loving. I have an amazing man in my life now, someone who loves me and who I love more than anything…and I have Freddy, of course. But it still hurts. It’s like…like they say when you lose a limb, you can still feel it itching or aching. That’s what he’s like, what he was like even before he died. He was a ghost you only felt in the echoes of the ways he hurt you. Did you know him at all?” she asked suddenly. “Forgive me for saying so, but I don’t remember you from back then at all…not that I would have. I really only had room in my selfish little life for him and Randy, and Marion to a slightly lesser extent. And Freddy, of course, when I needed someone to blame. I don’t even recall Marion’s son that well, and he was only a few years younger than Randy. Danny, wasn’t it?”

“David. And no, I…I didn’t really know him. I was only six or something when he died.”

“Did you cry?”

Ana opened her mouth to say she didn’t know, and left it open for a moment in mute surprise as the darkest recesses of her mind vomited up an unexpected memory of herself and David sitting at the table in Aunt Easter’s yellow kitchen. There was a peanut butter sandwich and a cup of hot cocoa smothered in marshmallows in front of each of them. David ate and drank with gusto, kicking his legs under the table, but Ana couldn’t eat and could only bring herself to hold her cup at all because her hands were so cold. She was looking down the hall, past the grandfather clock to the stairs, where Aunt Easter sat on the bottom step, sobbing into her hands. The memory came with the feeling that she had tried already to ask Aunt Easter what was wrong, maybe even tried to hug her or blow on her tears as Aunt Easter had so often done for little Ana, but Aunt Easter would not accept her comfort, only smiled at her with tears pouring from her eyes and told her in her happy-sad voice to eat her lunch, so now Ana was here at the table, sick to her stomach, unsure of what was happening, but certain she was the cause.

She must have asked David then, although she couldn’t remember that part in the rest of this brutally vivid memory. She couldn’t remember his answer, either, but she could remember staring at him in shock that he would say such a horrible thing, even if it was a joke…but it wasn’t. David ate his sandwich in big triumphant bites and drank his cocoa, letting the chocolate dribble down from the corners of his mouth like smears of blood, and little Ana got down from the table and ran to the bathroom in her bare feet and tried to throw up, because that was the only thing she could think to do with this awful feeling sitting like lead in her stomach and growing bigger and badder by the second. At last, she stuck her fingers down her throat, which succeeded only in making her choke and spit up a few drops of throat-burning bile. She collapsed beside the toilet, resting her head on the cold tiles, sweaty and shaky from the effort of trying to puke, and let the awfulness open all the way up and swallow her.

But no, she hadn’t cried. Not then, anyway. Maybe later, in some other memory that thankfully stayed lost.
“I did,” said Abby, bringing her out of that terrible time and into this one again. “I cried and cried…but I didn’t go back. And Freddy didn’t ask me to come back. I doubt I would have gone even if he had…and if I had, I doubt he would have let me come back. Not because he hated me, but because he knows what this place is, what it does to people, and he cared enough to get me the hell out before it ate us. And I was so awful that I let him. I took my son and I left my dear, awkward husband in this monstrous town all alone. I made him buy me a villa in France, in Italy, in Spain…and in Los Angeles, eventually, because I was tired of living in places where I couldn’t speak the language. He never complained. He bought me a house, a car, paid for child care, a housekeeper, classes in whatever silly thing I was interested in. Carter was my yoga instructor. Could I be more cliché?” Abby paused and turned a curious smile on Ana. “Do you have a special friend, Ana?”

“I have friends,” she said, but that sounded as evasive as it probably was. “I have…a special arrangement with one of them.”

“Is he good to you?”

“Yeah,” said Ana without testing the waters of that particular well of truth. But when Abby asked next what he did, this special friend of hers, it wasn’t Foxy she thought of at all. “He’s the lead guitar in a band.”

“Anyone I’ve heard of?”

‘Hell, you passed a billboard with his face on it on your way into town,’ Ana thought and said, “Well, they haven’t had a gig in years and they’ve never had an album, so…”

“But he’s still the lead guitar to you, huh? That’s so funny. I hadn’t pegged you as a groupie.”

“Is that what I am?” Ana had to laugh a little. “I got to admit, I always loved the band when I was a kid. Had a signed poster and everything.”

“Is he everything you thought he’d be?”

Ana’s smile twisted, but didn’t, couldn’t, fade away. “And more.”

“He’s lucky to have you. And you’re lucky to have him, you know. It takes a special sort of man to love us—” Abby glanced down, rubbing at her wrist. “—in our scars. Not in spite of them, you understand. In them. Have you ever seen the Mona Lisa? The cracks in the paint don’t diminish its value. They’re part of the art. Carter said that,” she added, rolling her eyes. “He was a bit of a gigolo in those days, but who am I to judge? I was a gold-digging adulteress. And a mother, trying to start over with a son who…I couldn’t quite reach. I knew there was something wrong with him by then, I mean really wrong, but I convinced myself he was just starved for a father figure. Carter was happy to fit the bill and they did seem to bond. And it was all right for a while. We had a good time together, playing house and spending my husband’s money, but then I got pregnant again. I knew Freddy would never leave Mammon to even find out, but Carter didn’t want to sneak around anymore. So I called and told him, and I was so sure there was going to be a terrible, ugly divorce and instead…he said he was happy for me,” Abby said in a wondering way, shaking her head. “He said he’d rather remain married, if that was all right with me. It was convenient for him. But he’d agree to a divorce if I insisted. Of course we didn’t insist, and he kept on taking care of us. Start-up money for Carter’s yoga center. A bigger house with room for the children. College funds. Parties at Disneyland. Rehab for Randy…and then lawyers and bail…and a funeral, finally. And I was glad. I grieved, but I was glad. I don’t believe in bad seeds and I know so much of his problems were my fault, but…I was so afraid of him by the end. For his cruelty and his violence, and because even at his worst, he could still be so damned charming. And smart. Not as smart as he was before
the drugs, but smart enough. If he’d been the one to do what Freddy insists Chad didn’t do, you
and I would have met at Freddy’s funeral.”

Something in the way she said that raised the fine hairs on the back of Ana’s neck. “Did he…Do
you think he…”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. No one ever came asking me questions and as far as I know, the only
one who ever suspected him was me, and only, only because he had so many girlfriends…but
never for very long…and if they ever came around again after he was done with them, they only
did it once. What are the odds? Granted, his ‘type’ was young runaways who didn’t use their real
name and who could have very easily just tumbled into another good time and forgotten all about
him. Chad’s mother was one of those. She never in her lifetime told Chad who his biological father
was or made any effort to collect from him…although by then, she had her hooks in what she must
have considered a fatter goose. But what about the rest of them? Fifty girls, a hundred, two
hundred, but only a few of them ever knocked on my door to tell me what a cheating bastard he
was, and they only did it once. Did they all really just move on with their lives? Or did Randy have
a special place where he took them…one last time? I don’t know.”

It was none of her business and this entire conversation had made Ana distinctly uncomfortable,
but still…

“How do you know Chad’s mom never told him about his father?”

“He told me when he tracked me down, looking for him. Apparently, she’d kept some…well.
Chad called them ‘love letters,’ but if they were anything like some of the others I stumbled across
in Randy’s room, they were more like a contract and lists of instructions. How to dress for him,
how to behave in public, how to…please him. His rules of surrender.”

Ana couldn’t help but wonder if any of them were the same as the rules for safety that hung on the
walls at Freddy’s, and in the dungeons that were occasionally found under them. Rule number one:
Don’t Scream.

“But they would have included his name and there only had to be one photo tucked away
somewhere for him to connect the dots. Randy was already gone by then, but he didn’t know that,
so when Chad came looking for his father, he found me. I was so shocked to see him—I thought it
was him. Even knowing he was dead, I still thought it was him, come to make sure I kept my
promise to him. And I let him in, so what does that say about me? I let him in and he sat in my
living room and told me the story of his life. A happy story, for the most part. A life of ease and
luxury that ended suddenly with the death of his parents.”

“How did that happen?” Ana asked suspiciously.

Abby let out a short breath that didn’t have enough humor for a laugh. “Is it terrible that that was
my first thought too? I’d only just met him. But it was a car wreck. No trouble with the brakes, no
trouble with the engine. Just two people coming home from dinner, and a heavier car veered into
their lane and hit them head-on. It happens every day. Tragic, but not suspicious, no matter how
much he seemed to enjoy his period of mourning. However, it turns out the man he thought was
his father was rather careless about money. He hadn’t updated his will since his previous marriage,
had allowed his life insurance policy to expire, and as for his business? Well, suffice to say, if he
hadn’t died when he did, he very likely would have gone to jail as soon as certain truths came to
light. There was a little money, but only a little, and before the year was out, the only thing
preventing Chad from living out of his car was a ninety-day grace period and the hope of a secret
bank account. Hence the desperate search through his mother’s documents that turned up the ‘love
letters’ that brought him to me. And I certainly didn’t like the way he was looking at my house…or
me…so I told him the first thing that came to mind, something stupid and sympathetic about how none of my money was mine either. And he’s charming, you know. Before I knew what I was saying, I’d told him about Freddy. I all but sent him here. Freddy saved my life, over and over and over…and I sent him a serpent’s tooth.”

As if summoned, Chad appeared outside, looking golden and relaxed and carefree as he escorted an assortment of star-eyed female cousins around the grounds, trailed at a very short distance by a tall, well-built ex-gigolo who knew all too well how young men and younger women think. He did not react when Abby raised her hand in a small wave; as promised, he never took his eyes off Chad.

“I wish Freddy would just throw him out,” Abby said softly, watching one of the teens sitting around the pool put away her phone and get up, drawn into the wake of Chad’s passage. “I know he’s offered him his pick of jobs, but Chad doesn’t want to work, not even if the most difficult thing he has to do is wear a suit and try not to fall asleep at the meetings. Freddy lets him travel whenever he wants and that gets rid of him for a while, but he always comes back and this time, I’m afraid he’s back for good. He doesn’t want to have to ask someone else to book a cruise or a penthouse suite at a five-star resort. He doesn’t want to settle for living in a mansion someone else owns or driving a car in someone else’s name. He doesn’t want a piece of the pie, no matter how big a piece it is. He wants all of it.”

“Well, maybe he’ll toe the line now that he knows he’s not getting ‘all,’ no matter what he does, and he won’t get any if he does something dumb again.”

“If he believed that, he’d leave and find another mark. He’s still here, playing the devoted grandson, which means he still thinks he has a shot at the grand prize.”

“He’s got to go through me first.”

Abby glanced at her. “He’ll try. I shouldn’t say that. I shouldn’t even think it, but God help me, I do. He believed you when you said you’d come after him if anything should happen to Freddy, anything at all.”

“Good, because I meant it.”

“I’m glad…but don’t misunderstand. That doesn’t mean he’ll stop. That means he’ll come after you first.”

“Yeah, we’ll see how that works out for him, when and if it ever happens,” said Ana, unimpressed. “I got a little too much on my plate right now to waste energy worrying about what that idiot might do. But—and I mean this in the nicest possible way—but I hope you’re not talking like this around anyone else. In the unlikely event that Chad should disappear for, you know…unknown reasons…this is the kind of talk that other people remember.”

“No. No, I never talk about him, except to Freddy. And you know how he is. He listens, so politely, but his mind is made up. He thinks he can save him. He really thinks all Chad needs is a second chance and someone who believes he can be a better man, with the right encouragement and the right opportunity.” Abby shook her head with a humorless huff as Chad walked on out of sight with his entourage and his shadow. “Chad isn’t the way he is because of a lack of nurturing encouragement or opportunities. There’s something wrong with him, something missing.”

“A fault in his code,” said Ana.

Abby looked at her sharply, then looked away again, rubbing at her wrist. “That’s what Erik used to say about Randy.”
She was saved from that awkward silence by the door opening again at the end of the hall. Shelly stepped out of the office, not quite staggering, but not too damn far from it. He forced a smile at Abby though, with lots of teeth to demonstrate how confident he was about his victory, and beckoned Ana with a forceful wave.

“Stark!” he called jovially. “You’ve cleaned up after fires before, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, come down here and tell this man you know what you’re doing. He doesn’t believe me.”

“Mr. Shelton, you quite mistake me.” Faust brought his chair to the doorway and out of that dark room into the sunlit hall, holding up one hand to shield his sensitive eyes where his dark glasses failed to protect them. “And I begin to wonder if you’re doing it deliberately. I am not accepting bids in this matter. I have made my arrangements. It is done. Mr. Pakusch and his team are already en route. They should arrive this afternoon.”

“Well, comp ‘em a tank of gas and turn ‘em around! I don’t understand why you’d want to hire on a bunch of outside scabs when you know you’ve got good men here!”

“You’ve gone to a great deal of effort to impress upon me how busy you are.”

“Now, sir, there is no job I would not postpone for you and I should hope you’d know that by now. Besides, if worse comes to worse, I can always hire on some temp labor. Well, I’ll tell you what,” he said with exasperated magnanimity. “Why don’t you put your Pushpin—”

“Pakusch.”

“Whoever he is. Put him and his people under me while they’re here. At least then I can be sure they’re getting the job done right.”

“Mr. Pakusch comes highly reviewed and highly recommended. I have no reservations about the quality of his work.”

“Well, I don’t know him!” Shelly declared. “And I’m not about to rent out my equipment to anyone I can’t trust to bring it back in working condition, so unless your Mr. Pretzel drove his ‘dozer down, where’s he going to go to get one? St. George? Hurricane? Because I know those men, too.”

“Are you threatening me, Mr. Shelton?” asked Faust, sounding nothing but curious and perhaps a little amused. “That’s rather bold for a man with two mortgages on his house.”

Shelly took a step back, physically and mentally, and tugged at his beard. “Course not,” he mumbled. “Course not, I’m just saying…I’m just saying that outsiders who don’t have a good reason to take care of their gear generally don’t. I depend on that equipment. At least let me put one of my men on this other fella’s crew to keep an eye on it. Hageman! You know Hageman! You trust him, don’t you?”

“Mr. Shelton—”

“Or Stark!” Shelly pointed back at her with a hand that visibly shook.

Faust looked at her and the uncompromising set of his features shifted to uncertainty.

Ana bit back a ‘Don’t involve me in this shit,’ and said instead, “Sir, can I talk to you for just a
second?"

“Later. Get down here and show the man your CDL! Tell him you can drive a dozer! What did this Pacman promise you as far as a timeline? Six weeks? Twelve? Stark can do it in four and you know it! Hell, she can do it in three. Stark, tell him you and my boys can have this whole mess cleaned up by the end of the month!”

Ana grit her teeth. “I have a CDL. I can drive a dozer. But I don’t have a month to put into a project right now. I told you, I need to go as soon as possible.”

“We work comes first, missy, you know that. You can take your little vacation after the job is done.”

“I can’t wait that long. I got to get out of here and back again before the snow drops.”

“What do you mean, ‘out?’” Shelly demanded. “You said ‘time off’! I thought you meant an afternoon! Where are you going?”

“That’s—” None of your goddamned business. “—personal,” Ana finished tightly.

“You know what else is personal? You ditching me with no warning for no reason, again! How long are you expecting me to pick up your slack this time?”

“Ditching you?” Ana echoed, then made herself stop there and refocus. “Two weeks.”

“Two weeks? What in sam hill are you doing for two weeks? You having surgery?”

“It’s a family emergency.”

Shelly tried out a frustrated bark badly disguised as a laugh. “What family?”

Faust looked at him.

Ana’s temper flared. “That is the second time you’ve said that and I must just be too stupid to figure out why it’s funny. You want to explain it to me?”

“I think I’d also like to hear this,” Abby said, folding her arms. “There’s nothing I like better than a good old-fashioned dead-family joke.”

Shelly tried to exchange a ‘Women! No sense of humor,’ glance with Faust, got a really good look at him, and immediately backed off that track, mumbling something about how he hadn’t meant anything by it and she must have misheard him.

“What happened?” Faust asked.

“Friend of mine had a bad fall,” said Ana. “I just need to go stay with him and, you know, help him put himself back together.”

“Well, which is it?” Shelly asked gruffly. “Your friend or your family?”

Ana’s temper slipped another notch closer to the red-line. “My friends are my family,” she snapped.

“And I’m your employer, so don’t raise your voice at me. You’re not getting two weeks to go run off with your ‘friend.’” He made air-quotes on the last word, like the sneer in his tone wasn’t emphasis enough to fully express what he really thought she’d be doing. “I’ll float you a four-day weekend, paid, but between now and then, I expect you to buckle down and earn it.”
“Sir, you are not hearing me. I am taking two weeks,” Ana said again. “The whole thing. I’m not asking you to pay for it, but I am leaving to go and take care of my injured friend. You can make that hard or you can make that easy for me, but you cannot make me stay.”

Shelly’s red face darkened.

Ana refused to re-engage, but she did hope to soften the blow with her next words. “Mr. Faust?”

“Yes?”

“There are five men, most of them with families to feed, who work for this guy,” said Ana. “The work they do now is going to be buying Christmas for those families. Okay?”

A faint wrinkle of exasperation folded itself into and out of Faust’s face. “You said it yourself once, Miss Stark. There is no good time.”


Abby made a small humming sound and turned, smiling, to stare out the window some more.

Faust sat in his chair, expressionless, for a long time. Light flashed across his dark glasses when he looked at Shelly again. “The community center is in need of some refurbishing before the holiday season descends upon us. New paint. Renovated restrooms. Concessions stand. General repairs and finishing touches. All expenses paid, of course.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I’ll speak with the council and arrange for permissions. That may take a few days. In the meantime, Mr. Pakusch and his crew will arrive this afternoon, and they’ll need to rent their equipment from you. You will cooperate fully and bill me, through the usual professional channels. Never again at my home. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Faust waited a few beats, then said, “Was there anything else?”

“Oh. Ah…no. I mean to say, it sure has been nice chatting with you,” Shelly said, showing his teeth, as any trapped animal will do, “but I have to be getting back to the office now. Lots to do and the days are only getting shorter. Hope to see you at the tree-lighting this year. It…ah…It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“The tree is dead and, I suspect, indifferent to whomever pushes the button that illuminates its corpse, but that’s a kind sentiment. Thank you. Miss Stark, when does your leave begin?”

Ana looked at Shelly.

He glowered back at her, but drew himself up with some semblance of authority and gave her a nod. “It might as well start now, since it’s an emergency and all. In the meantime, I’ve got work to do.”

“We won’t keep you then,” said Faust. “Abby, would you be so kind as to show Mr. Shelton out?”

“Gladly.” Abby touched Ana’s arm, offering a warm smile and a whispered, “And then I’ll go check on the children and let you two catch up. It was good to see you again.”

“Thanks. You, too.”
“And you, I can’t see the back of soon enough,” Abby continued lightly, waving Shelly on ahead of her. “Enjoy your reprieve and I hope you know it’s the last one you’re getting and you owe it all to her.”

He knew. Shelly didn’t say anything as he shouldered past her and onward out of the house with Abby strolling ahead of him, but he knew and whatever else he was feeling, it wasn’t gratitude.

“I’m sure he just forgot he was my ride back to town,” said Ana, staring after him long after his footsteps had faded from hearing.

“I’ll page my driver for you.”

“This is where I’m probably supposed to protest, but I really don’t want to make that walk, so yeah, please do. How are you doing?” she asked, heading toward him.

“Very well, thank you. And yourself?”

“It’s not small-talk, old man. How are you really doing? You look tired.”

“I am, and in considerable pain,” he replied in the same polite tone with which he’d told her he was very well, “but glad to be home. For all that modern medicine can offer, nothing restores one as much as to sleep in one’s own bed again after a long absence.”

Ana had rarely lived in one place long enough to even feel like she had her ‘own’ bed, but she nodded anyway. “Hospitals aren’t the most restful places.”

“That is certainly true. With the children visiting, I doubt I shall find much quiet here either, but it’s good to have them regardless. The house feels very different with them here. Despite that I myself grew up in this house, I’ve never thought of it as a particularly good place for children. It’s always seemed so dark,” he mused, gazing out the sun-dazzled windows that entirely lined one side of the hall. “But children do bring their own light with them, don’t they? Even into the darkest places. It’s what makes them such attractive prey to the creatures that hunt by night.”

“Abby said you released yourself,” said Ana, gently steering him away from that line of conversation. “Do the words ‘against medical advice’ appear anywhere on your discharge papers?”

“I couldn’t say, I haven’t read them. Nevertheless, I do not consider my actions rash. I was told last week that I might be released this morning, and I’ve no doubt I would have been, if not for some rather odd behavior I exhibited Saturday evening and some…shall we say unusual? Unusual readings their monitoring equipment recorded.”

“Oh. Yeah, that. Oops.”

“Oh, yeah, that. Oops.” he echoed gravely, swinging the chair around in the wide hall to follow her into the office. “They were naturally concerned and wished to keep me for further observation. However, I knew their caution was unwarranted, even if I did not care to tell them why. I successfully argued that I had hired a nurse, so I could be observed at home as well and more comfortably as much as in their facility. They released me into her care more than my own recognizance, I think. I would introduce you, but she’s elsewhere,” he added. “McCall is showing her the house. That takes a while.”

“I’ll bet. What’s she like?”

“She’s not from Mammon, although she was born in Hurricane so I do know her, somewhat. I believe her mother’s first cousin was a Pearson, but she’s a Stannick now. Stephanie Stannick. She wants me to call her Stevie.”
Something in the way he said that prompted her to ask, with a smile, “Do you?”

“I do,” he said gravely. “I find that level of unwarranted informality deeply distressing, but it’s a temporary situation and I shall persevere.”

“Is she nice?”

“I’ve no idea, really. She presents herself well, but how one presents themselves in—” He gestured at the walls around them. “—some circumstances is not necessarily indicative of their true character. I learned that rather late in life, but I did ultimately learn. In any case, it is not necessary that she be nice, only competent and not perpetually underfoot.”

“Well, here’s hoping she does her job and gets out of your hair soon,” Ana said, pretending to look around the office like she’d never seen it before, because for all he knew, she hadn’t. “So…Shelly mentioned you had some drama over the weekend at one of your pizzerias. Is it bad?”

He didn’t answer right away. In fact, he was quiet so long, she turned around, bracing herself against his knowing stare and maybe even a confrontation, but he seemed to be thinking it over.

“If by that you refer to the extent of the damage done,” he said at last, “then yes, it is bad. If you are asking the impact upon my life…and the lives of others…then no. No, it is not bad, certainly not as bad as I had feared on first hearing the news, and is, in fact, perhaps good. The building is destroyed, of course, but destroyed in such a way as to continue to function for a little while. Long enough, at least, to complete its purpose.”

“Shelly said it was a fire.”

“Yes, a fire, which the arson investigator tells me was deliberately set through the use of cheap accelerants, likely gasoline, and which our local sheriff assures me was the result of a careless child’s unattended candle.”

“Yeah, I got the ‘youthful shenanigans’ speech too, when I used the a-word. You going to get in trouble for that?”

“How do you mean?”

“You said arson investigator. Do they think you did it?”

“For what?” he asked scornfully. “The insurance money? A paltry sum, scarcely a quarter of a million dollars. To quote the vulgarities of my youth, I shit bigger than that, Miss Stark.”

She was never going to get used to hearing him swear and it was always going to tickle her.

“How do you mean?”

“You said arson investigator. Do they think you did it?”

“For what?” he asked scornfully. “The insurance money? A paltry sum, scarcely a quarter of a million dollars. To quote the vulgarities of my youth, I shit bigger than that, Miss Stark.”

She was never going to get used to hearing him swear and it was always going to tickle her.

“However, the investigator’s job is only to tell me how the fire started and to ascertain whether or not I was involved. I was not. Therefore, it is, my legal advisors tell me, entirely up to me whether or not to investigate further. It would make the sheriff happy if I elected not to. I think he has some suspects in mind,” Faust said, sliding his wheelchair up to the supplicant’s side of the desk and gesturing toward the tall-backed leather chair on the other side. “So have I.”

Ana did not flinch. She sat down and made herself comfortable, exploring the artifacts on the shelves behind her like a totally innocent person. “Oh yeah? Who do you think did it?”

“As I’ve every intention of letting the matter drop, it scarcely signifies. The effort it would cost to bring those responsible to court would be far better spent finishing the job they started before more lives are lost. And it would only be court, not justice. There is no justice for the wronged in
Mammon,” he said. “Which is why they set fires. No matter. The building is of no consequence. All that matters now is that it be swept away as cleanly and as quickly as possible, before irreparable damage is done. And that is why Mr. Shelton could not have this job.”

Ana snorted and shook her head. “Can’t argue that. I could describe the man in a thousand words and not one of them would quick or clean.”

“You mistake my meaning,” Faust said, then tipped his head, thinking. “Although you may be right. However, what I meant was merely that Mr. Shelton knows this town. He’s been in that building. And if he had the task of cleaning away the wreckage and he found the remains of a stairwell, presently buried in ashes and debris…well, he would almost certainly clear it and explore further. And whatever may be lairing down in that dark place will surely devour him and crawl out, never to be trapped again. You don’t believe any of this, of course.”

Ana thought of Blue under the tarp in her garage and said nothing.

“Fortunately, it is not always necessary to believe in monsters in order to contain them. Mr. Pakusch, for example, has not been told there are monsters in the basement, only that I have used said basement to store unsavory things that I do not wish to become public. He does not question this. He will not clear the stairwell in accordance with the laws of the state of Utah. He will instead fill it in with industrial foam, of the sort one uses to close dangerous mines, and then cover the entire area with a ten-inch slab of concrete, cover that with two hundred tons of earth, and leave it to be buried by the wind and the desert. For this, for the false account of his labor he will give to the proper authorities, and for a legally-binding non-disclosure agreement, he will be paid a great deal of money. Those who grew up in Mammon will no doubt always remember what stood on that barren plot, but they will never know that the monsters they laugh with one another about walk there still, below their feet. Is your friend very injured?” he asked, without a pause, as if the two subjects were connected in his mind.

Ana nodded. “Bad fall. Not as bad as yours, but bad enough. I really do think I can have him back on his feet in one week, if all goes well, but…you know how it is. Doesn’t always go well.”

“Truer words are seldom spoken. I would like to help, if I can. With your permission—and his, of course—I would like to contact his hospital and arrange to have his expenses paid.”

“That’s…generous.”

Faust nodded, frowning at her. “And yet you are about to refuse.”

“He’s proud,” Ana says tactfully. “He doesn’t even want my help, not really. I’m pretty sure he’d never take anything from you.”

“I will respect that,” Faust said after a moment. “But I would still like to help you. Open the bottom left-hand drawer, if you will. There is a false bottom. Remove it and press the button you see.”

Ana stared at him.

He frowned, thought, and amended, “Please.”

She couldn’t protest, shouldn’t even really be hesitating. She wasn’t supposed to know what was in that drawer or what pushing that button would do. Ana did as she was told, step by step, guided through the process of opening the drawer, the bookcase and the secret safe on the other side—the Great Caper that had swallowed up the first part of that whole awful night, just…just handed to her.

“What now?” she asked, staring in at the contents of the safe, seeing only the void left by the
money she’d already stolen.

“In the back, you should see a metal box with two locks.” Faust was quiet for a long time, long enough that she stepped back and looked out to see if he was even still there. He was, although only in the most physical sense. His head was turned, dark glasses fixed upon the display case holding the Freddy-bear plushie and one sneaker with rainbow laces. He must have seen her reflected in the glass. For a moment, his silence somehow deepened, and then he visibly made his decision.

“Beside it,” he said, “you will find a number of black leather bags. Take one and fill it with as much money as it will hold.”

“The hell I will,” Ana said, startled.

“Please. It is appalling enough that a few thousand dollars can mean the difference between surviving a fall and recovering from one. So can pride and that is much worse. Get your friend the help he needs. Keep the rest or give it away or fold it into a thousand paper cranes and make a wish. Money never mattered to me, but it does matter. Take it, so I can say I did…some good with it.”

Damn it.

Ana found the bags and slowly began to pack away bricks of cash. One…two…five…

At ten stacks—twenty thousand dollars—she hesitated and looked back.

“As much as it will hold,” Faust said again.

It held eight hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in bundled hundred-dollar bills. Given her history with Rider, it was not the most money she’d ever had or even held at one time, but the fact that she’d done nothing to earn it made it weigh much more than mere paper. As she zipped the bag shut, she couldn’t help but think that if it all went south for Mammon, she could probably live off this for several years.

That thought only led to the unpleasant reminder that Mammon was broke. Faust had been carefully, quietly and deliberately pinching off its financial lifelines for decades, to the point where it was probably impossible for the town to save itself from ruin. The council had no choice but to ask the man they knew damn well was behind it all for help. And he said no. And then he turned around and gave Ana, of all fucking people, over three quarters of a million dollars. And yeah, sure, it was his money and he didn’t have to give it to anyone, but those were some fucked-up priorities by anyone’s standards.

Didn’t stop her from taking it, though. And instead of giving every man, woman and child in Mammon three thousand dollars so they could all have a merry Christmas, she was keeping it on behalf of her robot friends, who had no bills to pay and who felt no hunger or cold. So who was she to judge? She had some pretty fucked-up priorities of her own.

When she emerged from the safe, Faust was just putting away his phone.

“Thank you,” he said, as if she were the one doing him the favor. “I’ve paged my driver. She’s on her way. I presumed you would want to leave as soon as you can.”

Sure, like she didn’t feel bad enough. Now he wanted her to just take the money and run.

“I can stay a little longer,” she said.
“And I would very much like you to,” he replied. “But your family needs you. And my wife is here with her family. I think I will never see them again after they leave, so I intend to enjoy their company as much as I can. But I should very much like to see you again, when you return.”

He said it like he didn’t think she would.

“I’d love that. You got a date for the tree-lighting ceremony?”

“Certainly not.” He looked mildly alarmed. “I hardly think that would be appropriate, for a number of reasons, least of all that I’m married.”

“Not a date-date,” she amended with a smile. “I just meant I’ll go with you, if you want. As your friend.”

He processed that and finally said, “I would like that,” in an uncharacteristically halting way. He took another moment to gather his thoughts, then added, “It will be on the evening of the 28th. The lighting itself happens at nine, but the campaign dinner begins at seven, and there is a short mingling time before then. I usually arrive at six.”

“Then you can pick me up at a quarter to six,” she said. “Formalwear?”

“I always assume so unless I’m told otherwise.” He frowned. “Standards have changed since I was a young man, however. I’m frequently overdressed.”

“Well, if you’re going to be in your top hat, the least I can do is wear a gown. We can be overdressed together,” she said, making a mental note to buy something that did not show a scandalous amount of cleavage. Maybe Freddy would help her pick one out. He had an eye for class. “Take care of yourself, old man.”

“Take care of your friend.”

He offered his hand for goodbye. She shook it, then bent and kissed his cheek. His fingers trembled in her careful grip; he held very still until she straightened up.

“Drive safely,” he said in a low, hoarse voice, and released her.

* * *

It always takes longer to start a trip than anyone ever thinks it will. Prepping the truck (which by itself involved several trips to various shops, cutting view-ports in the sides, and installing fold-down benches and safety restraints for the animatronics), then sorting out the required parts and loading them up, and finally packing a bag for herself took too much out of the day. Ana’s GPS assured her she could get there in less than three hours, but there was no point showing up on Yoshi’s doorstep at ten o’clock at night. She settled for giving him a call to make sure tomorrow morning was still okay—it was—and spent the rest of the night at Aunt Easter’s house, making sure it was clean and all the doors were locked. At midnight, restless and beginning to imagine footsteps in the creaking boards and knocking pipes of an old, empty house, she called out a goodbye and an I’ll-be-back to hiding Plushtrap and returned to Freddy’s. She sat with the bear for a while, watching the dark road and going over and over the travel plans until he gently told her to go to bed. She tried to sleep and failed, played some Mario Kart with Chica and lost spectacularly, tried again, failed again, snuck through the Parts Room into Foxy’s cabin, snuck back and slept like a stone until her phone’s alarm woke her just before dawn.
Chica had hot coffee already in her thermos and was just taking her breakfast cake out of the Easy Bake oven. Ana grabbed an armload of energy drinks for the road while Foxy and Bonnie carried Freddy to the truck and loaded themselves up, then double-checked the parts she was leaving behind to make sure she wasn’t forgetting anything, and then just stood in the camera’s spotlight in an otherwise dark room, listening to the silence. She thought it would feel different, now that the building was truly empty, and it did, but not the way she thought it would.

Out of nowhere, she thought, ‘Everything’s going to change when I get back.’

The camera whined as if agreeing.

She looked at it.

It looked at her.

She turned around and left, locking the loading dock behind her. She climbed into the back of the truck to make sure they were all secure, then shut the door and locked it, swung herself up behind the wheel and buckled herself in. She checked her watch—six a.m.—and slid the window open between the cab and the cargo hold. “This is it, guys. Vegas or bust. Everybody ready?”

“Homing protocols on standby and we’re all buckled in,” said Freddy. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

So she did. It was still dark and already raining. What little part of Ana’s attention was not focused on the road was already at their destination, running scenarios, trying to plan for every possible question and be ready with every possible lie. She did not look back and did not see the Puppet crouched at the edge of the roof, beside the restored sign.

The rain hit its cracked, smiling mask and rolled down its painted cheeks like tears, but it didn’t feel it or shiver in the biting wind. It watched, immobile, until the truck turned and passed out of sight, and then it returned to the ventilation shaft it had crawled out of and slipped back in. After a few twists and turns in the dark (retracing its steps once; it was not as familiar with these ducts as the crawlway), the Puppet crawled out of the air conditioning system and into the Party Room. After carefully replacing the vent cover, it swung itself lithely across the ceiling and behind the curtain to the stage which had become Ana’s bedroom. It passed through the prop wardrobe into the backstage area, and leapt nimbly up to the ceiling again, slipping easily through the only access hatch to the crawlway that Ana had not welded shut—the one in the Parts Room, where she had not been allowed access. From there, it was just a few more minutes crawling through a much more familiar maze until it came to the end and dropped down into the basement.


The dead man in the rotting rabbit suit didn’t even look up from the monitors where he sat, flipping from empty room to empty room. “They gone?”

The Puppet nodded from a wary distance.

The dead man glanced around, eyed the space between them, and huffed out an irritated laugh. “I’m not mad, you know. Don’t look at me like that, I’m not! She said where she was going, to some guy in Vegas. She’s going to fix up the band and then she’s bringing them back.”

The Puppet nodded, but came no closer.

“She is,” the dead man drawled. “She—shut up! All of you, sit down and be quiet and that’s an
order! Sheesh. She only packed a few tools and Bonnie left his guitar, so they’re definitely coming back. I just want to know when. Any signs?”

The Puppet made a few vague motions that amounted to a shrug.

“She took a lot of clothes, so it’s at least a few days,” the dead man mused. “Well, however much time it is, it’s going to go by fast, so we’re going to have to make it count. She almost certainly took my keys, so that leaves Freddy’s. Can you get over there before it gets light?”

The Puppet shook its head.

The dead man glanced at it, rotting satin lips pulling away from its stained metal teeth in a scowl. “Well…Tonight then. Tonight, just as soon as it’s dark, you get over there and this time, you do not come back without those keys. They’re there, somewhere.”

The Puppet gestured hesitantly.

“Yeah, well, look again. Check the safe this time. I know, I know,” he snapped as the Puppet’s mute protests intensified. “He changed the combination. But Freddy’s a creature of habit, always has been. It’s not a random number. He doesn’t believe in random numbers. It’s just not my birthday anymore. So try his. Try yours. Try David’s.” The discolored plastic eyes shifted to the monitors, where the screen now showed him a purple curtain, pulled slightly aside so that a narrow stripe of Ana’s bedroom in the Party Room was visible. “Try hers,” he said. “And remember, military dates. Day-month-year. Full year. Freddy doesn’t do things by halves.”

The Puppet nodded, thin shoulders slumped, eyes downcast in its perpetually smiling face.

He glanced at it, rolled his plastic eyes and sat back with an exasperated wheeze. “You know what they say,” he said, patting one tattered thigh. “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. Come here, baby. Let’s kill a little time.”

The Puppet crawled eagerly onto his lap, stroking the threadbare head with one clawed hand while tugging at the suit’s loin-plate with the other. The dead man shifted impatiently, craning its rusty neck to see over the Puppet’s insistent nuzzling at the monitors. The dining room. Half a dozen tables arranged in rows, every inch covered in endoskeleton bones, pumps, gears and servos. The parts themselves did not interest him; the auxiliary Press behind him could stamp out anything he wanted. It was the parts he didn’t see that had all his attention now as the Puppet arched and writhed atop him. The parts he didn’t see because Ana took them with her.

“She’s going to fix them,” he whispered, gripping at the Puppet’s narrow hips, forcing it into rough rhythm. He felt nothing, but he went through the motions, as automatic as any animatronic program. “She’s gone to fix them and then she’s coming back. And I’ll be waiting for her. We’ll all be waiting and we’ll all be together again, after all these years. You and me…and mommy’s little boy…and daddy’s little girl…” His outer jaws widened in a grin, showing some of the browned teeth of the skull inside the rabbit’s head. “…and we are going to be one big happy fucking family even if it kills her.”
Ana’s GPS had promised the drive was less than three hours, so Ana planned for four, but at the three-hour mark, she was still in Utah. Away from Mammon, city-traffic was full of commuters who were all convinced they were going to heaven and didn’t mind who they took with them. Exits were closed. Detours were confusingly marked, if at all. Ana had years of experience driving in Los Angeles, but she’d gotten too damn used to Mammon’s empty streets and relaxed atmosphere. By the time the first hour was behind her, she had a splitting stress headache on top of everything else.

Even if the highway had been empty, she would have been late. As much as she wanted to get there, this was a heavily-loaded unfamiliar truck on unfamiliar roads in heavy rain. She took it slow, stayed alert and drove defensively, but no matter what she did, it could never be careful enough to appease the nervous bear in the back. Anytime she changed lanes or had to brake suddenly to avoid hitting some other jackhat, or hell, if the road itself just curved a little too much, she could expect a knock on the cab window, followed by Bonnie’s increasingly long-suffering voice passing on Freddy’s request that they stop somewhere because ‘she’ needed a break.

She tried not to let herself get too impatient with him, she really did. She understood that this was his first road trip, since he’d been shut down for transport in the past (something she came to appreciate more and more as these delays stacked up). He was making a hell of an effort here and the least she could do was meet him halfway, so yeah, she pulled over at a lot of scenic turnouts and read a lot of historical markers through the viewing holes as Chica exclaimed excitedly over everything she saw.

But it was easy to be sympathetic for the first two or three stops. After five or six, sympathy was in short supply. With eight came annoyance and by the tenth, she was just trying not to swear at him.

At last she came to the mountains, where the storm that had been following her since leaving Mammon turned to flurries of snow and sheeting ice, and the next time that knock came on the window behind her, she told Bonnie flatly that she was not going to stop in the pass and to quit asking or so help her God, she’d go right off the edge of one of these narrow winding roads and plummet a thousand feet down a steep icy slope and explode on the rocks at the bottom. She needed her goddamn concentration for other things, so they’d better find their fucking happy places and leave her the fuck alone.

“You heard her,” she heard Bonnie say in a tone that made it plain he had reached his limit with this shit, too. “Just deal with it.”

The window shut.

Feeling just the tiniest bit guilty, Ana cranked up the radio so the animatronics in the back had something else to listen to besides an engine and her attitude, and drove on.

It was indeed a long, steep, narrow, winding road and Ana was sharing it with way too many other vehicles, and the weather just got worse and worse and worse until all at once, she came down through the clouds and out into a sunny, cold November morning. The tension that had locked up her muscles for the last hour finally began to ease up. From here, it should be smooth riding right
up until the invisible border, where Nevada waited to welcome her.

Knock-knock on the cab window.

Ana took a deep breath, let it out slow, and slid it open. “Yeah?”

In a cheerful don’t-kill-the-messenger tone, Bonnie said, “Freddy thinks you should take a break.”

Ana bit back the first thing that sprang to mind and said instead, “Tell Freddy I appreciate his input, but I don’t need a break and I’m going to keep driving.”

“Ana says—” Bonnie began.

“Tell her yes, she does,” Freddy interrupted from further back in the truck. “She’s been driving for five hours straight.”

“Freddy says—”

“Oh I have not. I’ve taken a baker’s goddamn dozen breaks, which is the only reason it’s even taken five hours, and for crying out loud, we’ll be there by noon! Just wait!”

“She says—”

“No,” growled Freddy, “we’ll be there at fifteen minutes after noon, because you’re going to stop. Now.”

“He says—”

“Fifteen minutes more or less is not going to make any damn difference!”

“No, it isn’t, so pull over! That’s an order!”

“Okay, well, you two clearly don’t need me in the middle,” Bonnie remarked and moved away from the window.

Ana had a few choice words that she didn’t bother to mutter all the way under her breath, but there was a scenic turn-out just ahead, so she took it (braking a little harder than was strictly necessary). She got out of the driver’s chair, refusing to admit even to herself how good it felt to stretch her legs, and walked around to the back. She unlocked the door, pushed it up and climbed in.

Chica was already out of her safety restraints and plastered to the wall, peering through the view-holes with an excess of fascination so that she could pretend she was not about to be trapped in an extremely small space with two fighting friends. Bonnie was also off the bench, leaned up against the cab wall with his arms folded and one leg kicked casually over the other to watch the fireworks. Foxy was still seated, slumped and staring at the floor, looking like he’d rather be anywhere but here.

Ana checked on the storage chests holding all the parts, tightened a few straps, then sat down in Chica’s place across from Freddy. “What’s going on, big bear?”

Freddy grumbled without words deep in his speaker, his ears showing some inner conflict, but he didn’t drop his gaze.

“I realize this is probably your first car-ride and maybe it’s a little scary for you, but no matter what you’re thinking, I’m a good driver,” said Ana.
“I’m sure you are.”

“Oh, you are, huh? Because you asking me to pull over every fifteen minutes for the last hundred miles sure doesn’t give me that impression. So what is the problem here?”

“Hey,” said Bonnie. He nodded, pointing with both ears at Foxy, still in that uncharacteristic slouch beside Ana with his eyes fixed on the ground between his bare metal feet. “Guess who gets carsick?”

Ana blinked, then swiveled around and stared.

Foxy’s ear, already low, folded back and flattened, but otherwise he ignored her and Bonnie both.

She looked at Freddy; he grumbled again and dropped his eyes.

“No, he doesn’t,” Ana said inanely. “How the hell would that even work?”

“No idea,” said Bonnie. “And he’s a pirate, too. You’d think riding in a car would be easier than sailing on a ship, right? I mean, ships don’t just go siiiide to siiiiide, they also go uuuuuup and dooooww…”

Foxy bent a little further over his knees, opened his jaws wide and made a metallic yarking sound that was almost funny for the first startled second that she heard it, but which quickly lost its humor as she watched a man who didn’t need to breathe actually choke on puke that wasn’t there for nearly a full minute.

“My God,” she said when it was finally over and Foxy was once again slumped on his elbows, cooling fan laboring. “Are you okay?”

“Right as rain, luv,” he rasped and made a spitting sound. “I can taste it. Lord love a guppy, how does that work?”

“Try not to think about it too hard. Just take a break, give your guts a chance to settle—”

“I’m settled,” Foxy said and spit again. “Just get us there, so’s I can get me land legs back. Another hour, ye said? Can a bloke hope for long, flat, straight roads?”

She tried to call up a mental picture of the map ahead of her, but saw nothing but a squiggly purple line. She knew sitting blind in a box was only making it worse and it might help if Foxy sat up front with her, but she couldn’t take the risk. It was one thing to glimpse an eye peeking at you from the side of an unmarked truck as you were driving down the highway; if a driver happened to look over and see a full-sized anthropomorphic fox riding along in the passenger seat of that truck…well, that was the kind of thing that made even the staunchest hang-up-and-drive proponent pull out a phone and start recording.

“I don’t know what the roads are like,” she said. “You might want to shut down until we get there.”

He shook his head at once, then grimaced, hugging at his abdomen like it hurt, and slowly nodded.

“See you on the flip side, Captain,” she said sympathetically and popped his chest case open.

He sagged into his restraints at once, head lolling, bent arm slipping off his leg to dangle over the truck’s floor. Ana patted his unfeeling shoulder and got up, reaching through the small window into the cab for her day pack in the passenger seat. She managed to fish out a sweater and came
back to tie the sleeves around his neck with the bulk of the sweater hanging down, preventing his
chest panel from closing and waking him up. Her hands were shaking, she noticed. Low blood
sugar, maybe. She should get something to eat at the next town, but watching the road roll by for
hours had left her feeling a little sick to her stomach.

“You okay?” Bonnie asked.

“What?” Ana looked at him, showing a few teeth in a defensive smile. “Am I talking to myself
again?”

“No, you’re sweating.”

“It’s hot back here,” she said mechanically, rubbing a hand over her face. But it wasn’t, despite
four animatronics regularly venting their cooling systems in an enclosed space. The truck wasn’t
made for hauling temperature-sensitive materials and even before Ana had drilled holes in the
walls, it couldn’t hold on to heat. She couldn’t say it was all that better in the cab, because the
heater fogged up the windows and she needed to see more than she needed to keep warm. She
wasn’t hot…but she was sweating. It didn’t necessarily mean anything, until you added up her
headache, shakiness and sour stomach. Maybe she was coming down with something.

‘Or coming off something,’ the voice of her conscience murmured.

‘Fuck that, I am not an alcoholic,’ she thought and gave Foxy’s restraints a quick checking-over,
changing the subject. “You should have told me he was having trouble.”

“He didn’t want us to say anything,” said Freddy. “And believe it or not, I do occasionally try to
respect my family’s feelings. I just didn’t realize…I should have known the impression I was
giving you. I apologize for that. I have no problems with your driving.”

“We’re good, bear. It’s all good.” Ana gave the last strap a last tug and offered Freddy a weary
smile. “We’re almost there. And hopefully, in a week, we’ll be on our way home. And a year from
now, this is just going to be the part we leave out of the story because it pisses Foxy off.”

“Are you kidding?” Bonnie snorted. “I’m going to write a song about it. The Ballad of the Carsick
Sailor.”

“Be nice,” sighed Chica.

“I am going to sing it in the nicest possible way every single time I see him for the rest of our
lives.”

“You two are such children.”

“Okay, well, I got to get back to it,” Ana began.

“Wait,” said Freddy. “We should have talked about this before now, but…when we get there…
we’re just animatronics, you understand? Highly advanced, but no more than that.”

“Of course,” she said, surprised he even thought he had to warn her. “What, did you think I was
going to introduce you and there’d be handshakes all around?”

“No, but…” Freddy’s eyes whined, pupils growing large and slow to shrink down again. “This
man is an expert in the field and we…we were famous, once. I don’t want him to recognize us, but
he might, no matter what you do. If he does, our safety could depend upon him believing that our
capabilities were grossly exaggerated back in the day, and that we were never more than a
mechanical magician’s stage props, cleverly rigged to misdirect our audience into believing we
could do things no machine could ever do.”

“He needs to believe you can do at least some of it,” Ana countered. “If he doesn’t think it’s
possible for you to walk, how hard will he try to put you back together in walking condition? What
we need to sell him on is that you guys can’t think. And that’s on you, big bear. I can tell the guy
you’re just a bunch of fancy wind-up toys, but he’s going to be watching you watch him and he’s
going to draw his own conclusions.”

He grunted sour agreement. “I used to be good at pretending to be lifeless, but I’ve fallen out of the
habit. I’m astonished we fooled you as long as we did.”

“So am I,” she admitted. “You’re a great magician, a decent singer and a snappy dresser—”

Freddy immediately reached up and took his hat off.

“—but you’re a terrible actor,” she finished, still trying to smile like it didn’t bother her at all to
watch him reduce himself from the Freddy she knew to…just another bear.

“Let’s hope I’ve improved,” he grumbled, now loosening his tie. He pulled it away, carefully
rolled it up and placed it in the hat, which he then passed to her. “And let’s hope he’s an honest
man who genuinely intends to help you, but I have to consider that he might not be. Whether he
knows who we are or not, if he’s as good as he says he is, he’ll know the technology that built us is
worth something. Our material components alone have to be worth millions. I have to consider that
he might try to take us from you. And if he does—”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Freddy put his ears down and raised his voice, pushing through his prepared speech like he was
punching through a wall. “If he does, there’s going to be a fight.”

“You’re damn right there is. Nobody’s taking you away from me, bear, and anyone who tries is
going to get a bandsaw to the face. I killed one guy to get you this far, you think I’m going to puss
out now?”

Freddy shut his mouth and looked at her. They all looked at her.

Ana shrugged one shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think he’ll try. I’ve got a pretty good
danger-radar, even if I don’t always listen to it, and he seems all right to me from the few phone
calls we’ve had, but hey, I’ve been fooled before. He’s got some kind of history with Rider, so the
odds of him being totally on the up-and-up are slim to none. And you’re right, you’re worth a lot of
money. That alone might be enough to tempt him to get the jump on me at some point.” Thoughts
of Blue intruded, never far from her mind—that last lunge in the Parts Room…and everything else
that came after it. She shook her head to dispel the memory and said, “But he’ll never get you away
from me. If he tries, one of us is going to die and you’ve seen him.” She laughed through her nose
and spread her arms a little. “You’ve seen me. Who would you put money on, bear?”

“I don’t want you to fight. I want you to run.”

Ana queued up a “Hell, no,” but swallowed it when Freddy’s huge paw seized her little human
hand.

“I need to know you’ll run,” he said, as quietly as his deep voice allowed. “I don’t want to hurt
you.”
“Come on, bear. You’re working yourself up over nothing. It’s going to be okay.”

“I’m trying to believe that, but right now, I’m in three pieces and far from home and I’m…”

“Not in control?” Ana guessed.

“Afraid,” he finished, killing her crooked smile. “Not of what’s going to happen, but of what I might do if the worst does. What I might do…to you. Yes, I know, you’re not afraid of me,” he sighed as Ana did her best not to roll her eyes. “Years of looking at violent graffiti has led me to believe I am so much scarier than I am…but it worries me just the same. So for my peace of mind, promise me you’ll run. Please.”

She placed her free hand atop his and gave it a little pat that hopefully served as both comfort and a reminder that she was breakable. “I promise.”

His eyes moved left and right, reading her.

She smiled, trying to look honest. Maybe she was even successful. He relaxed his grip and took his hand back, anyway.

“I’m sure I’m worrying over nothing,” he said. “I’ll even let you tell me you told me so once we’re safely back home.”

“Deal.” Ana got up, beckoning to a reluctant Chica. “Back in the saddle, sister. If we have the time, I’ll try and take a more scenic route on the way back, but right now, I just need to get there so I can —”

She broke off there, suddenly flustered.

Freddy’s facial mechanisms whined, arranging themselves in what should have been a smile. “Take a break?” he suggested.

She forced a small laugh. “Yeah,” she said and then quickly climbed out of the hold and locked it down. Let him believe she was embarrassed because he’d caught her almost admitting she wanted the break she’d refused to take when he was the one telling her she needed it. Maybe it was even a little bit true, but it wasn’t what she’d almost said. It wasn’t rest she wanted. It was a drink.

‘Focus,’ she told herself brusquely, returning to the cab for the last leg of this interminable journey. She put Freddy’s hat with the tie tucked inside on top of her day pack and climbed up to the driver’s chair. ‘You’ve got enough real problems, you don’t need to go making up new ones. You’re not an alcoholic. And if you’re really worried that you might be drinking too much—you’re not, but if you’re worried about it—then just ease off it for a while. Prove that you can quit, if you wanted to. While you’re staying with Yoshi, just stay straight. How hard can that be?’

She held her hands up before the wheel and watched them tremble. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw her pale, sunken-eyed, sweat-sheened face. She looked at her day pack on the seat beside her, and through the open flap, saw the half-gone bottle of whiskey sticking its neck out through a tangle of shirts and socks and panties. It was under all that because it was the first thing she’d packed, the one thing she wanted to make sure she’d brought, the one thing she did not want to leave behind.

As she stared at it, out of nowhere, she thought, ‘If you take a drink and your hands stop shaking, you’ll know,’ and that sounded so reasonable, she almost did it.

Ana grabbed the bottle and, without giving herself time for second thoughts, kicked the driver’s
door open and threw it out into the rocky desert. She closed the door, started the engine, and drove away fast, like she thought it was going to grow feet and run after her.

There. Problem solved.
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Bonnie had never really travelled anywhere before, but this wasn’t what he thought travelling would be like. It wasn’t supposed to be a joyride, he knew that. And being trapped in a box not much bigger than the Vault where they were stored between pizzerias wasn’t the start of what anyone would call a fun time. Still, he was finally seeing some of the real world beyond what Ana called the Edge of Nowhere and he wanted to enjoy some of it, because that was sure never going to happen again.

Ana had cut little slots in the side of the truck so they could see outside, making sure that they all had one directly behind them on the benches, so they didn’t have to get out of their restraints when the truck was moving. Although Bonnie appreciated the gesture, he didn’t use his very much and whenever he did, what he saw didn’t look a whole lot different from what he’d been looking at all his life. The snowy mountain (with all its curvy roads on the outside of the truck and Foxy barfing up his boots on the inside) had some different trees and some soft blues and greens that were interesting for a while, but then they came right back down into the same dull red desert he thought they’d left behind in Mammon.

In fact, Chica was the only one who got any real use out of the little windows. She spent the whole trip peering out and exclaiming over what she saw, oblivious to the complete lack of excitement from the rest of them. Foxy spent the whole time either puking or trying not to before Ana shut him off, and Freddy was so deep in his own head that he might as well have been shut off, too. Bonnie tried to fake some enthusiasm whenever Chica gushed over whatever stupid landmark caught her eye outside, but his thoughts, as always, were with Ana.

After the last stop, she said it would be another hour before they got to Yoshi’s place. Bonnie’s internal clock had popped up in the corner of his vision when the restaurant ‘opened,’ and she was right: Exactly sixty minutes after she started driving again, Chica said, “I think I see it. MechaTech, right?”

“I don’t remember, but that sounds familiar.”

“She’s slowing down,” Chica said, fingertips nervously tapping at the wall of the truck as she peered outside. “This is it.”

Freddy roused himself out of his funk when the truck turned off the paved road onto an uneven gravel drive and looked out the window behind him for the first time on the whole trip. “I’m on the wrong side, I think,” he said. “What does it look like?”

“Um…well…there’s a building,” Chica said dubiously.

Bonnie unbuckled himself and got up.

“What are you doing?” Freddy said sharply. “Wait for the truck to stop! You’ll fall!”

“Relax, we’re going, like, a tenth of a mile an hour. Aaaand we’re stopped.” Bonnie pushed Foxy’s body off to one side so he could use the window behind him. “There is a building,” he confirmed. “And a house. They both look kind of sketchy to me.”
They did, too. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but he suspected most cutting-edge animatronics experts didn’t operate out of the basement of their money-mansions, so he’d been braced for a simpler set-up. This was simple, all right. This was just a big metal box with one human-sized door and two car-sized ones, and a couple square windows so filmed over by dust that they might as well be part of the wall. The sign Chica had mentioned was just a lightboard with individual letter-tabs spelling out the name and a phone number, the sort of thing that had been common enough once upon a time (they’d had one like it at High Street), but which was now old-fashioned and a little trashy.

The house that shared the gravel driveway was smaller than the shop. To Bonnie’s eye, it might even be smaller than the dining room back home. A couple curtained windows, peeling paint and a dented screen door set in the middle of a sagging front porch with cinderblock stairs were the best of its few features.

From what Bonnie remembered of the night his vocal coil had to be changed out, the guy actually knew his stuff, so maybe he was just so confident in his skills that he didn’t care about appearances, but wow. The best that could be said about this place was that it looked like someone didn’t know how to market himself very well; at worst, it looked like it might have teenaged bodies hanging on hooks in the back. Or maybe Bonnie had been watching too many horror movies lately.

The driver’s door opened and Ana climbed stiffly down. She paced a few steps away, looking at the building, looking at the sign, looking back at the truck. Her eyes unerringly found Bonnie’s. She frowned, giving her chin a little get-away-from-the-goddamn-windows jerk before she headed for the house.

Chica immediately turned her head around to face forward and put her hands on her knees. She slumped, letting her head loll over her chest, and shut her eye-lights off.

Bonnie watched Ana knock once…twice…pace around…knock again. She went to the workshop next and knocked on that door too, with the same result. “Looks like no one’s home,” he remarked. “Think we got the wrong place?”

“What are the odds of there being two MechaTechs in one town?” Chica asked reasonably, talking through her speaker without moving.

“I don’t know. There’s four Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzerias in Mammon,” Bonnie retorted. “What are the odds of that?”

Chica tsked, which she did a lot on the rare occasion that she couldn’t think of an answer. “Sit down and go dark before someone sees you.”

Bonnie peeked out the viewing-slot once more time—Ana was now talking on her phone—then returned to his bench and slowly strapped himself in again. “Does she look okay to you?”

“Not really,” Chica whispered. “But I don’t think it means anything. She didn’t sleep much last night and it’s been a long drive.”

“I know what tired looks like on her,” Bonnie argued. “This is different. She looks sick.”

One of Chica’s shoulders hitched in a tiny shrug. “Maybe she caught a cold. It’s getting to be that time of year, but I still don’t think you need to worry. Ana knows her limits.”

“Since when?” Freddy grumbled, only to immediately dismiss his own words. “In addition to
Chica’s excellent points, I also suspect she may have been hurt more than she wants to let on and she’s obviously upset about...about the things she had to do that night. She just as obviously does not want to talk about any of that and prior experience has proven that nothing good happens when I confront her with my concern. Add this—” He swept an arm outward, indicating the whole grim scene in the back of the truck. “—to that, and anything I or you or anyone says becomes the trigger to an explosion. This is not the time,” he said, letting his eyes flash to emphasize his quiet words. “Ana may not always know her limits, but I know mine, and I’m right at the edge of what I can cope with. So I’m asking you, for my sake, if not for Ana’s, please just let it go.”

Bonnie gave in with a reluctant nod. Freddy was right about there being a time and a place for big talks, and Chica was right about stress not making anyone look their best, and probably even Foxy would be right about something if he was awake right now. Everyone was right except Bonnie, who could not shake the feeling that there was something else at play here. She might be sick or hurt or tired or stressed, but all of these things were just toppings on a sinister pizza, and yeah, that was a stupid metaphor, but it also worked. Whatever this was, it was the foundation, the solid crust completely hidden under the melty mess of everything else that was stuck to it, and the more Bonnie thought about it like that, the more he realized Ana had been eating it for a long time.

Or maybe he was wrong and it really was all about whatever had happened Halloween night. Maybe when they were home again, when all the drama with Freddy’s legs was over and her bruises were healed and it was just the two of them watching one of her dumb horror movies late at night, maybe then she’d even want to talk about it, but more likely, she’d just pretend nothing had ever happened. And who was Bonnie to say that was the wrong way to handle it? He’d killed so many people and dumped so many bodies over the years, and yeah, it used to bother him. Hell, he used to go through their pockets afterwards, trying to find out who they’d been, if they had families...all that crap. He didn’t do that anymore. He couldn’t even remember when he’d stopped. Did that make him a monster? Well, probably, but did he feel like one? No, and he didn’t feel bad about that either. As Ana herself had said, the only thing that ever bothered him about all that was how easy it was to get over it.

He’d changed. They all had. They were all just walking, talking manifestations of the damn quarry, which looked no different on the surface after twelve years of dumping bodies (twelve years that Bonnie had been doing it anyway; it made such a great dumping place that he wouldn’t be surprised if someone told him the playthings from Mulholland and High Street were down there, too), but whose still waters had been poisoned and turned tar-black by the bones slowly filling it up.

Bonnie looked down at himself, tracing the widest crack in his chest with the tip of one bare metal finger, thinking of that night when he’d fallen into the quarry. Not so much the falling-in part, which was pretty nightmarish, or the climbing out, which was even worse, but standing in the kitchen after it was supposedly all over, with his error log telling him a critical failure was imminent and no way to let anyone know. If he hadn’t had the alert literally flashing across his vision in bright red letters, even he wouldn’t have known. He didn’t know how to say any of that to Ana in a way that would make sense, and he knew that if he tried, she’d just tell him she was fine, and she might even think she was telling the truth, but that was the point, wasn’t it? It was possible to be broken and not even know it.

These troubling thoughts were interrupted when another vehicle suddenly pulled in, tires spitting out gravel as it braked too hard next to the truck. A door opened. A man called, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I got a call to quick replace a compressor—fifteen minute drive, two minute job—and I figured the surest way to get you to show up was to go do it! And hey, it worked! Here you are!”

“I know I’m late,” Ana replied, boots crunching closer. “Weather was crazy and construction was
everywhere. I had trouble finding an open pass.”

“Yeah, it’s always pretty bad this time of year. All the more reason to get this done and get you on your way again before you’re forced to move in with me until spring.” After an awkward silence where shared laughter had obviously been expected, the man cleared his throat, clapped his hands once and said, “Okay, so! Can I see them?”

Two pairs of boots came around to the back of the truck. The lock rattled—a last warning to those inside to get their game faces on. Bonnie kept his eyes open, but let his limbs go slack. The next thing he knew, a great wedge of sunlight came slanting in as the door rolled up.

“Whoa.”

“Yeah. They’re in a condition.”

“No, I mean…just…whoa,” the man said again, respectfully. He climbed into the truck and came straight to Bonnie, staring with smiling wonder into Bonnie’s unresponsive face, unaware that Bonnie was staring back at him. “They’re a lot bigger than I thought they’d be.”

‘And you’re a lot smaller,’ thought Bonnie. All humans were small compared to him, but this guy? Tiny.

Well, okay, that was an exaggeration, but Yoshi was definitely on the short side for a guy, thin and kind of soft-looking. From a distance, he might even be able to pass as a teenager, with his slight frame and that fairly ridiculous attempt at a beard he had going on. Up close, it was obvious he had some years on him, though. There was a little grey coming in at his temples, vividly contrasting with his otherwise black hair, which he wore straight and loose and a little long. Behind a pair of wire-rim bifocals, his eyes were edged in fine age-lines, but were still bright with boyish curiosity.

First impressions could be deceiving, but Bonnie thought he looked like a fun guy. Not charming, the way the Purple Man used to be, when he was in a ‘fun’ mood, but easy-going and cheerful. And Bonnie didn’t care, but if he did, he’d also notice the guy was probably handsome and definitely human and judging from his intense interest as he examined Freddy’s exposed mechanisms and the distinctive seven-pointed leaf emblazoned on his tie-dyed t-shirt, he shared at least two of Ana’s M-related hobbies.

Yoshi turned away from Bonnie at last, reaching out to rub his fingers over the Velcro tabs glued to the top of Freddy’s head. “So,” he said, grinning. “I don’t suppose you know what you’ve got here?”

Ana shrugged. “One of those singing animal bands from some discount Chuck E. Cheese.”

“Nothing discount about these guys,” Yoshi told her, now pulling Freddy’s head toward him to look at the back, then picking up and closely inspecting one of Freddy’s hands, all while Freddy held very still and silent, apart from the fluxing of his pupils—blue and black, blue and black.

“Where did you say you found them?”

Ana’s face went perfectly blank, but Bonnie could see the gears in there frantically turning, trying to remember what she’d told him months ago.

The silence was noticeable. Yoshi glanced at her curiously. “You said it was a storage unit? Where?”

“Uh…someplace up by Salt Lake. I don’t remember the actual name of the town or the storage place, sorry.”
“Go on,” Yoshi said when she stopped talking. “There’s got to be a story in this and I’m dying to hear it.”

“No story. I needed some quick cash, so I rolled the dice. I got, like, ten units for a hundred bucks, which should have told me something about what I was getting. Mostly boxes of clothes and books, cheap furniture and clunky old computers. It was all pretty much worthless,” she said, glancing at Bonnie with a hint of apology in her eyes. “I didn’t even make enough on the sales to cover the cost of hauling everything else to the junkyard, but that’s what you get at auction, you know. A gamble.”

“But when you opened up the last unit,” Yoshi prompted with a dramatic flourish, “you hit the jackpot.”

“It was the third or the fourth, actually, not the last. But yeah, I found them. And they made it worth it, even if I couldn’t sell them.”

“Was there anything in there with them?”

“Just their spare parts.”

“Nothing else? No installation materials, like a show stage or something? Any props or backdrops? Any clue as to where they came from?”

“There’s no logos or serial numbers anywhere on them that I can see, so…some guy’s garage, I guess.”

“Not a chance. A lot of money went into making these guys. A lot of money. Someone had a plan for these guys and someone expected a payoff.”

“A lot of money goes into building model trains and collecting trading cards, too, but it’s still just a hobby.”

“Not buying it,” Yoshi said cheerfully. He picked up one of Freddy’s legs and turned it so the sole of the foot was facing up. “Look at this wear. Here…here…everywhere. Things deteriorate in storage, but they don’t erode. Whatever these guys were built to do, they were doing it. For a long time. So where would you put a singing animal band? It’s got to be a restaurant or a theme park, right?”

Ana shrugged with pretty convincing indifference. “Maybe. What’s your point?”

“My point is, somebody out there has to have seen them. Somebody remembers them. Don’t you even want to know who they are?”

“I already know who they are,” said Ana and nodded at Freddy. “That’s Barry.”

Yoshi’s rising excitement visibly deflated. He stared at her, oblivious to Freddy’s eyes shifting to stare at her too. “Barry?”

“Yeah. Apparently of Barry-and-Carrie fame.”

Both Yoshi’s and Freddy’s eyebrows raised.

“Carrie?” Yoshi echoed.

Ana hiked a thumb back at Chica. “Carrie the Canary.”
“Oh!” blurted Chica.

Yoshi attempted to turn toward her and jump back at the same time, both from a squatting position, to the effect that he sort of flailed and fell into Freddy’s chest, staring at her. “They’re on?” he gasped. “You didn’t tell me they were on!”

“They’re always on,” said Ana, glaring at Chica. “I put them on standby, but they get triggered easily by certain phrases or situations. Say hello, Carrie.”

Chica offered up a friendly wave and bellowed out, “HI THERE! I’M CARRIE!”

Freddy heaved a small sigh, then snapped on his eye lights and waved as well, rumbling, “AND I’M BARRY! AND WE’RE GOING TO SING A SONG!”

“No, we’re not! Suspend showtime and standby,” Ana said loudly, and as Freddy and Chica both shut off their eyes and slumped again, added, “They’re a little buggy.”

Yeah, I see that,” said Yoshi, picking himself out of Freddy’s lap. He looked up at Bonnie, then turned all the way toward him with a broad grin. “Who are you?”

Well, okay. He could play along. Bonnie switched on his eyes, waggling his ears as he dialed up the volume on his speaker to reach all the little kiddies in the back row. “WELL, HI THERE, LITTLE COWBOY!” he boomed. “I’M BUSTER! WELCOME TO BUSTER’S BURGER RANCH, HOME OF THE BUSTER BURGER!” He hyucked out some of his stage-laughter. “NOW LET’S GIVE A BIG OL’ TEXAS-SIZED ROUND OF APPLAUSE TO PERCY THE POLITE PIRATE, WHO’S GOING TO COME ON OUT AND SING YOU ALL A SONG ABOUT HIS TWO FAVORITE WORDS, PLEASE AND THANKS!”

“Knock it off, Buster,” said Ana, rubbing her face.

“Hey Percy!” said Yoshi and waited expectantly while Foxy continued to slump, unresponsive. After a few seconds, he seemed to notice Foxy’s chest plate was slightly open, with Ana’s sweater keeping it from closing. He reached, only to have Ana step in front of him. “Is he broken?” he asked. “Why’s he shut off?”

“What did I just say? You can’t shut them off. I only put him to sleep for the ride.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” She pointed at Foxy’s hook. “I didn’t want him glitching out and waving that thing around, especially with Carrie strapped down right next to him. And before you ask, I didn’t put them all to sleep because when they’re completely out, they don’t self-correct for balance, so when I take a tight turn or hit a bump, they bang around and can potentially do some serious damage to themselves. I didn’t have time to find better restraints and I can’t wrap them up too much, because they need decent air flow or they overheat. Any other stupid questions?”

“Uh, no,” said Yoshi, obviously taken aback.

Ana bared her teeth, rubbing at her temples. “Sorry. I have a splitting headache. I don’t mean to snap at you, it’s just I wasn’t expecting the interrogation.”

“Oh. I wasn’t trying to interrogate…but yeah, I talk too much when I’m excited. Uh…I guess let’s just focus on the job at hand.”

“Please.”
“Well, it’s obvious who we’re going to be starting on,” Yoshi remarked, fetching a penlight out of his pocket and shining it into the cavity of Freddy’s face. Although Freddy managed not to move, his cooling fan revved. Yoshi noticed, shifting the angle of the narrow beam down and lighting up Freddy’s chest cavity from within for a moment before he straightened up again. He felt at some of the bent and broken facial rods (Freddy’s cooling fan hitched and ground), thumbing at the on/off button of the penlight with his free hand in a restlessness that was very familiar after all this time living with Ana. He wanted to get to work.

‘Gosh, they’ve really got a lot in common,’ thought Bonnie unjealously. ‘Good for them.’

“Hey, you want to maybe not do that?” Ana demanded as Yoshi wiggled at a protruding pin that should be attached to Freddy’s muzzle. “They got enough problems and that shit’s delicate.”

Yoshi quit feeling at Freddy’s insides, only to start poking at his outsides, touching cracks and wiggling case-plates. “These aren’t the parts you expect me to salvage, are they? Because I hate to tell you this, but these are way beyond recapture.”

“That’s not a free pass to break them even more. Step back off him, man, I’m serious!” Ana waited for Yoshi to show her his empty hands, then nodded at the stacked tubs against the back wall and watched with narrow eyes as he promptly went over and opened one.

“Oh wow, look at that,” he murmured, peering down the hollow pipe of an arm bone with his pen light. “That’s so cool. How the heck did they do this?”

“Look at me,” said Ana. “Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, I need to be sure we’re both on the same page about some things.”

“Right, right. The money,” Yoshi guessed. “I had a couple thoughts about that.”

Ana leaned back a little. “Oh yeah?”

“First option, hear me out, in lieu of payment, how about you let me keep—”

“No.”

“Not one of the bots,” Yoshi hastened to say. “Just the old parts, the broken—”

“No.”

“Not even—”

“Not even,” Ana broke in coolly and to prove it, she took the part out of his hand and put it back in the tub, slapping the lid shut and keeping her hand on it. “Let’s get one thing super sugar-frosted clear. I’m well aware that I’m in a bind here, but I am still going to draw some hard lines and I expect you to color inside them or we’ve problems. If I see you pocket so much as a goddamn screw—”

“Hey, come on.” Yoshi drew himself up with wounded surprise. “I got a few lines of my own, you know, and calling me a thief is definitely stepping over one of them. The whole reason I brought it up was because I was trying to make a deal. You said no, that means no, end of story. I don’t steal from my clients.”

“Fair enough,” said Ana, although she did not apologize. “Back to payment plans. You said ‘a couple thoughts,’ so…?”
“Right, so second thought, why not take it out in trade?”

Ana’s eyes lit up as brightly as if there were bulbs behind them. There were three moods that Bonnie had so far discovered that could do that: curiosity, delight and I’m-about-to-punch-a-bitch. Seeing as these were neither curious nor delightful circumstances, Bonnie guessed he was about to see some punching.

But after a moment, the shine of hostility faded into a considering, albeit suspicious, stare. “Okay,” she said at last. “You said that way too enthusiastically for a guy who meant it, so I’m just going to go ahead and ask. Are you aware that ‘take it out in trade’ is slang for demanding sex in exchange for services?”

Bonnie fought not to react, but his ears flattened. He pushed them up again, still grinning, willing his darkening vision to lighten up. He wasn’t alone. Across from him, he saw Chica’s head tilt and her pink eyes fill up with black, and from beside him came the whirring of servos and the creaking of restraints that might be up to the task of holding a heavy object safely immobile on a long drive, but which could not hold even half a Freddy if he wanted to snap those straps and punch a hole right through a guy. So much for just being simple animatronics.

Fortunately, Yoshi was too shocked to notice any of it. “No,” he stammered, backing up with both hands raised until he bumped into Foxy. “No! What? Since when?”

“Since ancient Roman times. Not back then, since then. That’s what it’s meant for literally two thousand plus years. So…Is that what you meant by it? Because if that’s the case—”

“No! Not even a little bit, I swear! I just…need to get something out of this! And I’m not trying to screw you—” Yoshi blanched a little and shook his head, cutting his hands in big ‘no’ motions. “Not that way, not any way! But look, you are asking for two weeks of my undivided attention, which is not just a ridiculously narrow window for a build—excuse me, four builds of this complexity, but also half a month where I have no other source of income. And yeah, I had a great Halloween season, but not so great that money doesn’t matter anymore! I really want to do this, but I can’t do it for free. You’ve got four big, big bots here and reskinning all four of them at once is going to eat through most of my stock of premium materials. Some of that stuff takes months to reorder, so the odds of me having to turn away work during the waving-Santa and flying-reindeer season are high. Now you may think I’m overcharging you on labor to make up for the inevitable losses I’m going to suffer, but I’m not. Keeping my software updated takes money. Keeping my hardware in top form takes money. Electricity, shop space, feeding the technician who’s keeping it all running—all of that takes money. Anyone else with my skillset would charge you twice as much for labor, easy, and no effing way they’d give you exclusive service or anything close to a two-week estimate. You’d be lucky to get those bots back before next year, and you better believe those charges would be piling up on the daily, and those would be the honest guys! I gave you a quote on the phone that was practically a gift and you did not jump for joy, so I’m thinking money might be a problem and I came up with some alternatives, that’s all. I’m not trying to screw you here,” he insisted again. “I’m trying to work with you!”

“Okay,” said Ana and gave him a hard stare. “But dude, for real, don’t ever use slang again unless you’re absolutely sure you know what it means. If I was in the habit of jumping to conclusions, you’d be wearing your face on the other side of your head right now.”

“Sorry.” Yoshi let out a short, shrill laugh. “I swear I’m not a sleazeball, I’m just an idiot. If you want to keep things simple and just do the money thing, that’s how we’ll do it. We don’t even have to talk to each other if that’s how you want it. I know I talk too much,” he said with a wide smile under embarrassed eyes. “Especially when I’m nervous. I’m making a terrible impression and I
know it. I just really, really wish I could shut up now.”

“Relax,” said Ana. “So if salvage is out—and salvage is absolutely out—what other kind of trade were you thinking?”

“I do your bots and you do my house.”

Ana leaned back slightly and just stared at him.

Yoshi fidgeted the longer her silence drew itself out and finally, hesitantly, said, “You build houses, right?”

“Yeah,” Ana said slowly. “What the hell have you got so wrong with your house that it’s worth a complete rebuild of four animatronics?”

“Ugh.” Yoshi scratched a hand awkwardly over his head, trying to smile away her attention, but it never waivered and at last: “Okay, well, here’s the short version. Viva Las Vegas and all that, but between the astronomical rent, the lights, the noise and the crime, I was looking to get out of the city. Unfortunately, between one thing and another…my credit is…not great and…well, we don’t need to get into the reasons. Let’s just say I took a shot and threw a bid at one of those online auction properties. And like you say, you know, it’s always a gamble. Got a two-bedroom with workshop on half an acre for what I thought was a steal, then I get here and…” He trailed off, shaking his head and staring away through the wall. “Previous owner was a hoarder and it was never cleaned out before auction.”

Ana’s eyes narrowed some more. She did not answer.

“I can’t say I had no idea, because the pictures on the site were pretty trashy to begin with and they were all exterior shots with no wide angles, so I should have known, right? Also, it was an online auction and there’s a reason you never see good properties on those sites. Anyway, I get here and this whole area where we’re parked was a junkyard. Rusty cars, old tires and ratty tarps as far as the eye could see. The workshop was completely filled with literal garbage. Like, bags and bags of actual trash just piled up and rotting everywhere. And then there was the house.” Yoshi pivoted and pointed out the open back of the truck toward the other building. “They took eight dumpsters of junk out of that dinky little house. Eight. It was like a fricking TARDIS of crap. Literally, in some cases. I had to get a biohazard team to deal with the bathroom. That was like…it hadn’t been functional in a while, but the owner was still using it, if you know what I mean.” Yoshi’s accompanying dramatic shudder was only half-faked. “Anyway, I got it all emptied, but then what, you know? The floors were wrecked, the plumbing was shot and the porch literally collapsed when the assessor was here to see whether or not the place should be condemned.”

Ana glanced over at Bonnie with what could only be read as an Are-you-hearing-this-too expression. He didn’t know how to react, especially given that he wasn’t supposed to be reacting at all, so he didn’t, and eventually Ana returned her hard stare to Yoshi. “How the hell did you get out of that without a yellow slip on the door?”

“I didn’t, but I had ninety days to…to pass an inspection,” he continued apprehensively as Ana turned around. She went to the open mouth of the truck and stared out at the desert, one hand braced on the jamb and the other at her hip, clenched on nothing, like Foxy when he was wanting his sword. Yoshi waited, but she didn’t move, and at last, he went on, “So I hired a guy and…and you know, I hate to talk smack on people, but that guy and his crew just scammed the living crap out of me. I mean, they got the job done. Sort of. I passed my inspection anyway. It’s legally habitable and I won’t fall through the floor, it’s just a little run down. A lot run-down. It’s awful in there,” he said with another, smaller laugh.
Ana continued to do nothing.

“And I don’t know what to do about it. I know I should just hire a new guy, but after the last one…” He let that go, shaking his head. “I tried to fix up a few things myself, but…that was maybe not a wise idea. All I did was take a big mess and make it even bigger and now…now I’m living in it. And it’s the worst thing…I mean, just the actual worst. Like, I’ve been sleeping in the office here for the last couple months. Can you…Can you even imagine what it’s like to camp in your own yard just to avoid having to live in the actual house that you actually own?”

Ana huffed out a humorless laugh. “Yeah. I can.”

“I realize you’ve only got a week or two and I don’t expect miracles, but holy cow, whatever you can do in that place is a huge help.”

“I can tell you right now it won’t be much, seeing as I’ll be working with my bare hands, or do you expect me to buy a whole new set of construction tools along with eating all the renovating costs?”

“Still got to be cheaper than hiring me, right? And it won’t be that bad,” Yoshi hastened to say, clearly attempting to sweeten the deal. “I don’t need Persian rugs or crystal chandeliers. I just need a toilet that flushes and a roof that doesn’t leak. Besides, I got a friend in hotels. He’s doing some renovating right now and he says he’ll hook me up as far as any tools you might need while you’re here, all you got to do is promise to bring ‘em back in working condition. I made him a display for the lobby of his three-star,” he added with a cautious puff of pride. “I’m not all haunted houses and hayrides, you know. I’ve got animatronics in fifty-three hotels and shops around the city. That’s not me bragging, either. I mean, okay, it sort of is. I’m just saying, despite the way this place looks, I’m actually really legit.”

“No one’s questioning your skills,” Ana told him in quite possibly the least reassuring tone something like that could ever be said.

Yoshi knew it. Uncertainly, he said, “So…are we doing this?”

Ana was quiet a little too long. Her answer, when she finally spoke, was a flat, “I didn’t drive all this way for nothing.”

“Okay, so…” Yoshi visibly shored himself up, pasted on a huge smile and said, “Let’s get them inside. They can walk, right? You said they can walk? I am dying to see them walk.”

“Buster and Percy are the only ones with any real mobility anymore. Barry’s obviously out of commission and Carrie’s not that far behind him, but they’ll both try to walk if you tell them to, so do not tell them to,” she said with a hard stare and a pointing finger that Yoshi solemnly acknowledged. “Once they get situated in there, they need to stay put until we get them fixed up.”

“I understand, but…can I see? Just this once?”

Ana unbuckled Bonnie’s safety restraints, then Chica’s, and stepped back, pulling Yoshi with her. “Getting them to listen can be tricky, unless you speak their language,” she told him. “So we’re going to play some Simon Says.” In a loud, clear voice, she said, “Play with me, Buster.”

That was his cue. Bonnie stood up, hyucking and flapping his ears around. “OH BOY, I LOVE SIMON SAYS. LET’S PLAY!”

“Awesome,” Yoshi breathed, wide-eyed. “And he’s just going to do whatever you say?”

“Within the scope of his extremely limited vocabulary, yeah. Or until he glitches out and forgets
he’s playing. That happens a lot.”

“LET’S PLAY!” Bonnie said again.

“Go ahead,” Ana invited, gesturing to him. “Start with his name.”

“Uh, okay.” Yoshi eased a little closer. “Buster, Simon Says, raise your right hand.”

Bonnie did so, waggling the fingers. His pinky fell off. Damn it.

“I’ve got them under control,” Ana said, picking it up and putting it back on. “I just need to boot Percy up and do some safety checks. It’s going to take a few minutes. In the meantime, if you don’t mind, I could really use an aspirin or something, and something to wash it down.”

“Sure! I’ve got Mountain Dew and Pepsi and, uh, more Mountain Dew. Um…there’s a K-cup in the office if you want coffee…and water, I guess, although the pipes are…yeah, I don’t know about the water.”

“Whatsoever you’ve got in an unopened bottle or can is fine,” said Ana, propping Foxy up and busying herself with the control panel in there like there were buttons to push or connections to check.

“Oh?…oh. Okay. Dew it is! I’ll, uh, go get that and meet you at the shop.”

“Right behind you,” said Ana.

But she wasn’t. She watched him go, then turned irritated eyes on the rest of them. “You need to up your game on the dumb-machine front,” she told them. “All of you, and especially you, Chica. What was that about? You were the last one I expected to blurt shit out.”

“Sorry.” Chica hung her head, but peeked up through her mostly broken plastic lashes. “I wasn’t expecting to suddenly be a canary.”

Ana answered that with a severe shake of her head, folding her arms and looking so damn much like Freddy in that moment that Bonnie let out a short, startled laugh. “I admit, we probably should have worked that out before we got here,” Ana said, giving Bonnie a glare before turning her attention back on Chica, “but that’s still not much of an excuse. We’re all going to be doing a lot of thinking on our feet and we’d better do a better job from here on out or we’re going to pull this off.” She waited a moment while Chica tapped her fingers, then softened slightly and said, “You mind the canary thing?”

“No, not at all! I kind of like it.”

“You look more like a canary than a chicken, now that you mention it,” Bonnie remarked.

Chica beamend. “I do, don’t I?”

“So is it me?” Ana asked, peering through the window behind Foxy at the house. “Am I just being paranoid or should we get the hell out of here right now?”

Freddy grunted, watching the house in a distracted way. “I don’t think I should answer that. Mine is not an unbiased opinion at the moment.”

“Give him a chance,” said Chica in her most peacemaking tone. “He’s just nervous.”

“About what?” Ana demanded. “As far as he knows, this is a plain-Jane business deal. What does
he have to be nervous about?”

“You’re kidding, right?” said Bonnie.

When she looked at him in hot-eyed bewilderment, Chica gently said, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you’re being a little scary.”

Ana’s brows crashed down. “I am not!”

“And if you believe that,” Chica said, even gentler, “that’s even scarier. He’s not doing anything—Ana, he’s really not,” she said as Ana loudly scoffed and turned away. “Are you feeling all right?”

Ana started to answer, but only let herself get as far as an angry breath, stopping herself before she said anything she might have to apologize for later and giving herself a moment to calm down before trying again. “No,” she said finally. “I’m not lying about that headache, but that’s why I’m asking if it’s just me, because I don’t think it is. Bonnie,” she said, turning intently to him. “Think.”

Caught by surprise, Bonnie’s instinctive reaction was a short laugh. “Uh, it’s not what I’m known for, but sure, okay. About what?”

“That night I had him on the phone, for your voicebox.”

“Yeah, I remember. What about it?”

“You were there the whole time, right? I was only ever talking with him when you were right there.” Her voice lowered even as her blue eyes blazed. “Did I ever mention that I built houses for a living?”

He blinked. And then he thought again, harder. They’d both done a lot of talking that night, most of it technical stuff that went way over Bonnie’s head. He had to admit, after the first hour or so, he’d tuned a lot of it out and just sat there, reading the posters on the break room’s wall and being bored. In the end, all he could do was shrug his ears a little and say, “I don’t think so. It was a while ago, though. I guess you could have.”

“I didn’t,” she insisted. “He spent the whole night trying to go off on tangents while I had to keep his scattered ass focused. Why the hell would I suddenly start making chit-chat about my job? And this business with the hoard in his house and the guy from the city trying to condemn it, what the hell is that about? Am I supposed to believe that’s a coincidence?”

“Seems unlikely,” Bonnie admitted, “but it’s kind of a weird thing to expect to bond with you over, too, isn’t it?”

After his first words, Ana had already swung on Chica with one pointing finger aimed, ready to hammer home whatever point she thought she was making, only to pull herself up short as the rest of his words sank in.

“How would he even find out about all that stuff?” Bonnie asked. “If you didn’t tell him, who did? Who else even knows?”

“That’s the point! No one else knows! I only told you because I—” She broke off there, a little color rising in her cheeks.

He folded one ear forward with a crooked smile. “Because you didn’t know we were really listening,” he finished for her. “Yeah, I get it. So how does he know? By the time he talked to you
that one night, wasn’t the whole thing with your house already over?”

“Nothing’s ever ‘over’ in Mammon,” Ana muttered and rubbed her head some more. “He could have talked to my boss. Everybody talks about everything in that town. One phone call was all it would have taken.”

“How’d he know who your boss is?”

“I pay taxes,” she said defiantly. “I’m sure my entire employment record is on the internet somewhere if someone knows where to look.”

“With nothing but your name to go on? But okay, sure, that’s plausible, I guess, but if that’s the case, wouldn’t he have a hundred other things he could lie about to get on your good side? The two of you could be laughing about doughnuts and daycare stories instead of you nearly losing your house, which, even if you won that fight, still has to be a hell of a sore point.”

Ana’s scowl darkened…and fell away. She dropped her eyes, scuffed the toe of her boot across the floor of the truck, shook her head a few times, and finally looked up at him again. “So I’m being paranoid.”

“You’re being cautious,” Bonnie corrected. “And that’s okay. Believe me, nobody here is going to get mad because you were looking out for us. There’s always room for another obsessively hyper-vigilant watchdog in the family, right, Freddy?”

Freddy raised his head slightly and looked around at him, all his internal facial rods shifting into an expression that Bonnie, with his years of experience being faceless, had no trouble identifying as a frown. “What?”

“Nothing. I was just making a dumb joke. Sorry.”

“Shit, he’s coming back already,” Ana muttered. Grimacing, she heaved Foxy upright, removed the sweater and closed his chest compartment, already reaching for the handcart. “We got to get in there, if that’s where we’re going. Hop on, Chica.”

“That doesn’t look very sturdy,” Chica said, eyeing the dimensions of the cart. “And I’m super-heavy. Can’t Bonnie carry me again?”

“Yes,” said Bonnie.

“No,” said Ana. “I barely trust him to walk that far over loose gravel. He doesn’t need anything else throwing off his balance. Don’t argue with me, sister, get on the cart.”

“CLOCK DISCREPANCY DETECTED. CORRECTING…CORRECTED. AHOY, ME MATEYS AND WEL-WEL-WELCOME TO PIRATE’S C-C-COVE! Ow, me bloody head hurts. Where are we?” Scratching his hook across his head, Foxy turned and peered out the viewing hole behind him. “Is that him we came all this way for? That scrawny little bilge-rat?”

“That scrappy little bilge-rat is going to be taking you apart and putting you back together, so show him some respect,” said Ana, tightening the straps holding Chica on the cart. “Oh, and just real quick, you’re animatronics from Buster’s Burger Ranch. This is Buster, that’s Barry, this is Carrie—”

“I’m a canary now!”

“—and you’re Percy the Polite Pirate.”
“I’m who the fiddling fuck now?”


Foxy’s ear flattened. “This were yer idea, weren’t it?”

“You still remember The Manners Song, don’t you, Percy?” Bonnie asked cheerfully. “It’ll add to our credibility if you ‘glitch out’ and sing it a few times. All eight verses.”

“It’ll add even more if’n I ‘glitch out’ and run me hook through yer head, ye poxy scab-stain.”

“Please don’t fight,” Chica implored.

Freddy just shook his head and looked away, venting his cooling system.

“Yeah, don’t fight, Percy. In fact, here’s a little pointer from an old pro. Repeat after me, ‘Sometimes we get mad at our friends and say things we don’t mean, but saying I’m sorry can help us all be friends again.’”

Foxy’s ear, still flat, pivoted away from irritation to an angle of feigned contrition. “Oh, yer right. Ahem. I’m sorry yer a poxy scab-stain.”

“That’s better.”

“I can’t deal with this right now,” Freddy said, very very softly.

“Everybody shut up,” Ana snapped even before Bonnie could call an immediate truce. She stepped forward and stopped just out of Freddy’s reach. “You holding it together, big bear?”

“No,” said Freddy. Tiny motors whined in his head. He looked at her, the blue of his eyes eclipsed by the lenses of his pupils. “I’m sorry. I thought I could do this. I thought…but now that it’s really happening…I don’t think I can. I…I want to leave. Can we leave?”

If she’d been looking for an excuse to go, there it was, but strangely, Ana didn’t jump on it. Instead, frowning, she said, “Is that really what you want?”

“No,” Freddy said at once. “I don’t want that at all, but he’s going to touch me. I don’t want him to touch me.”

“Freddy, you had to know—”

“Yes, of course I did, but you saw him! He can’t wait to take me apart, to…to eviscerate me!”

“I’ll be right there—”

“Yes, and you’ll tell him exactly what to do and he’ll say he’ll do it, but he won’t,” Freddy insisted. The ring of blue around his lenses thinned. “He’ll just wait for you to leave and he’ll pull me apart…and I’ll feel it. I’ll feel that distance chewing at my bones in all the different rooms he puts me and I can’t…I can’t go through that again. Please. Please don’t make me do this.”

Ana took another step forward, shrugging off Bonnie’s warning hand when he caught her shoulder, and knelt down in front of the bench where Freddy sat, shivering at the joints. “I won’t,” she said. “I will turn this truck around right now and take you home, big bear. I’ll get you a wheelchair. I’ll make you as safe and as comfortable as it’s possible to make you for a few more years, but don’t kid yourself. A few more years is all you’ve got.”
“Not all,” said Freddy. “I have you. You’re better than this man, I know you are. We don’t need him. You can do this.”

“No,” Ana said quietly. “I can’t. He’s got specialized equipment, remember? I don’t know where to find his tools or even what they’re called. The kind of software he’s using, they don’t sell that shit at Office Depot, and without it, I can’t do anything better for you than I could for Chica’s leg.”

A terrible idea rose up in the back of Bonnie’s mind, but before he could think of a tactful way to suggest that Yoshi had everything they’d need, Ana went calmly on with, “Now let’s pretend this guy gives me a reason to put him under the ground and take his shit.”

Foxy nodded, Chica opened her beak, but closed it without protesting, and Freddy didn’t react at all.

“I can’t exactly hang around after a murder very long, which means I’d have to load up and get out fast. I don’t know what he’s got in there, but there’s no way we’re fitting the full contents of that shop in this truck. I’d have to guess what I need and the odds of me missing something vital are approximately one in one. Not to mention, I still don’t know how to use any of it. The reality here is, this guy probably went to robot college for years to get to where he’s at. I have no way of acquiring those skills overnight and I guarantee they don’t teach that shit at the local night school, so now we’re looking at a timeline where I get into a technical institute of high enough quality to teach me what I need to know, but low enough standards to take me, and I got to be honest with you, bear, I don’t see that happening without a lot of blowjobs.”

Freddy stared at her, his eyes almost full-black, and she was so close to him, so close. But at last, his stiff shoulders slumped and he nodded. “You’re right. I know you’re right, but I just don’t think I can do this. You need to open me.”

Ana frowned. “Freddy, are you sure?”

“Just for a little while. Just for this, when he’s taking me apart. I don’t need to be finished. I don’t even need skin. As soon as you put my endoskeleton back together, I’ll be all right. I’m just…I can’t be calm while I wait for a stranger to take me apart. I thought I could, but…I’m going to go black and the longer I fight it, the longer I’ll stay black when it happens—and it’s going to happen,” he said, too calmly. “It’s already happening. I don’t want to hurt you.” He shivered, hard. “But I will.”

“Okay,” said Ana, so softly against his rising, static-charged voice. “Okay, then. Find your happy place.”

“Wait. Bonnie.” Freddy turned his eyes toward him, but not quite. He couldn’t see, Bonnie realized. He was already deep enough in the black to be blind. How in the hell he was still managing to talk, Bonnie had no idea. “Bonnie, you put yourself in charge, so if anyone’s going to pull this off, it’s you. Put your ears up and smile. Never stop smiling. Remember, you are the face of Buster’s Burger Ranch.”

Bonnie pushed his ears up and forced cheer into his voice. “I learned from the best!”

“All right. I’m ready. Open me.”

She did, so that Freddy’s last word stretched long before his speaker shut down. Ana got her sweater and tied it around Freddy’s neck, then just knelt and stared up into the ruins of his face for a few seconds. At last, she looked around, first at Foxy, then at Bonnie. “You two done?” she asked coolly.
Bonnie nodded, subdued, and looked at Foxy, who did nothing.

Ana stood, dividing her angry stare equally between them, which hardly seemed fair. “Because if you’re not, by all means, keep going. Get it all out of your systems now, because when we walk into that building, the man who owns it is going to be listening to every word you say, and unlike me, he is not some stupid stoner who wants to be fooled. He’ll know the difference between some advanced communications software and a self-aware artificial intelligence. I only have so much control over this situation if it blows up, you got that?”

Bonnie nodded again, ears low, but it was Foxy who said, “Ye all right, luv?”

She wouldn’t look at him. She rubbed the back of her hand (was it shaking?) across her sweaty face and turned away. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just…not feeling very well. Come on, Bon. Buster. It’s Buster now,” she muttered to herself and gave her face a not-so-little slap. “Buster. Buster. Barry, Carrie, Percy, Buster.”

She got the handcart with Chica on it, wheeled it around and soon was gone.

“What’s the matter with her?” Foxy asked, frowning after her. “She sick or something?”

“Or something. This is turning into a real shitshow, isn’t it?” Deeply worried, Bonnie put on a big ol’ Showtime Smile and followed Ana to the open door where Yoshi waited for them.
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

MechaTech’s base of operations looked shabby enough from the outside and Bonnie was aware that no ordinary person’s workshop was likely to live up to the one where he’d been made, but the room he followed Ana into was nothing to inspire confidence. It wasn’t a small room, although it gave that impression. There was a closed door to the right and left of him, both considerably taller and twice as wide as the human-sized one he’d just come through, with nothing but empty space and plenty of scuff-marks on the floor to show that something was regularly moved back and forth between them. Everything else, including the coffee machine where Yoshi was presently hovering, had been shoved forward into the much smaller space beyond the doors. The walls were paneled in what was either plastic-looking wood or wood-looking plastic, Bonnie couldn’t tell. The floor was poured concrete. The back wall was covered in sticky notes, invoices, receipts, and one of those giant calendars where you write in the month and dates yourself. A couple toys and some mechanical parts scattered wherever there was room to put them gave some hint of a personality, but mostly the place just felt unfinished.

“What kind of coffee do you like?” Yoshi asked, rummaging through a little basket of plastic cups. “I got double mocha, vanilla hazelnut, cinnamon bun, raspberry, and caramel macchiato.”

“Doesn’t matter. Mocha.”

The coffee maker hissed and spat out a trickle of liquid. As the mug filled, Yoshi opened the mini-fridge. “Creamer? I got vanilla, hazelnut, Irish cream, chocolate caramel and marshmallow.”

“How Irish?” Ana asked.

Yoshi blinked around at her in laughing surprise. “Are you kidding? It’s not going to have real whiskey in it. It’s not even real cream.”

“Plain milk is fine.”

“I, uh…I’m lactose-intolerant, so…fake creamer is what I’ve got.”

Ana did a bad job of stifling a sigh. “Vanilla, then.”

“Sugar? Or syrups? I got chocolate, caramel, butterscotch—”

“But you’re a mechanic! Do you like coffee?”

“I like coffee,” Yoshi said with an embarrassed sort of laugh. He handed her the steaming mug and a couple of pills, waited awkwardly while she downed them, then took the half-empty mug back and put it on the desk. “You okay?”

“It’s just a headache. I’ll be fine.”

“Great. So…” Yoshi motioned weakly toward the door on Bonnie’s right. “You ready to see the shop?”

She was and soon Bonnie had his first real look at MechaTech: a long shell of a building, lined with industrial shelves and racks, divided down the middle by workbenches to form two cluttered
aisles which would have been narrow even by human standards. Ana was having enough trouble just maneuvering the handcart around, and she wasn’t a seven-foot bunny with long ears to get tangled up in hanging wires.

“Sorry about the mess,” Yoshi was saying, pushing gear and equipment out of the way. “It’s not as bad as it looks. I know where everything is.”

“No judgment here. You should see my workshop at home,” Ana told him—Ana, whose workshop in the Quiet Room was immaculate. “Where do I put these guys?”

“Uh, anywhere you can, I guess. I got a couple works-in-progress on the tables, but there should be one clear for your bear. The rest of them can just stand up against the wall wherever there’s room.”

“Simon Says, Buster, turn to your right. Simon Says, Buster, take ten steps forward. Okay, um…I guess this is good. Carrie—I mean, Simon Says, Carrie, take one step forward.” As soon as Chica had stepped off the cart, Ana pulled it out of the way, banging into two shelves, a rolling tool table and a chair in the process.

“Sorry,” said Yoshi, springing forward to try and make more space behind Chica. “I swear I cleaned, I just really wasn’t expecting them to be so big.”

“It’s my fault,” Ana said tersely. “I should have sent you their specs so you could be more prepared. I was so focused on getting out, a lot of that shit just slipped my mind. We clear? All right, Simon Says, Carrie, take two steps backward. She in there? Simon Says, Carrie, take one baby step backward. Good. Okay, where’s…? Simon Says, Buster, turn to your left. Simon Says, Buster, take two steps backward. One more…Simon Says one more…Simon Says, Buster, take one more step backward, Jesus. Okay, great. Buster wins.”

“YAY!” Chica cheered, clapping her hands as Ana winced and rubbed her head. “GOOD GAME, BUSTER!”

Bonnie took a bow, making sure to smack his ears on the work table in front of him and hit the shelf beside him when he waved.

“Yeah, yeah, good game. Stand by before you break something.”

“STANDING BY,” said Chica and shut her eyes off.

“STANDING BY,” said Bonnie, now wedged between two metal shelving units loaded end to end and top to bottom with half-built animatronics, each of them looking to Bonnie’s admittedly jaded eye like some kid had thrown wires, motors and everything but dried macaroni and glitter into a vaguely animal-shaped framework. Even the ‘fake’ animatronics back at the pizzeria—the big ones like Tux or Swampy or even the little ones like the crows in Pirate Cove or the dancing mice in the South Hall—didn’t look like this. It didn’t exactly fill a bunny with confidence, knowing that the same guy who built those was about to work on him.

“I’ll go get the others,” Ana said, turning the empty cart around and tucking the restraints up around the handle. “You coming?”

“No, I think I’m going to make a little more space here.”

Ana nodded, but her eyes narrowed. “Okay, so…before I step out, I’m going to say something and I need to hear you say you understand and you agree.”

“I’m listening,” Yoshi said with a quizzical smile.
“Good. I don’t want you touching my toys unless I’m there to watch you do it. You can catalogue the spare parts, work on the new skins, or do whatever voodoo you do on the computers, but unless I am physically present, you keep your hands off my animatronics like they were made of spiders, you got that?”

“I’m sorry…what?”

“You heard me. And I’m aware it’s unreasonable, but this is a hard line and I want to hear you say you’ll toe it or we have no deal. You’re going to have plenty of chances to do something sneaky behind my back, but believe me, I will find out about it and when I do, I will make you very sorry for a very, very short span of time. Do right by me and that will be the only time I ever threaten you,” Ana went on, quietly overriding Yoshi’s startled stammering. “Do me wrong…” She paused, pretending to think while holding his gaze, then affected a little shrug and finished, “Well, that’ll still be the last time, but it’ll end a whole lot worse. You need to ask me what that means?”

Yoshi stared, then slowly raised his hand and said, “Are you being serious right now?”

“Is that your way of telling me I need to convince you before you take me seriously?” Ana put a hand on the nearest worktable, close to, but not quite touching, a large screwdriver. “Because we can do that.”

“No! I just…um…want to make sure you’re not messing with me, because…you know…people mess with me a lot. And I can take a joke! If it’s a joke.”

“It’s not. These guys are special to me,” she said, looking over at Bonnie. “If I seem like a bitch right now, it’s only because they are so important to me. Shit happens and most of the time, I can be very sympathetic toward the author of the unintended fuck-up, but where these guys are concerned—” She shifted her gaze from Bonnie to Yoshi, giving him the full force of her icy blue stare. “—I have no chill at all.”

Yoshi took a long step back, both hands up like a man being mugged. “Hey, the customer is always right at MechaTech. If you want to be there, you’re there. As long as you’re aware that what you’re asking is going to have an effect on our time-table, then you have my word I won’t play with your toys behind your back.”

“Good.” Ana waited, then said, “Is there anything else you want to say to me?”

“No!” Yoshi said at once.

“It’s okay if you do,” she assured him. “You’re not going to piss me off by setting boundaries. I like to know where I stand with a man, especially a man I don’t know very well. If we’re not good, you need to tell me now, while we can still negotiate.”

“Nope, we’re good,” Yoshi said, too cheerfully.

Watching this scene play out left Bonnie with some conflicting emotions. He’d only gotten to see Ana in full badass-mode once before, when she’d gone up alone against six men, some of them armed. She’d taken them the hell down then and he supposed that must have been something to see, all right, but at the time, he’d been so afraid he was about to watch her die that he couldn’t enjoy it. And he wasn’t enjoying this as much as he ought to either. Yoshi was about the least-dangerous specimen of human he’d ever seen. Watching Ana go at him like this was like watching someone hit a marshmallow with a sledgehammer.

He couldn’t say any of this, of course. Even if he wasn’t pretending to be a mindless machine, he
wasn’t sure he could have found the right words to explain his unease. And he couldn’t imagine how Ana could read any of his thoughts when even he couldn’t fully grasp them, not to mention how she was doing it through this stupid senseless just-an-animatronic grin, but when she glanced his way, she sure saw something.

Her eyes clouded, then fell. After a moment, she glanced at Yoshi, who took another step back. She sighed.

“I’m not trying to scare you,” she said. “I mean, obviously I am, but only because I want this to work and for that to happen, I can’t afford misunderstandings. The rules—” She broke off, rolling her eyes, and finished in a humorless chant: “The rules are for your safety.”

“Got it,” said Yoshi, clueless.

“I’m going to go get the others,” Ana said, wheeling the handcart around. “Make some space.”

Yoshi immediately set to decluttering, but stopped as soon as Ana was gone and collapsed onto a tall work-table, burying his head in his arms. “Hi, I’m Yoshi and I’m lactose-intolerant!” he said in a high nasally sing-song, adding, “Idiot. Why don’t you tell her about your toe-fungus while you’re at it? That’ll impress her.”

He knocked on his head a few times, really drumming the stupidity in, then pushed himself up and continued moving loose parts onto shelves or into boxes, seemingly at random. “Don’t screw this up, man,” he warned himself. “She’s a lot scarier than I remember.” He nodded, agreeing with himself, then furrowed his brows like a kid looking at a particularly tricky math assignment. “Also hotter. Like, I remember she was good-looking, but up close, she is just ridiculously good-looking. I’m not usually an eye-guy, but those eyes are beyond blue. Sure, they’re probably contacts, but I’ve never seen eyes like that, they’re so…piercing. Like, she could stab a guy just with her eyes. Also with a screwdriver and I think I’m learning something about myself, because that almost makes her even hotter.” He glanced at Bonnie. “What do you think, Buster? Think I’ve got a shot?”

Bonnie gave him some extra-loud stage laughter, complete with a knee-slap.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” sighed Yoshi, picking up a loose roll of duct tape and tossing it an easy twenty feet across the room into an open box.

“NICE SHOT,” Bonnie said.

“Thanks, but you know, girls like her don’t go for guys like me, no matter how many downtown shots we sink. She’s probably got a boyfriend anyway. Yeah. Some six-foot-forty inked-up bad boy with muscles on his muscles and, like, purple hair.”

That was true. Used to be true.

Bonnie’s ears twitched again.

Yoshi glanced at him with distracted curiosity, then pulled out his phone, moving over to the window to steal a peek through the dust-filmed glass as he tapped at the screen. He didn’t appear to be actually making a call, though, so maybe it had nothing to do with them. Phones did lots of things these days. He could be checking his calendar or getting the weather report or reading his mail or anything at all.

When he was done with whatever it was, Yoshi started to put his phone back in his pocket, but paused and then tapped at it some more, now coming to stand next to Chica. He put his arm around
her, held the phone out and said, “Smile!”

Chica cocked her head and opened her beak.

The phone flashed and made that distinctive and totally unnecessary shutter-snapping sound as Yoshi took a picture. He looked at it, but must have thought he could do better, because he adjusted his hair and took a few more at slightly different angles. As he examined the new shots, Chica’s gaze dropped to look at the phone over Yoshi’s shoulder, wincing a little at what she saw, but when Yoshi looked up, she was once again staring straight ahead.

Yoshi moved over and repeated his performance in front of Bonnie, and when the photo-session was done, Bonnie too stole a quick peek at the phone. He saw the last couple pictures Yoshi had taken (seeing his face—furless, cracked and still discolored from his dip in the quarry—made him almost miss the days when he didn’t have one), and then the phone buzzed in Yoshi’s hand. He swiped his thumb across the screen, giving Bonnie a great view of the chat-log. There was no name at the top, just a phone number, and a couple speech balloons below it.

she just got here in a yellow balloon on the right-hand side.

U talk? What she say? How she look? in a blue balloon on the left.

As Bonnie watched, Yoshi pulled up a teeny tiny keypad and pecked out letters, which the phone used as prompts for possible words for Yoshi to pick from. It would be a fascinating process to watch if not for the conversation that followed.

Looks like she’s been driving all day and not in the mood for me to chat her up with a lot of questions
don’t get cute w me

I’m not Just saying You said tell you when she got here, so she’s here, but she’s still unloading and she is one big mood right now

What mood?

“Dude, if I was good at decoding women, I’d have one,” Yoshi muttered, but his fingers pecked out, Just a little stressed. She says there was some bad weather over the pass, probably the drive

The response was not a long time coming, but since all the others had popped up almost instantly, a five or six second pause seemed very noticeable. Then: Anyl else shows up U call me. Don’t care what they say. Even if they just pull in turn around n leave, U CALL ME. Meantime do NOT tell her u talking to me

The sound of crunching gravel could be heard through the window. Ana and Foxy, almost at the door.

Okay, Yoshi typed, muttering, “What have you gotten yourself into now?” He put the phone down on a nearby worktable, but kept his hand on it as the door opened.

Ana came in first, pushing Freddy in the handcart, followed by Foxy, who was carrying Freddy’s legs. She directed him over to stand against the wall with Bonnie, but her attention was already on Freddy. She frowned. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Sorry. Mom called,” Yoshi said, holding up the phone with a broad, distinctly nervous grin. “You know how moms are.”
“I know what you’re going for here, man, but I guarantee, you do not want to get me started talking about my mother.”

“Oh. Well, uh…hey, say cheese!”

“What?”

The phone flashed.

Ana didn’t flinch, but Foxy dropped Freddy’s leg and staggered back, shivering at the joints as he spat, “AHOY, ME LIT-T-T-TLE MATEYS AND WELC-C-C-OME TO PIRATE C-C-C-COVE!” He staggered again, banging into a set of shelves, then folded over at the waist and grabbed at his eyes, accidentally stabbing his hook through his open eyepatch. “IT’S ME, YER OLD-D-D-D FRIEND, C-C-CAPTAIN—Percy!” he barked at the end of it. “Bleedin’ hell!”

Yoshi lowered the phone, staring. “What did he just say?”

“No flash photography!” Foxy snarled, almost pulling his patch off its tired hinge in his attempt to disentangle himself. “There’s yer one warning, ye little weevil! Ye does that again and yer walking the plank right out’n this building!”

Ana put the handcart against a wall and marched over, hand out. “Give me that.”

“What? No!” Yoshi pulled the phone out of her reach and backed up for good measure. “Okay, I guess I should have asked first, but come on. I’m not posting them on Facebook, for crying out loud, I need these pictures for work.”

“That’s too bad, because you’re not getting them. Give me that fucking phone.”

“Listen—”

“No, you listen. I may have bid on that storage unit like I said, but you have no proof of that, so let’s pretend, just for shits and giggles, that I broke into one and stole them. Did you know that if you steal more than five hundred measly dollars’ worth of shit, the great state of Utah considers that a felony offense? As is transporting stolen goods across state lines, as is receiving them, for that matter. Now you tell me: Is there a square inch on any one of them that you think is worth less than five hundred dollars?”

“Uh…”

“So for all you know, I am a felon and you are my accomplice and those pictures you just took are evidence of a fucking felony crime.”

“Come on, I just said I’m not going to show anyone! You act like I’m going to Snapchat them or something!”

“And you act like no one ever picked up a friend’s phone while he was in the shitter and flipped through his fucking gallery. You really think your stupid selfie is worth going to prison? Better question, you really think I think your stupid selfie is worth me going to prison? Because, spoiler, I don’t.”

“Okay, okay. I get it, but—”

“This is not a discussion,” she snapped.
Although Bonnie knew how serious this whole thing was and how much depended on him acting like an object, hearing Freddy’s most high-hatted words coming out of her mouth was just too fucking funny. He had to laugh.

Ana glared at him, then pointed at Yoshi. “Don’t test me. Delete those pics right now.” She paused to glance at Bonnie and roll her eyes a little, adding, “That’s an order,” to prove she hadn’t entirely lost her sense of humor, even in these circumstances.

“Listen to me!” Yoshi exclaimed with convincing desperation. “There is no way to scan these guys into the system without taking them apart first and no guarantee that the computer will be able to figure them out. A couple of pictures on a phone may be the only record we have for how to put them back together. These things are irreplaceable, lady! I know you have some idea of what that means. You can’t want me working blind!”

Ana didn’t answer, but Bonnie knew her well enough to see the uncertainty behind her stoic stare. After a tense moment, she glanced at Freddy, still slumped in the handcart, then looked up at Bonnie.

“Okay, okay, watch.” Yoshi poked at his phone, then showed it to her. “They’re gone, okay? Now wait here! Just wait!”

And with that, he sprinted out of the building and into the house across the lot.

“Foxy, are you all right?” Chica asked worriedly.

“Aye. Bright flashing lights,” Foxy added in answer to Ana’s frown. “They can trigger a kind o’ soft reset for me.”

“What?”

Foxy nodded grudgingly. “Wipes me task log and sends me back to me home position. Not sure how that would play out, seeing as me home stage presently be a hundred miles and more away.”

“And you didn’t think that was something I needed to know?”

“If’n ye had a reboot switch, would ye tell me?” Foxy countered.

Ana huffed and sent her accusing eyes at Bonnie next.

“You can flash me all you want,” Bonnie told her, then rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant the rest of us didn’t get that upgrade.”

“Upgrade,” Foxy grumbled.

“Okay, well, I don’t know what else to call it. All the Mulholland animatronics got it, so they could be reset without the technician having to get too close. They were…glitchy.” Bonnie shrugged apologetically at Foxy, who snorted static back at him. “It shouldn’t be a problem now, as long as nobody flicks the lights on and off really fast.”

“Or takes pictures,” Ana agreed and sighed. “What do I do about that? He’s got a point, damn it, but I don’t want pictures. It only takes one getting out in the world and this whole thing explodes. Once a picture gets onto the internet, it’s there forever.”

“Just because the worst thing can happen doesn’t mean it will,” Chica said, tapping her fingers. “We have to trust him if we expect him to trust us, don’t we? And if he really needs those pictures
“He might,” Foxy interrupted, “but ye don’t. Ye know what yer doing and he don’t get a vote.”

“I’m not sure we can trust him to keep them private anyway,” Bonnie agreed, keeping his ears turned toward the door. “He wasn’t documenting anything, he was posing with us. And maybe I’m getting paranoid in my old age, but I’m starting to think you’re right and we should get out of here.”

“Bonnie—”

“Yeah, I know,” he interrupted. “Everything you just said in the truck is still true, but that guy was talking to someone before you came in. Not here, on his phone. And not his mom, or if he was, they got a weird relationship. But he was definitely talking about you.”

She looked at him and maybe it was her headache or the weird lighting in here or whatever it was, but something in her face, in her eyes, made her look like a stranger. No, not a stranger. Not herself, but still familiar in an awful way. For a moment, it was like the Purple Man himself was looking back at him, the way he used to look when no one was around to see him, when the smile was gone and nothing was left but the shadows and that killing look in his eyes…

Then Ana moved half a step closer and everything changed and it was her again, wary and stressed, but just Ana. “With who?“ she asked. “Did you catch a name?”

“There wasn’t one, just a phone number.” He told her what it was and even before he’d finished, she was already rolling her eyes and bringing both hands up to cover her face, which was not the reaction he’d expected. “Do you…want to know what they said?”

“I can guess,” she said sourly.

“He’s coming,” Foxy said, glancing through the window beside him and half-raising his hook. “What are we doing, luv?”


Before Bonnie could ask any more questions, his mics picked up running feet on the gravel outside. In seconds, Yoshi burst back through the door with an actual camera and a wild look in his eyes. He ran over, a little out of breath, and showed her what he had.

“Okay?” he pressed as Ana took it from him with an expression of distracted amazement. “It’s a Polaroid.”

“I know what it is. Where did you even get it?”

“I told you, there was a hoard. I’ve got a boombox, a dozen VCRs and an answering machine, too. My point is, we can take the pictures on this. You can keep them when we’re done or burn them or whatever you want to do, just as long as I know they’re there if I need them. Okay? Come on, you’ve got to meet me halfway on something.”

“Fine.” She held the camera up, but didn’t give it to him when he tentatively reached for it. “You can take pictures with this, but just for the job and I get to keep them, and the camera, the whole time I’m here. You get no trophies, no keepsakes, no souvenirs. And this better be the last conversation on this subject. If I really have to waste time wondering if I can trust you, I clearly don’t and I should just cut my losses now and leave. I don’t want to do that, so don’t test me. Got it?”
“Got it,” he said meekly.

She handed the camera to Bonnie. “Someone dropped this,” she said.

“I’LL PUT IT IN THE LOST AND FOUND BOX FOR YOU, LITTLE FRIEND!” said Bonnie, and popped the casing on his abdominal compartment, tucking the camera inside.

Ana snapped her fingers to stop Yoshi staring at this turn of events and pointed at him. “And from now on, if you need something like that, you talk to me first. I can be reasonable, believe it or not, and I want this to work. Don’t make it any harder for me.” Ana turned away while Yoshi was still stammering out apologies. She unstrapped Freddy and stepped back, wiping her face on her shirt sleeve. It must be hot in here. She was sweating a lot. Funny that Yoshi wasn’t, but this was his place, maybe he was used to it.

“All right, Percy, let’s get him on the table,” Ana said, gesturing.

‘That’s you, dumbass,’ Bonnie thought, looking meaningfully at Foxy, who belatedly remembered who he was supposed to be.

“You didn’t say Simon Says,” Yoshi guessed, sparing Foxy the trouble of covering for his embarrassingly long pause.


“Aye-aye, little matey!”

“Don’t forget his legs. Simon Says don’t forget his legs. Now Simon Says turn to your right. Simon Says walk forward until you touch the wall. Simon Says turn around…not all the way around, just…Simon Says stop. You win. Standby, Percy.”

Foxy rolled his eye, but played along with an only slightly sour, “STANDING BY.”

Ana gave him a warning stare and went to the so-called ‘operating’ table to check on Freddy, straightening one dangling arm, closing a half-open eye, and then just standing there with one hand on his cracked shoulder, looking around.

Yoshi noticed and perked up. “So, welcome to my work in progress! The materials room is back there—” He pointed at a narrow door almost invisibly situated between two wide racks. “—but it’s mostly full of what’s left of the last guy’s junk at the moment, which is why everything is sort of everywhere in here. Anyway it’s probably not very safe, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t poke around in there. And, uh…you saw the office. It’s kind of where I’m living right now, so…you know, it’s got all the comforts of home, if you like closet-sized squalor. Uh, and the molding room is on the other side of that. It’s cool with me if you want to wander around in there and see what I’m working on or whatever, but keep the doors shut. The materials are temperature sensitive and once we get into it, there’s going to be fumes and paint particles and all that jazz that can really gum up the gear, and, uh…you know, I couldn’t really afford to install the good filters and ventilation through the whole building, at first,” he hastened to add. “It’s on the list, it’s just…you know…I was dumb enough to believe the guy when he quoted me an estimate, so I only budgeted for that, and then it was nearly double by the time he got done, so I had to prioritize and…”

Ana nodded, a glint of sympathy showing through the cracks in her hard face. “You got screwed over pretty good, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. And…And you want to know the worst part? I knew he was doing it. I knew he knew I knew, and we both knew there was nothing I could do about it, because I was already out of the old
shop and if I wasn’t ready in a new one in time for the Halloween season, that was it, game over. Nobody really shops around for an animatronic guy, you know? They stick with you until you can’t do the job and then they find someone else, and then they stick with that guy until he can’t do the job and then they find someone else, but they never come back to you. So if I complained about anything at all, all the guy had to say was—”

“Well, we can do that,” Ana supplied in a deep, drawling voice that was clearly meant to imitate someone specific, although Bonnie didn’t know who, “but it’s going to take some time.”

“And I didn’t have time,” Yoshi concluded shame-facedly. “That piece of paper was stapled to the door for anyone to read, so he knew I wasn’t going to fight him. I had to let him keep screwing me and just pray he got the job done when he said he would or I’d lose everything. Believe me, I know how this place looks, but I’m really good at what I do. I am, I swear, but that just…doesn’t always matter.”

“Not like dollar signs do,” Ana agreed.

“Keeping my clients was way more important than standing on my principles with a sketchy contractor. And it all worked out, I guess. He finished half the work in all the time for twice as much money, but I’ve got my own place, I kept my clients and I can recover. Next year, I’ll have all this sorted out, but for right now…keep the doors shut, please.”

“Got it.”

“So, okay, where was I? Uh…” He looked around and shrugged. “Is there anything here you haven’t seen before?”

“Where’s the assembly rig you were talking about? I’ve never seen one of those.”

“Oh! It’s right there.” Yoshi turned around and pointed, and since he wasn’t paying attention, Bonnie had a look for himself.

He knew he was looking at the right thing—there wasn’t anything else in the way of Yoshi’s finger—but it wasn’t anything special. It was just a rectangular frame suspended over the operating table with a boxy sort of device attached to the side and a couple of jointed appendages fixed to sliding runners in the middle, each with a different tool-tip head. Bonnie recognized a drill, a clamp and something that maybe was a cutter, but he still couldn’t tell what it was supposed to do. Just be extra arms, he guessed, so that one person could do the work of two or three, but it sure didn’t look like it would be a very efficient assistant. He wondered why the guy didn’t just get a Scoop, like Ana’s. A glance at her face told him she wasn’t impressed either, and while she wasn’t as easy to read right now as she sometimes was, he could tell she was beginning to rethink a few things.

Yoshi could tell, too. “Something wrong?” he asked tentatively.

“No,” she said, although she didn’t try very hard to look like she meant it. “I guess I was expecting something bigger, which is stupid of me, since I didn’t even know what it was.”

Yoshi accepted that with half a nod, half a shrug. “You were picturing, like, a car factory, with a bunch of huge robotic arms building a bot while I stand off to one side in a hardhat checking things off on a clipboard.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I’m not going to stand here and tell you that stuff doesn’t exist, but if it does, it’s in much bigger hands than mine. You know, the military, NASA…” He shrugged again. “Disney. There’s a
limit to what’s available in the private sector unless your pockets go a lot deeper than mine, but I assure you, this is essentially the same thing, just on a smaller, admittedly limited scale.”

Ana nodded, but her doubts obviously remained.

Yoshi fidgeted, looking at her, at Bonnie and Freddy, at the contraption hanging from the ceiling, and finally said, “You want to know how it works?”

“I can see how it works,” Ana replied, studying the contraption through narrow eyes. “I’m just having a little trouble figuring out what it can do that I can’t.”

“It’s not what it does, it’s just that it does it with more precision than you or I or any human can. Okay,” he said, spreading his hands and then patting the air as if he could push her skepticism out of the way and replace it with a more receptive mood. “Okay, so you remember how I told you the biggest part of the job is going to be scanning in all the special parts?”

“So the computer can design the animatronic.”

“Yes! But actually, no, not in the sense of a working animatronic. The program doesn’t know anything about wiring or compressors or actuators or anything like that. Its sole focus is on stability, not functionality. All it does is build a virtual model, factoring in things like weight, kinematics and especially what materials are involved.”

“Materials?”

“Yes,” said Yoshi, looking surprised. “Different metals are…different? When it comes to, like, buckling under pressure or conducting heat or—”

“I get it, but I don’t know what the parts are made of.”

“It’s cool, I’ve got an analyzer, we’ll figure it out. Where was I? Oh yeah, so the computer takes all those things and runs simulations to see where the bot is more susceptible to things like pressure or friction, and then fast-forwards through ten or twenty years to see how those weaknesses cause the structure to deteriorate and where the risk of catastrophic failure can maybe be reduced by padding this or changing the configuration of that, and this all refines the original design until we arrive at one where the bot has the best quality of life.” He paused, clearly catching himself by surprise with that particular turn of phrase, and grinned. “So to speak.”

Ana didn’t even fake a smile to be polite, just stood there and waited.

“Okay,” said Yoshi, somewhat subdued. “Okay, so when it comes to complex machinery, stability and functionality have a major arc of descent over time. Something that works really well when it first comes together, even with careful maintenance, starts to lose efficiency almost from the moment it turns on and the reason for that—I mean, besides the obvious cost-cutting and planned obsolescence—is poor alignment of objects of function. And it doesn’t even have to be that poor! Something that looks level to our puny human eyes may actually be .0001 percent off-true, and that’s tiny. Most lay computers won’t even register a discrepancy that small, so you could even have it calibrated and think you’re good, but if it’s a knee joint, to make this a relevant example, and your bot is walking around? I mean, my Fitbit tells me I take roughly three thousand steps a day, so let’s assume your bots do too. In one year, that’s over a million steps, not to mention everything else they do. Bending, waving—all of that has an impact on the joints. And these guys are big, okay? They’re big and they’re heavy. And the thing you have to understand about the pressure created by weight is that it changes based on things like the shape of the structure and how it’s balanced and especially where and how it moves. It’s like…It’s…Okay, how much do
these guys weigh? Like two, three hundred pounds?”

Ana glanced at Bonnie. “How much do you weigh, Buster?”

Bonnie flicked an ear at her. “IT’S NOT POLITE TO ASK SOMEONE HOW MUCH THEY WEIGH.”


“TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY-ONE-POINT-SIXTEEN KILOGRAMS,” he replied with the same inane cheer. “MY ENDOSKELETON IS THE HEAVIEST COMPONENT AT ONE HUNDRED NINETY-SEVEN-POINT-ZERO-EIGHT KILOGRAMS.”

“Keep in mind, that’s his original weight, before…you know.” Ana indicated Bonnie’s skinless lower legs. “All this.”

“Gosh, that’s handy,” remarked Yoshi, staring up at him in admiration. “I keep forgetting they talk.”

Bonnie waggled his ears.

“Anyway, so two-eighty…that’s about six hundred pounds. I like round numbers. So for simplicity’s sake, let’s say half of that is above the belt and half below. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“So there’s three hundred pounds resting on the hips, but because of how that weight is distributed and the fact that the legs have to move, the hip-joints are under the equivalent of nearly five hundred pounds of pressure. And that pressure increases exponentially the more joints we run into as we travel down the body. Pressure on the knees is six times real-weight. At the ankles, it’s almost ten. So now you look at that slight discrepancy we talked about before, multiplied by every other moving part with an equally slight discrepancy, plus a few years of walking around and what do you get?”

Ana sent Freddy a brooding frown.

“Exactly,” said Yoshi. “And this is why the development of a walking robot, even one like Big Dog, is a huge deal. Walking requires so many independently moving parts and interconnected objects of function, not to mention all the environmental variables, that it would be impossible for any human to deliver permanence just noodling around in his garage. The calculations involved in recreating a working human—and that’s what we’ve got here, essentially,” he interrupted himself. “Animatronics designed to have equivalent, if not superior, mobility to a human being. So yeah, the calculations necessary to their construction are so complex and there are so many of them, with every damn one of them affecting every other one of them, that it’s only been recently that the average jackass like me can even get his hands on a computer with enough processing power to put them into a program, much less run it! Plus, I have the assembly rig, which can take that information and precisely implement it. Does it build the bot for us? No. But it knows what 0.0001% off-angle looks like and it can correct for that while we’re aligning parts and drilling holes.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point of four decimal points’ worth of precision when you don’t even know how much the skin is going to weigh yet? And what happens when they pick something up?”

“That’s the thing,” Yoshi told her in the overly patient tone Bonnie had heard so many parents use when explaining the obvious to a child. “The computer will be able to tell us how much weight the
scaffold can safely carry, based on the design and the materials and flexion and all that jazz, and if we put it together right, it won’t matter how that weight sits. I mean, duh, of course it does, overloading is always a thing, but I’m saying…I’m saying…” He thought, then snapped and pointed at her. “You have bones, right?”

“Last time I looked.”

“Okay, and those bones are precisely calibrated, as only God can do. If they weren’t, your ability to stand or walk or pretty much do anything would be severely inhibited. It may even be impossible. But because your bones are precisely calibrated, you can fill out your frame—” He indicated her body with a few curvy sweeps of one arm. “—with another hundred pounds of muscle and organs and fat and it really doesn’t matter. Everyone has fat,” he added, color rising in his appalled face. “I’m not saying you’re…I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with—”

“You’re fine,” Ana said with a sigh. “And I’m listening. Go on.”

“All I’m trying to say is, a strong skeleton allows you to carry a couple hundred pounds, whether you do that with flesh or by juggling barbells or—” He gestured toward her handcart where her hand still lightly rested on one grip. “—however you do it. From a technical standpoint, the risk of catastrophic destabilization is almost entirely focused on the internal support structure. A precisely calibrated skeleton can carry external variance just fine. With bots, just like with us, a strong core is the best way to assure a longer, healthier life.”

Ana nodded, her gaze straying to Freddy again. “How long do your bots live?”

“Uh, well…I don’t use the rig for all my builds. Most of my animatronics are just Halloween junk, you know. Simple mechanisms, simple functions. They only have to make it a few months at most, so it’s more cost-effective to just slap them together and patch them up year by year. I do use it when I’m putting together an installation for a casino or something like that, but they don’t tend to have a lot of moving parts, so it’s not really a great measure of the rig’s merits. And for that matter, the technology hasn’t been around that long, so I can’t promise, whatever, twenty years just because that’s what the simulations estimated. But for what it’s worth, I got the rig in 2009, and I’ve got animatronics out there that are still going strong six years later. They don’t walk and talk, obviously, because nothing does that outside of sci-fi movies…and Buster’s Burger Ranch,” he amended, looking over at Bonnie. “But they are still doing what I built them to do and they’re doing it without my attention. For all intents and purposes, without any maintenance at all.” He gave that a moment for the respect such a statement deserved, then shrugged. “And if you still don’t think that’s good enough, then…I’m sorry, but that just means you don’t understand the work, not that I can’t do it.”

Ana glanced at him, looked at Freddy some more, than turned all the way around and lifted her chin. “I believe you,” she said. “I’m sorry, man. It’s been a rough couple of days and I’m feeling it, but if you still want to deal with me, then we got a deal and I’ll try not to be as big a bitch going forward as I’ve been up to now.”

She offered her hand. Yoshi grinned and shook it.

‘The beginning of a beautiful friendship,’ Bonnie thought. He tried not to react in any visible way, but heard servos whine. When he glanced aside, he saw Foxy’s remaining ear flat to the top of his head. ‘Yeah,’ thought Bonnie, watching Yoshi celebrate. ‘I don’t trust him either.’

“So, what do you need from me in the way of creature comforts?” Yoshi asked. “Anything I can do to help you settle in? Another drink? Snacks? Coffee stuff? I can go out and grab anything you want. I should do that anyway, since I don’t really keep food at the house. What’s your poison?”
Ana shook her head, paced some more, wiped her face, and said, with puzzling bitterness, “Monster. Ultra black, if you can find it.” She pulled out her wallet, peeling off a few bills and passing them over with a short, unsmiling laugh. “Or Rehabs.”

“Ultra black or Rehabs, got it. What about dinner? We got everything around here, literally everything.”

“I don’t care. I haven’t had Chinese for a while.” Ana gave up a few more bills. “Get me some of whatever’s good, make sure there’s glass noodles in there somewhere.”

“Oh hey, I can pay—”

“No,” said Ana. “That’s going to be another hard line. I pay for all the food.”

“Uh…sure. Okay. I’m not about to turn down free food. Um, here…here is my house key,” he said, unclipping one from the set he carried. “You can go see what you’re dealing with, and when I get back, we’ll open this guy up—” He patted Freddy confidently on the chest, without commenting on the fact that the sweater that had been blocking Foxy’s chest open just a few minutes ago was now doing the same thing for Freddy. “—and see what I’m dealing with. After that, I guess we’ll see. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

Yoshi turned around, almost bumping into Bonnie. He backed up, grinned, and held up the hand Ana had just been holding. “High-five, Buster!”

Bonnie gave him a light tap up top and a thumbs up for good measure. “HAPPY TRAILS, PARTNER!”

“Be back soon!” Off he went.

Ana followed him as far as the door, restlessly fidgeting with the key she’d given her as she watched him get back in his car and drive away. Only when he was good and gone did she close the door and she kept standing there for a while, staring at its back without speaking, giving Bonnie plenty of time to see how pale and strained and shaky she was.

This was not a good time to throw more gravy on the shitbiscuits, but this might be one of those situations where waiting was even worse. Wincing in anticipation, Bonnie ventured, “Ana—”

“If you ask me one more time if I’m okay—”

“Are we really staying?” Bonnie asked.

She looked at him with an amazing lack of expression for a human’s face, then away at the featureless face of the door. “Yeah.”

“Can we trust this bloke?” Foxy asked, reaching slowly for his hip where he wasn’t even carrying his sword.

“Who, Yoshi? Probably.”

“Even though he’s reporting on yer comings and goings to some other bloke?”

“The other bloke is Rider,” Ana said and grimaced. “I can just about guarantee that when I called him up way back in July, Rider told Yoshi to tell him if I ever called again, so he did.”
“You’re not mad?” Chica asked cautiously, tapping her fingertips.

Ana shook her head. “Poor bastard had to choose between getting on my bad side or Rider’s. He made the smart choice. I’d do the same in his place.”

“What’s this Rider-bloke want with ye?” Foxy pressed, now raising his hook since a sword hadn’t magically appeared in his hand.

“God knows,” Ana sighed. Her attention drifted toward Freddy. She went over to him, pausing to adjust the position of his head before she opened his wrist compartment. “He’s been weird lately, but if he wants to lean over Yoshi’s shoulder and keep tabs on me, let him. I’ve never—” She broke off with a short, dark laugh and said instead, “I was going to say I’ve never kept secrets from him, but I guess I can’t say that anymore,” as she pulled Freddy’s phone out of his magic trick compartment and handed it to Bonnie. “But in any case, he’s always had my back and I trust him.”

“Okay,” Bonnie said, taking the phone from her. “What’s this for?”

“I’m going to head over to the house and see what that’s all about, and I want you to have some way to give me a quick heads up if Yoshi comes back and decides to get handsy when I’m not watching. You know how to use it without tipping him off?”

“Oh yeah,” Bonnie assured her with a great deal more conviction than he could back up. “I know all about teching.”

Ana’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Texting,” she said.

“Yeah,” Bonnie said, locking his ears into a fully upright, confident position to hide the fact that the rest of him was secretly dying. “That, too.”

Ana seemed to have trouble finding the words to respond to that and while she was thinking about it, Foxy said, “Ye sure ye don’t want to give that responsibility to someone who ain’t a bleeding ijit, or at least someone who knows the right bleeding word?”

“No,” Bonnie retorted before Ana could speak. “She’s pretty sure she wants to give it to someone with two hands, so they can hold it and still push buttons without putting their stupid hook through the stupid screen.”

“There ain’t any buttons on that thing, ye witless lummox.”

“They show up on the screen when you tech…xt. See?” Bonnie said, putting the phone inside his wrist compartment and shutting it again with an extra hard snap. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Oi, yer useless, ye are. Here’s a tip from a pro: The harder ye work at sounding convincing, the less convincing ye sound.”

“I’m not trying to convince you of anything, because I don’t have to!”

“Good thing, that, because ye didn’t. Ye got no brains at all, ye know that? No brains, no looks, no charm…and I’ll wager this Buster can’t even play the bloody guitar. No bloody wonder the restaurant closed and we ended up in storage.”

That stung way more than it should have and without thinking, Bonnie shot back, “Yeah, and I’m sure that had nothing to do with the fact that our polite pirate attraction dropped f-bombs left and right.”
“Once. One time. Ye got no sense of numbers either. I hope ye weren’t teaching them kiddies to count.”

The door closed.

Bonnie and Foxy looked at it, then around the room, mostly at the empty place where Ana used to be.

“She left,” Chica said quietly. Her gaze when Bonnie tried to meet it was unflinching, but full of weariness and pain. “I wish I could go with her. I wish I’d asked her to open me before she went so I didn’t have to listen to the two of you…because you won’t stop. Even now, you put your ears down and you won’t look me in the eye and you act like you’re sorry, but in five minutes, you’ll be at each other again. Why? No, don’t tell me you’re sorry,” she said as Bonnie opened his mouth to mumble out something just like that. “Don’t tell me you’ll do better, just tell me why? What are you even fighting over?”

And of course Bonnie had no answer. If there had been an argument back in that first pizzeria, fighting as children do over who got more stage time or less of a father’s love, he didn’t even know what it was anymore. The tension had just always seemed to be there, as far back as Bonnie could remember, but it had never been this bad before. Not until Ana crawled out of the rain and into their lives.

But she wasn’t his to fight over. And even when she’d called herself his girl, she’d made it clear that didn’t give him the right to dictate who she talked to. He still had hopes that they might get back together again someday, but she sure wouldn’t stay long if he kept on being a jealous dick.

And even as the rational side of him silently voiced this thought, the dark half muttered, ‘Tell that to Foxy,’ so there it was, if there was anything at all at the heart of this whole ugly mess. He’d been thinking of this all wrong, like Ana was the rope in a never-ending game of tug-o-war, but she wasn’t. Although she made a great excuse, they’d been fighting since long before she’d ever crawled in through a broken door on a rainy night.

Well, it took two to make a thing work, whether it was love or hate you were working on. Foxy could say or do whatever he wanted, and always would—that was just how he’d been made—but that didn’t mean Bonnie had to play. In fact, there was more than one way to win at tug-o-war; if you couldn’t pull the other guy over onto his stupid fox face after decades of trying, you could always let go of the rope. And let him fall on his ass instead.

Okay, so he still had some stuff to work through, but at least he was trying.

Bonnie turned, expecting to see some similar feelings reflected back at him, but Foxy’s one ear was still flat to his head and his plastic eyes almost seemed alive with the heat of the boiling emotion just under the cracked surface of his skin.

Bonnie offered a hand.

Foxy folded his arms.

“Look, I’m sorry, man. I am.” He wasn’t, but he could work on believing it later. The important thing was saying it now. “I’ve been biting your head off for no reason and I don’t expect you to forgive me just because I ask, but I do want us to be friends, or at least—”

“Is this stinking bucketload o’ chum part o’ me politeness training?” Foxy interrupted.

“Uh, no, I just—”
“Then I don’t have to listen to it. Fuck off with ye.” Foxy turned his head and stared stonily into a shelf full of spooled wire of varying gauges.

“Got it. Fucking off,” Bonnie said cheerfully, folding his own arms and finding a spot on the opposite wall between racks of unfinished animatronic animal heads to stare at. “See what great friends we are? Already in total agreement.”
Ana had worked for most of her adult life, doing everything from mucking out horse stalls to building meth labs. She’d clocked in at bakeries, ski resorts, orchards, day care centers and a great many construction sites. She’d learned that, no matter what the work itself was about, the first day was never about getting stuff done, only getting familiar with the site, the tools, the rules and the team. No matter how dire the circumstances or how little time she had to change them, Ana knew nothing was going to get done today.

And nothing did.

Well, maybe not ‘nothing’. Yoshi took her through the house, showing her all the badly-started, unfinished repairs that needed her attention. She used her roombuilder to take some measurements, made estimates of the necessary materials, and reassured him that it wasn’t as bad as he thought it was, which was even mostly true. There were a lot of little things that needed to be done, but nothing too back-breaking. As she wrote up a list of equipment she’d need for him to pass along to his hotel-friend, she was already mentally making a second list of the stuff she could do now. Despite her earlier bitching about how he expected her to work without tools, she had brought her rolling toolchest, since she’d expected to do some work on the animatronics and it was literally easier to bring the whole unit than to cherry-pick and safely pack a couple dozen instruments. She kept that to herself for now—the first day was awfully soon to trust her excitable engineer with toys he wasn’t allowed to touch—but she figured she could check off at least half of these boxes in a single weekend. With only a few exceptions, none of the jobs would take more than a few hours. Even if this wasn’t the arrangement between them, she could see herself doing a lot of this work anyway, just to bring her body to a state of physical exhaustion and force her restless mind to sleep, but not yet. Not until the real work was underway.

When he was done showing her torn linoleum and leaky pipes, she took him back to his workshop and let him give her that tour, too. He showed her the computer program he’d be using, pulled up a filed called ‘Lulu’ and clicked Build. Ana watched, feeling Yoshi’s pride and anxiety like static at her back, as the computer picked out metal rods, sized them, cut them, joined them together, then picked out motors and compressors and wires and pumps and fixed them to the frame, forming a body with six appendages not quite equally spaced around it. Joints went on; four of the appendages became legs. A motorized pendulum was attached; now there was a tentacle-like tail. A great deal of modifications and mechanisms slowly transformed the bulbous final appendage into a head with bulging eyes, wide jaws and sharp fangs. Some kind of monster, one of his Halloween horror creatures, she thought, until a second framework was wrapped around the mess and a skin set over that and suddenly, she was looking at a cute little sleeping pug. Its sides rose and fell with steady ‘breaths’, it could open its bright eyes, perk up its floppy ears, move its head, wag its curly tail, and generally do sleepy dog things, even if its legs couldn’t do much more than twitch as it ‘dreamed’. The speedbuild ended with a short clip of the finished animatronic ‘sleeping’ in an old lady’s lap, responding to her careful petting with happy pug-grunts and snuffling, and if it wasn’t exactly indistinguishable from a living animal, it was damned close.

All of this was cool, of course, but the real show was playing out on the sidebar, where the parts necessary for every step of the build were linked, along with precise measurements and installation requirements. Everything anyone needed to build a pug was right here, and although Yoshi was evasive when she asked him how long it took to go from design to fully-fleshed animatronic, she
believed him when he assured her he could build another one in three days, a week if he had to order the parts. She was pretty sure she could build one herself in that timeframe, except for the skin, and it would only take her that long because she didn’t know her way around the equipment yet.

Leaving Yoshi with a similar video of Freddy’s rebuild—Freddy’s schematics—was still a little troubling, but only a little. Without Faust’s unique parts, he’d never be able to make his own Fazbear animatronic. At best, he’d just have a giant doll, marvelously articulated perhaps, but one that would never move on its own power…or think its own thoughts.

“So?” Yoshi ventured as the video came to the end of its second playthrough.

“I’m impressed,” said Ana, honestly enough.

“Awesome!” Yoshi reached over her shoulder and opened a new file. He named it Barry. “You ready to get your hands dirty?”

“Way ahead of you,” Ana murmured, then pushed herself away from his computer and they got to work.

Sort of.

It took nearly an hour just to take all the pictures he insisted on before he was ready to start taking things apart, and then it was her turn to bring momentum to a crashing halt while she impressed upon him the importance of listening for the beep. She didn’t really think she had anything to worry about as far as that went. Technology had advanced considerably over the last fifty years and unlike the men who had disregarded a young Fred Faust’s warnings to follow the protocol before removing hardware they knew nothing about, Yoshi had probably fried a thumb drive in his time. When she told him to listen for the beep, he agreed immediately and his enthusiasm for following that rule did not wane no matter how many times she said it.

The practice run was a dissection of Freddy’s dismembered legs and it was there that Ana began to understand just what a grueling process this was really going to be. Freddy’s left leg was composed of one upper leg bone, two lower leg bones, three joints—hip, knee and ankle—and a foot. How many parts was that, seven? One would think so, but no, because the bones were capped with connecting plates and fasteners, the joints were complex mechanisms in their own rights, and the foot…there had to be a hundred separate parts in the foot alone. Plus, there were pumps acting as muscles, tension springs acting as tendons, numerous sensor pads acting as nerve clusters, separators, contractors, flexors and stabilizers. Each of these components had to be matched to their Toy-sized equivalents, from which the new endoskeletons would be assembled, and those corresponding parts scanned into the system, and even that wasn’t as simple as it sounded, not just because the scanner took for-freaking-ever (although it did), but because Yoshi had to first create a file for each piece, identify all its component materials with his analyzer, get its precise weight and measurements, and then teach the program how that part connected to other parts, and give the program a way to cross-reference the files for those parts, and if they needed auxiliary objects of function, most of which had to be ‘built’ inside the program from their own separate parts, all of which needed to first be scanned in, which meant Yoshi had to create a file…

It was a painstaking process and of course, pains should be taken. This repetitive, brain-melting tedium was what was going to restore her animatronics to their full potential and keep them alive for years to come. One mistake could mean the difference between Freddy Fazbear and Freddy Fazmobile. She was glad to see Yoshi taking it seriously, she just wished he’d take it seriously a little faster.
She suspected he was taking longer than he had to, but if he was trying to impress her with how methodical he could be, she had no one to blame but herself. That she even wanted to blame someone was only a testament to her own mood, which had steadily eroded under the strain of thinking through her headache and steadying her trembling hands, until all she wanted to do was… whatever she had to do to make it stop.

But she didn’t. She was not an alcoholic.

The left leg took six hours. The right, ‘only’ four. As Ana debated whether to continue deconstruction with Freddy’s hips or his arms, Yoshi began to drop hints that he had come to the end of what he called his ‘effective work cycle.’ She supposed that was fair. It was nearly midnight, after all, and she sure couldn’t say she wasn’t tired.

“We’ll jump back in first thing tomorrow,” he promised on receiving her reluctant agreement. “Bright and early. Crack of dawn. And you know, this really is the slowest part. Most of the core structure appears to be the same from one model to the next, excluding the heads and some minor feature variance in the arms. If nothing else, the materials are definitely the same, so once we get Barry fully scanned in, the others should be a breeze. We might get all three of them done in a day. Or two.”

‘Or three,’ Ana thought.

Sensing her lack of enthusiasm, Yoshi dialed his own up another notch. “I’m really happy with what we’ve accomplished here. I guarantee we’ll be starting reconstruction by Friday.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but please don’t make me promises just to make me happy.”

“I’m not. Whether we finish by the end of next week or not, that I don’t know, but we’ll definitely have started.”

They were sitting in his ‘office,’ whose primary function appeared to be preventing cross-contamination between the modeling room and the workshop. There were a few officey touches—a three-drawer filing cabinet that doubled as a table for the coffee maker, a chair that would have been at home on the bridge of the USS Enterprise, a compact desk just big enough for his computer set-up and a tasteful array of action figures, and the sagging, much-worn and suspiciously-stained sofa he kept as a ‘reception area.’

At the moment, Yoshi had the comm while he saved their progress for the day and shut his system down. “So at the risk of poking the dragon,” he said, switching off the monitors one by one, “let’s talk sleeping arrangements.”

Ana gave the threadbare arm of the sofa beside her a pat. “This’ll do me fine. Or if you want to sleep in here, I can sleep in the truck.”

“No, you are definitely going to want something temperature controlled. It’s not so bad right now, but I make no promises for what it’ll be like in three hours. Last month, it was still eighty degrees at night. Next month, it’ll be below zero. You’ve never seen weather as crazy as Vegas.”

“Spoken like a man who’s never been to Mammon.”

“Mammon, as in Utah?” Yoshi perked up. “Is that where you’re from?”

Cursing her tired brain and loose mouth, Ana shrugged dismissively. “Born there, moved away when I was a kid, recently moved back. I’m surprised you’ve heard of it.”
“Heard of, never been. What’s it like?”

“The open mouth of Hell,” Ana replied.

Yoshi blinked a few times, then cleared his throat and started over. “My point is, I got a bedroom. One of us should use it. I spent all week cleaning it,” he admitted with a self-conscious laugh. “You probably noticed.”

“Not really,” she said, which was true. And as his face fell, she added, “They’re all clean. Some parts of the house are in more of a condition than the others, but there’s really nothing in there you need to feel ashamed of, seriously. The way you described it, I was expecting…” Memories of her aunt’s house tumbled through her mind—boxes stacked to the ceiling, floors sagging under the weight of the hoard, the basement so deep in garbage that she had to crawl to the stairs. Shaking her head, she simply said, “I was expecting a lot worse.”

Yoshi accepted that with an uncomfortable smile and a shrug. “I guess I still see it the way I found it. Anyway, the bed is brand new. Well, the bed is from Goodwill, but the mattresses are brand new. And the sheets. And the pillows. I’m sure it’s more comfortable than that thing,” he went on super-casually while his face filled up with color. “It’s a lot bigger, anyway. You can stretch out. Roll around. You know. Really…really get comfortable. Probably even two people could…Sorry,” he said suddenly. “Forget I said anything. I’m not good at flirting and it’s obvious you’re not interested. You’re not interested, are you?”

“No,” Ana said gently. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No,” he said at once, showing immediate relief only faintly tinged with disappointment. “It’s just one of those things I figured I was always going to regret if I didn’t at least give it a shot. I’m the kind of guy that let a lot of opportunities knock and walk away, you know? And now it’s too late to…you know…change it. And I’ve got good genes, but still, you know, my life is almost half over at best, so I figure, from now on, I’m going to answer the door every time. Maybe knock on a few myself. What’s the worst thing that can happen? Don’t answer that. But never mind, point is, no means no. So, you can have the bed and I’ll sleep out here.”

“I’m not kicking you out of your own bed, man. I’d rather sleep out here anyway.”

He smiled a somewhat hurt smile. “To keep an eye on your bots? Make sure no one’s sneaking parts?”

She supposed that was her cue for a polite denial, but instead she shrugged and said, “Put yourself in my shoes, man. Where would you be?”

“Right where you are,” he admitted with a laugh. “Well…I’ll see you in the morning then.”

“See you.” She waited for him to leave, waited a little longer, then got up and opened the door to workshop.

The room was dark, not completely silent, but very still. Ana ran her eyes restlessly across the half-glimpsed shapes lining its tall walls as she stepped inside, then opened the exterior door and stepped across the threshold into the open night.

Even here, miles away from the city limits, she could see Las Vegas as a dome of smudgy color hanging in the midnight sky and hear the faint murmur of its frenetic activity. If she didn’t know where she was and had only this seemingly lifeless scratch of land beside this empty road to judge by, she might think she was seeing nothing but the reflection of the long-set sun, hearing nothing
but the wind. Hell, she might even think she was back in Mammon, except that she couldn’t smell
the quarry.

But in any case, she could see lights on in Yoshi’s house and as she stood in the doorway, she even
glimpsed his shadow on the blinds as he moved around inside.

She backed up into the workshop and shut the door. “He’s gone for the night,” she said to the
seemingly empty room, turning on the lights.

At once, three sets of servos shrilled out in something like harmony as three animatronics came to
life amid dozens of inanimate ones. Chica even stretched, like she had sore muscles from standing
all day, before going to the operating table where Freddy—half of him anyway—lay sleeping.

“Everyone okay?” Ana asked, coming up on the table’s other side to reassure herself with the sight
of all those delicate cogs and wheels still spinning in Freddy’s battery case.

“Fine as paint,” Foxy grumbled, pacing and tapping his hook aggressively off shelves and tables,
pipes and jars full of nails, as if he were testing them and finding them all out of tune. “I’m like to
die o’ boredom, but other’n that, all’s well.”

“It’s not that bad,” Chica admonished.

“But that bad? This here be the worst conditions I ever been kept in, aye, and that includes the
bloody vault! At least we could move around in the vault. Stretch our pins and pumps. Talk!”

“I don’t remember having any epic conversations,” Bonnie remarked.

“Whether we did or not ain’t the point. We could have. Tell the truth now,” Foxy said, turning on
Ana with his hook raised. “How long are we going to have to keep this act up?”

“I don’t know.” Ana boosted herself up and sat on the table beside Freddy, letting her feet dangle.
She kicked her legs idly as she studied the workshop around her and thought how much it looked
like her own—the orderly chaos occupying the shelves, the mechanical odds and ends strewn atop
every surface and the empty pop cans and fast food wrappers under them, the good smells of
machine grease and solder, the ceiling racks full of lesser used equipment like the overhanging
vines and branches of some hardware jungle. Its familiarity should feel soothing to her frayed
nerves, but it didn’t. Maybe just because it was someone else’s lived-in mess, someone else’s hard
work all around her. She hoped that was all it was, but she still felt…not discouraged, exactly, not
as if she’d been given a reason to have doubts or face failure, but as if she expected to. A weight of
doom lay over her, a foreboding fed by absolutely nothing that she could put her finger on, and no
amount of rational thought could shake it off.

“I don’t know,” she said again and this time said all of it. “I told my boss I’d be home in two
weeks, but just because that’s all the time we have doesn’t mean that’s all the time we’re going to
need. I’m trying to feel like we made progress today, but I just don’t know. It feels like I spent the
last twelve hours watching someone else stare at a computer.”

When he wasn’t playing on his phone. But that was a bitch-session for another time.

Foxy snorted through his speaker. “Could be worse. Ye could have to stand there, not moving nor
speaking nor showing any sign o’ life, watching someone else watch the bloke doing the computer-
staring. I’d like to see ye do that two hours, much less two weeks.”

“Take a Midol, princess,” she said, rubbing at her weary eyes. “We’re all perfectly well aware of
how much this sucks without you actively trying to make it worse. Shut up. No, for real,” she
added as Foxy swung around with a few choice words for her. “I hear something.”

Servos whined as Bonnie and Foxy swiveled their ears around, both homing in immediately on the same direction. She didn’t need them to tell her ‘something’ was footsteps in the gravel, coming closer, and they didn’t need her to tell them to get back to their places and save the arguing for later.

When Yoshi knocked, she was once again seemingly alone in the workshop, which was a good thing, because he didn’t wait for her to answer before hesitantly opening the door, just enough to show her half of his anxious face. “I saw the light on,” he began, sounding like he’d rehearsed. “I figured maybe you were…um…I don’t know, strange place and all that, and, um…well, I know I didn’t exactly make the best impression on you, so I figured, you know, I can either make it a little better or a lot worse, so here I am, and I’m thinking maybe you’d be interested in…uh…”

With sudden decisiveness, he pushed the door open wide and stepped in, holding up his red and yellow bong with the pot leaf emblem etched on the side. “No strings,” he said hurriedly. “It’s just the best way I know to, you know, chillax and make new friends. What do you say?”

She should say no, if for no other reason than to give the animatronics a chance to relax and be themselves after half a day being lifeless robots. Miserable as she was, this whole thing was much harder on them.

On the other hand, miserable as she was, didn’t she deserve a break too?

“I say light that shit,” said Ana and soon her headache was, if not completely gone, at least insignificant enough that she no longer cared if she had one. She sat on the cold concrete floor (a discomfort that was also insignificant) with her back against Bonnie’s legs, listening to the weird-ass vaporwave playing on Yoshi’s shop-radio and watching smoke drift in the currents of the air conditioning while Yoshi perched on his high workstool, gazing into the workings of Freddy’s battery case like all the secrets of the universe were performing there just for him.

At length, he roused himself from his fascination to look at her and say, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“All that.” Yoshi waved at the door to the office, closed now, to keep the fragrant smoke from travelling into his work setting and soaking into the fibers of that sagging couch more than it already had. “Coming on to you. I knew better.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing bad!” he assured her. “I’m just saying…a guy like me, a girl like you…I’m not exactly your type.”

That prickled on some level, but in her present mood, all it raised was a crooked smile. “I’m not sure you can call what I’m apparently attracted to a ‘type.’”

“Still. I should have kept it professional. Sorry I made it weird.”

Servos whined.

Ana patted Bonnie’s foot on the off-chance that he could feel it. “Relax. We’re good. You got nothing to be sorry about, as long as you take no for an answer.”

“I will, I will. I am, I mean. Sorry,” he laughed. “I’m doing it again. Making it weird.”
“You’re fine.”

“You don’t have to spare my feelings. I know I am. Believe me, the one social skill I have honed to razor-like perception is knowing when I’m making it weird.” He took another hit, but all her hopes that he would go back to staring at Freddy’s battery evaporated with the smoke when he blew it out and said, “I never really learned how to talk to people, you know? Except about work. I can talk your dang ears off when it’s about work, although I try not to. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that most of the people who want my bots actually have zero interest in how they’re built. And I don’t know how to talk about anything else. I should get new hobbies. Do you have hobbies?”

“Sure, I got the Three Ms,” Ana said breezily, and heard three pairs of eyes and two pairs of ears come to alert. With hopefully not too much noticeable effort, she focused and carefully continued: “I medicate, I fix up broken machines and I…watch movies. I used to read, too, so…three Ms and an R?”

“Movies, huh? That sounds cool. Do you belong to any clubs? You know, where you sit around and discuss, like, themes and symbolism and metaphors and stuff?”

“No. I just watch them. Or read them. Depending on whether it’s a movie,” she amplified, reaching for the bong, “or a book.”

“Or if the movie has subtitles, you can do both. That’s, like, twice as much leisure in half the time. Efficient. I need more hobbies. I knew a guy and he was into this one show, this anime, and I kind of wanted to hang out with him more off-work, so I tried to get into it, and I had questions, you know? So I do some research online and the anime’s got a manga, so I find a shop that sells them and I go there to see if the manga tells you more than the show, and this other guy there hears me talking to the clerk and he calls me a weeb.” Yoshi gave that a beat to let the full indignation come to fruit. “A weeb! Like, dude, I’m Japanese! I get to watch the cartoons from my own freaking mother country! Well…my grandma’s mother country. My point is, I can’t be a weeb, by definition. He’s the weeb for even knowing what a weeb is!”

“Did you tell him that?”

“No, are you kidding? I just slunk out of the shop and went home to fume about it. And you know, the worst part is, in retrospect, maybe he wasn’t even making fun of me. He was a grown man in an Avengers tee looking at Star Wars mangas. What are the odds he was really flexing on weeb at all? Maybe he was just as socially awkward as me and trying to break the ice with a joke so he could come over and join the conversation. He probably knew all about the stupid show. We could have been friends. But now it’s too late!” Yoshi said with renewed energy, thumping a finger down on the table next to Freddy’s skull. “I can’t even go back to the comic shop because of how I ran out and even if I met him again in, like, the grocery store, he’d never want to talk to me because even if he doesn’t really think I’m a weeb, he probably thinks I’m a huffy little drama queen!”

“You should switch to another school,” Ana said dryly.

“I know, right? I mean, not that I should do that, I know you’re joking, but that’s where you’re supposed to work through all this stupid stuff and learn how to have actual adult social interactions. Only me? When I was technically in high school, I was, like, nine. I still thought girls had cooties. And friends? I never had friends as a kid. I had a PR agent and a manager. What did I need friends for?” He thought about it and laughed. “I still don’t. In the whole damn world, I have, like, one real friend right now.”

More servos whined, probably as Chica suppressed some sympathy.
“One’s all you need,” Ana said, hoping to distract him before he noticed.

“Yeah.” His smile softened from the defensive thing it was to something real and a little stoned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Still, it messes a kid up. My parents really laid that whole special-genius thing on me and I bought into it, hard. I mean, I was a kid. What does a kid know? Your folks create the world around you. They control all the variables. If they tell you you’re the smartest boy who ever lived and everyone loves you for it and if they don’t, it’s just because they’re jealous of your intelligence, of course you’re going to believe it. You’ve practically got no choice.”

Ana nodded, thinking of the world her mother had built around her. A small world, no bigger than a locked closet, stinking of sweat and tears and piss, and herself the only inhabitant…

“I didn’t know better,” Yoshi was saying morosely, once again staring into Freddy’s battery. “I wasn’t allowed to be with other kids, because they’d just hold me back. I couldn’t afford distractions like sleepovers and sports. I was special. I wasn’t being isolated and emotionally stunted, I was learning discipline so I could reach my full potential. My parents had a plan for my life,” he concluded bitterly, “and having friends wasn’t part of it.”

“Dude, you’re bringing me down.”

“Sorry. Sorry. It’s just it sucked,” he went on, sorry or not, while Ana sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Even when I bought into the whole super-genius thing, I still knew it sucked. I only got through it by telling myself that once I got my degrees, my life would be all Doogie Houser, you know? I’d be the youngest and most respected engineer in the robotics industry. I’d spend my days giving press conferences and looking awesome in a lab coat and at nights, I’d hang out at clubs with all my grown-up colleagues who were in awe of my genius, and my life would be one endless hilarious sitcom and maybe I’d touch a boob.” He propped his chin on his palm, tracing the inner workings of Freddy’s battery with the fingertips of his free hand. “It took years, literally years, before it dawned on me that no one was jealous and no one was in awe. The kids my age justifiably thought I was a pretentious little twit, the kids on campus thought I was a snot-faced know-it-all with an entitlement complex, and my ‘colleagues’ in the industry thought I was a publicity stunt. And let’s be honest, they were all right.”

“Come on, man. You earned your place. You quoted me a list of achievements as long as your arm.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t only mine, were they? I was just a cog in the machine.”

“But that’s how things are done. No one’s ever the one guy who does whatever, it’s always a group effort in the real world.”

“Tell that to my parents,” Yoshi said with a snort. “I was headhunted into Disney when I was fourteen and to hear my parents talk, you’d think I was there to wear a mouse suit and get my picture taken with kids. Disney is cutting-edge, it’s right up there with NASA in the field of robotics, but somehow I was letting them down? When I told them I’d been chosen to head the team that built the first self-guided car in the world, they told me working on a team was like riding a bike with training wheels and nothing to brag about. Like…really? Nothing, literally nothing I could do was living up to my full potential, whatever that was supposed to be. The pressure was enormous, and that wasn’t even the worst part yet. The worst part came in…what was that, ‘91? ‘92? I’d done some redesigns for the audio-animatrons at Disneyland and it was a pretty big deal back in the day, so I scored an invite to meet some of the other youngbloods in the industry…and I got a reality check like a brick to the fricking face. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t the smartest or even the youngest kid in the room. I wasn’t special. I was good, okay, but I
sure wasn’t the best. You know what I was? I was seventeen and already burning out in the nicest of niche industries. I told my folks I wanted to quit and they lost their damn minds. Tears, shouting, the whole bit. How could I squander my genius? How could I even think such a thing after everything they’d done for me, everything they’d sacrificed? And my manager,” he added with a special sort of tone, “decided my moodiness was because I wasn’t sleeping well, so he gave me some sedatives to help with that. And peppers, so I could focus in the mornings. And mood stabilizers, which as you have probably guessed, only destabilized my mood even more. And he was a doctor, so of course he knew best. And I have to admit, in the beginning, it really seemed like the pills helped. I felt like I was getting things done again. I wasn’t,” he added with a rueful grin, “but I felt like I was. Lots of projects going in lots of directions, lots of…you know, momentum! But everything’s a work in progress. Nothing’s done. You know?”

Ana did not answer, but she thought of her aunt’s house. And Freddy’s, for that matter. Two huge, sprawling buildings full of empty rooms, half torn up, half put together…

“My work got worse,” Yoshi continued. “A lot worse. I don’t really remember much of that. I was high pretty much all the time for the next three years. And then, one day, I didn’t have a manager or a PR guy or an agent to ‘fill my prescriptions’ and I had to get a drug dealer like a frigging pleb. And then sell drugs so I could afford my own.”

“I was wondering when Rider would come into this,” Ana remarked.

“Yeah. And in all fairness to the guy, he told me I was going to get sloppy and I’d get caught and ruin my life. But what did he know? He was a drug dealer. I was a super genius.”

“Did you get sloppy?”

“Yup! And I got caught, but he was dead wrong on the last one. I didn’t ruin my life. I got fired, so the pressure bubble of that whole mess popped overnight. My lawyer made me a sweet deal—no jail time, no record, just rehab…and I need to come clean. That’s where I really picked up my name, in rehab. My parents never let me play video games. But I do kick absolute ass at Mario Kart, I never lied about that.”

The guilt on his face was so profound that Ana felt moved to reach out her foot and give his a sympathetic tap.

He smiled wanly, then shook it off and smiled for real. “It’s also where I got off the hard stuff and that alone really straightened a lot of stuff out. My folks were so ashamed by the scandal, they disowned me, so I don’t have to deal with that toxic bullshit anymore. Plus, I kept Rider’s name out of it, and when I got out of rehab and had nothing…you know, it sounds weird, but he was there for me. Put me up for a few weeks—at a pot farm, but still. It kept me solvent until I could get back on my feet.”

“Don’t ever tell anyone but me that part of the story,” Ana advised him. “Rider will kill the fuck out of you if you let it be known he’s a soft touch.”

“Believe me, I try not to even think the guy’s name too hard for fear he’ll pop up in front me like the damn Devil himself. Pills sure never made me freak out like I did the night he suddenly called me up telling me he had another job for me after, what? Eight years? Ten? And that job was you, Buster.” He put out his hand, and Bonnie, never one to leave a bro hanging, give him a high-five. Yoshi settled back with a broad grin, saying, “Washing out may have been the best thing that ever happened to me. My name may be mud on the company level, but I kept some individual contacts, which is a hell of an advantage in any industry. The work I do may not be exciting, but it pays the bills and I’m my own boss.”
“If you’re happy, that’s all that matters,” Ana agreed, thoughtlessly raising the bong in a salute to Chica, who said shit like that all the time.

“So that’s my story,” Yoshi concluded. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What was it like for you, being the smartest, youngest kid in every class?”

He caught her with a mouthful of smoke and it took her a while to cough it all out, laughing all the way. Even once she got herself under control, all she could manage at first was a hoarse, incredulous, “Seriously?”

He’d been smiling, bewilderedly trying to share some unknown joke, and now his smile faded. “Um…yeah?”

“Dude, I am so far from smart, it’s not even funny. Unless you’re stoned,” she acknowledged and coughed again, croaking, “Then it’s fucking hilarious.”

“Oh come on. I feel like a freaking caveman around you. I was terrified to even touch this guy,” he said, patting Freddy’s battery case. “No pictures, no video documentation, no schematics. Just me, taking something irreplaceable apart. Every time I think about having to put him back together without any kind of safety net, I want to pee myself a little, but you? I’m looking at your face right now and you don’t even see the problem. If it wasn’t for all the finicky stuff that comes with miscalibration, you’d slap him back together right now.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Ana said mildly. “I’m under the influence and he’s heavy machinery.”

“Yeah, whatever, you know what I mean. Look at this. Look at this!” He leaned out and popped Chica’s thigh casing open, exposing the bones of her leg, with all the modifications Ana had made. “Don’t think I didn’t notice this. The solder’s so fresh, I can smell it. I know you did it.”

“So?”

“So how long did it take you?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t looking at the clock. A couple hours at least.”

Yoshi clapped both hands to his face and groaned into them, then slapped his thighs and all but shouted, “That’s what I’m talking about!”

“What? Jesus! Why are you yelling at me?”

“A couple hours? Hours?! A couple days! That’s what it should have taken, if it could be done at all, which it can’t,” he said, pointing at her accusingly. “There might be a couple people alive today who could do it in one day, but I’m sure as hell not one of them, and I’m good, lady. But a couple hours? By hand? That’s impossible. The guys who built them probably couldn’t even do that, and it works, doesn’t it?”

“No,” said Ana, oddly defensive. “I mean, yeah, enough to walk around on, but it’s not a perfect fit, so it’s just a matter of time before it blows out on her.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, but it works!” he insisted. “That’s a big, big deal!”

“Why are you getting so keyed up about this?”
“Because they’re awesome!”

“Dude, you need to dial that down. It’s an animatronic animal band, not the cure for cancer.”

“Hey, there’s a lot of degrees for awesomeness, okay? Don’t gatekeep my joy. ‘Dial it down,’” he groused, glaring at her from under the fringe of his hair. “Lady, you need to dial it up. I honestly…I don’t know whether to laugh or get mad here. It’s like you’ve got the holy grail I’ve been chasing all my life and you’re using it as a popcorn bowl or something. Not out of ignorance, because you know what it is, but you don’t care about the holy grail and you need something to put your popcorn in!”

Ana was a little too stoned to get mad, but she tried. “Okay, first? Popcorn is fucking delicious and I would really like some right now.”

“Yeah,” Yoshi sighed. “Me, too.”

“And second, I’m here, aren’t I? I dropped my whole damn life and drove all day to get these guys to the best in the business, so don’t fucking tell me I don’t know what I’ve got.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said between calming puffs. “I know. I’m sorry, but you’ve got to understand…you just don’t see them the same way I do, because…you know…you see them every day. When I saw awesome every day, I didn’t appreciate it either. But…I…don’t anymore. I used to. I used to be the golden boy of robotics, and I…” He looked at the bong, laughed smoke, and set it aside. “I made a few mistakes, and now I make crawling zombies for Halloween and flying reindeer for Christmas and the occasional display piece for tourist traps and I…better than that. Okay? I may never be awesome again, but I’m way better than that. Okay? I may never be awesome again, but I’m way better than that. So being here, seeing them, working on them…? It’s like God Himself is smiling on me for the first time in almost twenty years, and you’re calling them an animatronic animal band like they’re the Countrytime Bears or the Banana Splits. And you know better. You’ve got to know better.” His attention wandered to Chica’s patchworked leg and he shook his head wonderingly. “I’m good, but damn, you are on another level entirely.”

“All I did was take something apart and put it together again. It’s about as miraculous as doing a jigsaw puzzle.”

“Yeah, right. If you were using pieces from a different puzzle that you just hand-cut to fit the pattern and still somehow made the same picture. Let me tell you something, lady. Real talk? These things are impossible. You know that, right? They should not exist. They are butter-soft sci-fi bullshit brought to walking, talking life and they’re amazing, but they’re impossible. I look at them and, wow, I don’t know what they are or how they work and they scare me a little…and meanwhile, you just took a broken leg off and built a new one like it was easy. It’s not easy. Tell me you know that. I think I could handle the crippling feelings of inadequacy better if I just knew that you knew how amazing you are.”

Ana shrugged uncomfortably. “I got a knack, that’s all. It doesn’t mean anything. It sure doesn’t mean I’m smart in any way that actually matters, it just means I’m good at putting shit together.”

“Good at putting shit together,” he echoed and covered his face again.

“No, come on. I had to repeat the sixth grade. I flunked everything. I flunked art, for God’s sake. I dropped out of the ninth grade with a straight-F average, and when I’m not working scut jobs at minimum wage or refurbing meth labs for my drug dealer, I’m not working at all. My life is legit better now than it has ever been before and it’s still a goddamn shipwreck. Oh knock it off,” she said irritably as more servos whined. “You know it’s true.”
Yoshi, who had been about to speak, clearly thought that was directed at him. He visibly swallowed some words, fidgeting, then went ahead and said, “Well…maybe…I mean, if that’s really how you feel, maybe you could come work for me.”

She laughed, groaned, and laughed some more.

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are, man, but it’s still funny.”

“But why not?” he pressed. “I know how this place looks, but I’m working on it and my contracts are solid. You can stay here until you find a place—no funny business, I swear!”

“I have a place,” she said with a bittersweet smile. “I need to get back to it. And you don’t need me. You know what you’re doing, you got a good thing here, and the last thing you need is someone like me fucking it all up for you. You’re a nice guy, Yoshi, but trust me, I’m no good for nice guys.” She tipped her head back, looking up at the tower of Bonnie’s familiar body, made strange by this angle. “I’ll make you wish you never met me, if I give you half a chance.”

Bonnie’s ears twitched, high above her.

Yoshi seemed to be having trouble thinking of what to say, which was understandable. Ana took pity on him and gave him an easy out.

“I got to get some sleep,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said with obvious relief. “Me, too. This was fun, though. We should do it again sometime.”

“You want to think twice before you give me a free pass to mooch off your stash, friend.”

“If you’re buying all the food while you’re here, it’s the least I can do.” He offered her a hand, which she didn’t need but did accept, helping her climb stiffly to her feet and watching as she took her first unsteady steps. “You sure you don’t want the bed? Instead of me, I mean! I’m not hitting on you, I swear! I’m just saying, it’s not too late to switch places.”

“I’m good,” she said as she opened the outside door for him and waved him through (without realizing it, she kicked one foot out in front of the other as she did it, nodding once, unconsciously imitating Blue’s habitual little bow every time he got the door for her). “See you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early,” he promised, backing out into the night.

“Crack of dawn.”

He finally went, locking the door behind him as a gallant gesture that was entirely pointless, considering he kept the key and could unlock it just as easily, but she appreciated the sentiment all the same. She switched off the workshop lights and moved to the window to watch him go, a little unsteady on her feet, maybe, but only a little.

“He’s gone,” she said at length. “Hopefully he’ll stay gone this time.”

“The guy can sure talk, can’t he?” Bonnie came over and had a look for himself, leaning in over her shoulder to share the small window with her. His warm chest pressed against her back, the rhythmic vibrations of his cooling fan in sync with her breaths. “I got to admit, I wasn’t expecting his life story.”
"I feel so sorry for him," Chica added. "No child is emotionally equipped to handle that kind of pressure. What kind of parent would put him through it? And then to just…abandon him for not meeting their impossible expectations!"

"He turned out all right," Ana said sleepily, leaning into Bonnie’s cracked side. She didn’t think about it. He was there, so she did it. He put his arm around her with the same distracted ease and it didn’t mean anything. "Nice guy. A little skittish, but he knows his shit. I’m feeling a lot better about him than I was this morning."

"Feeling lots o’ things tonight, ain’t ye," said Foxy in a flat, humorless tone matched by the hard shine in his yellow eye as he stared at her.


"Goodnight!"

"See you," said Bonnie, already poking through the drawers of Yoshi’s workspace. "Score. I found a deck of cards. You guys want to play some poker or something?"

"Aye, deal me in," she heard Foxy say as she walked away. "But I warn ye, I bluff, I cheat, and above all things, I be a sore loser when I don’t get what I want."

Ana’s heart tried to tell her something when her ears heard that, but whatever it was couldn’t penetrate the thick blue smoke filling up her brain. She left it all behind with the closing of a cheap door and flopped down onto Yoshi’s lumpy, uncomfortable couch. Just a loveseat, really, but she’d slept in worse beds. Even the smell of it, musty and sour and a bit smoky in spite of his preventative measures, resonated with that child-sized part of her and made everything feel a little more like home. She drowsed to the low grumble and hum of Yoshi’s computer as it labored steadily through its backlog of tasks, until the lines of reality blurred. For a second, it seemed perfectly plausible that the long drive to Yoshi’s place and everything that had happened after that was one big, tedious dream and now she’d half-woken up to find herself back in the pizzeria with Bonnie’s arms around her, listening to his cooling fan gasp and strain behind his cracked chestplate. With her last semi-conscious thought, she wondered if she’d remembered to lock the loading dock door, and even before she’d quite finished reassuring herself that she had, she was deep asleep.
Ana needn’t have doubted herself. All the doors back at the Old Quarry pizzeria were securely locked, and all the windows were boarded over on the outside and blacked off with heavy plastic on the inside. When the sun set, the restaurant’s automated power supply system changed from Open to Closed, and most of the ambience—the flashing lights in the arcade, the happy music endlessly looping through the speakers, the glowing stalactites and spooky sound effects in the Treasure Maze—switched off. All the animatronics from Brewster in the front lobby to waving Peggy at her signpost to the crows perched on the back mast in Pirate Cove powered down and were still.

All was silent.

At midnight, the power system’s settings changed again, from Closed to Night Shift, and the last lights went out. Throughout the pizzeria, the only sounds were the drumming of rain on the roof, the low hum of the cooler and freezer in the kitchen, and the droning of the fan in the security office that Ana had accidentally left on. Even the cameras stayed dark and still; they could still be activated during the Night Shift, but there was nothing in any of the rooms to watch.

However, it wasn’t quite as empty as it seemed. Soft scratching noises could have been heard moving from the crawlway into the air conditioning ducts, if anyone had been there to hear it. Soon after, a long clawed hand snaked out of one of the narrow ventilation pipes and found a gripping place. Something pulled itself out, like a stick figure drawing itself into existence by moonlight, unfolding and contorting until all at once, it became the Puppet, still balanced on one hand with its legs twisted up in unnatural angles, white face turning as it scanned the empty road.

Slowly, it brought its legs down, shifted its balance from its hand onto the footless pegs it walked upon, and stood, scanning the desert and the wooded foothills and the road that separated them, but mostly looking at the rain as it poured in sheets over the Puppet’s smooth, black body. It couldn’t feel the rain—not the cold or the wetness or the thousand pebbly points of impact—but it remembered how unpleasant it had once been and so it was annoyed anyway. It indulged these feelings for a moment, here where there were no cameras to mistake its sulkiness for defiance, and then it scurried to the edge of the roof and flipped itself acrobatically over, hanging from the eave for a moment so that a drop did the least amount of damage to its splintered wooden legs.

It ran across the parking lot on all fours, like some nightmarish spider that was missing half its legs but was still swift and venomous, stopping twice to try and listen through the wind and rain because it thought it heard something. Not a vehicle and not a person, but more like a radio…or like static between channels, in which the Puppet thought it could hear, if it could hear anything at all, a few words…or humming…but mostly just static.

Or the rain. Just the rain hitting the rocks. The microphones that acted as the Puppet’s ears had been top of the line when they were new…fifty years ago. Now they were old, clogged with dust and wet with rain, and maybe rusty. Did microphones rust? The Puppet didn’t know.

In any case, there was no one here and it could not afford to be distracted. It had a job to do.

The Puppet ran on.
Although it was not much faster in this body than its last one, it never got tired or lost its breath, couldn’t feel the cold or the wind, and was extremely flexible in its own wooden way. Despite having to cut across the desert (everyone in Mammon was probably asleep, but it wasn’t worth the risk of being spotted if a car happened by on their way to, say, vandalize an abandoned pizzeria), it reached Old Canyon Road within an hour. From there, it was only a short run to the security gate, where the Puppet easily slipped through the iron bars, and another somewhat longer run to the top of the cliffs, where Faust’s glass mansion stood watch over a dying town.

The Puppet approached with caution, staying just outside the effective range of the motion sensors positioned around the house. Many of the floodlights were on anyway, and this gave the Puppet pause. Perhaps they were sensitive enough to be triggered by the storm. Or perhaps they had been switched on?

The Puppet had stolen into this house many times in the last few months and it had always been empty. Not completely empty, not stripped of furniture or possessions, which meant whoever lived there was only temporarily away, or so it was hoped. And the Puppet did hope so, genuinely and not just because the dead man in the rotting rabbit suit hoped so. The Puppet’s human consciousness had not been erased or altered in any way when it had been transferred to this body; it had good memories of this place and of the man who lived here. Now, perhaps, that man had returned and even if the Puppet couldn’t find the keys it had been sent to retrieve, that would be good news to bring back.

There were cameras attached to some of the lights and, knowing there might be eyes behind those cameras, the Puppet stayed low and well back until it came to a shadowed place at the rear of the house where the master suite’s balcony overlooked the grounds. Ana Stark had to climb onto the roof of her truck to reach it, and even then, it hadn’t been an easy feat, but the Puppet was much taller, with claws made for catching even the smallest handholds or stabbing in new ones, and springs at the joints of its long limbs for extra flexibility. It could move in ways no human could and it was especially good at jumping. Now, if the door had been locked, that would have presented an insurmountable problem for it, but the Puppet knew this door was never locked. It opened it and crept inside.

The master suite’s furnishings had changed since the Puppet had been alive, but the style was very much the same as it had ever been. Despite the urgency of its appointed task, the Puppet lingered for some time, running a claw along the spines of the books that lined the tall shelves, plucking at the broad leaves of a potted plant, inspecting the contents of the medicine cabinet in the adjoining bathroom, and finally creeping up to the bedroom door and stealing a peek inside.

The lenses of its eyes whirred softly, adjusting to the darkness. The bedroom’s sole source of light came from the charging pad…and the two phones plugged into it. The Puppet stared at this, then pushed the door all the way open and drew itself up to its full height. Outside, the storm raged on, filling up the adjoining room with flashes of blue-white light, throwing the Puppet’s shadow long over the two figures that slept in the bed. The man was a stranger. So was the woman, at a first glance. At a second…

The Puppet moved closer, leaning far over until its cracked face was only inches from the sleeping woman’s. Pinpoints of silver light deep in the sockets of its eyes cast dim spotlights onto her tan, lined face, illuminating faint traces of scarring by her eyes, nose and chin where cosmetic work had once been done.

After a long moment, the Puppet drew back, looked around, and leaned out to pick up a tasteful leather purse. It rummaged through the contents, eventually trapping a driver’s license between two of its long claws and pulling it out to read it by the faint light of the charging pad. It looked back at
the woman, then (rather carelessly) replaced identification in purse and purse in chair before
looming over the bed again. It amused itself for some time by tracing the woman’s wrinkles in the
air just above her face and even if its expression could not change, it somehow managed to project
a sense of smugness at every sign of age it found.

At last, the Puppet reluctantly ended its game and withdrew from the bedroom. The hall outside the
master suite was empty, if not as dark as it usually was at night. The Puppet tapped a clawtip
against a new nightlight plugged into an outlet, then continued on its way, but when it reached the
next door, it opened it.

Four young girls slept inside, two sharing the bed, two more in sleeping bags on the floor. The
Puppet picked its way carefully across a minefield of glittery nail polish bottles and lip gloss,
bowls holding the remains of a midnight sundae party, and an assortment of phones and tablets to
reach the first sleeper. It crouched beside her for several minutes in silence, long legs bent around
its thin shoulders, before carefully smoothing back the dark cloud of her hair so it could press its
gaping mouth to the child’s cheek. It left as silently as it had come, leaving no sign that it had ever
been in the room, except perhaps nightmares.

It went room to room after that, its mission temporarily forgotten as it took inventory of each guest
in this uncharacteristically full house. Most slept through this visitation (although not as deeply as
they seemed to; quite a few of the youngest children had the same nightmare of a dark clown with
a white face, and once away from their dubious parents, would solemnly discuss the ‘ghost’ of
Grandpa Freddy’s house much the same way a young Ana and David had discussed the ‘monster’
in Aunt Easter’s locked basement). There was only one room which the Puppet did not get to
explore to its satisfaction, although it did open the door a crack and watch for quite some time as
Chad gave Faust’s live-in nurse an extensive oral interview.

When the Puppet ran out of rooms to explore upstairs, it made its way down to the ground floor
and eventually to the long hall that led to Faust’s office and the safe which was the sole reason for
coming here, and still it allowed itself to be diverted by every door it passed. In this way, it
rediscovered store rooms packed with furnishings and decorations bought for special occasions not
celebrated in decades, a coat check room that held coats and luggage for the first time in years, a
gentleman’s lounge where the drinking cabinet had to be locked (and already secretly unlocked
half a dozen times), but when it came to the room Ana had designated the ‘orgy room’, the Puppet
found what it had not been sent to look for but had nevertheless been hoping to find.

An adjustable bed, narrow and new enough that the Puppet would be able to smell the lingering
odor of the packing plastic it had been shipped in, if only it had a sense of smell. Toward the foot
of the bed, a motorized wheelchair had been parked, angled to allow easy access. Near the
headboard was a tall, wheeled table with two drawers and an extendable, angled surface on which
rested a closed laptop computer and a small hissing baby monitor. Safety rails flanked both sides of
the bed, cushioned to prevent accidental bruising. And in the bed lay an old man, aged face
composed and slender hands folded atop the sheet that covered him like a corpse laid out in his
coffin.

The Puppet crawled closer, then stood up somewhat awkwardly and walked the final distance. It
was not heavy, but the floor was polished hardwood, and the pegs of its legs made a distinct
knocking sound. The sleeping man frowned in his sleep, and as the Puppet reached out and slipped
its long fingers around the safety rails, he woke.

Lightning splashed across the sky, through the wall of windows that lined the hall, into this
improvised sickroom, pooling in the old man’s pale blue eyes.
They looked at each other, silent, as thunder shook the world.

When the storm faded again into drumming rain and distant mutters, the old man reached up. The Puppet met him. Their fingers wrapped around one another’s hands.

“Marion,” he said in a thick, medication-slurred voice. “How…did you…? How…? How…” His eyes clouded, began to close. “How good of you to come,” he mumbled and was once again asleep.

The Puppet gently released his hand and brushed its claws once through his forever-flyaway hair. The silver lights of its own eyes dimmed as it gazed at him, then shifted to the steady red light of a baby monitor positioned on the nearby table, and then it dropped back to all fours and crawled away. It shut the door behind it as quietly as it could, then crawled down the hall with no more interruptions to the office at the very end.

Once inside, it opened the secret panel in the south wall right away, but only had a few minutes to tap at the safe’s keypad before a bright yellow bar of light sliced in under the office door. The Puppet darted over, not to lock it, but to crack it open and watch a rather anxious and disheveled young lady jog barefooted down the hall and let herself into the old man’s room, followed at some distance by Chad, who was also disheveled but comfortably so in a pair of loose-fitting grey sweatpants and nothing more. He paused to look in at whatever was happening in the old man’s room, then looked at the door at the end of the hall.

The Puppet gingerly closed the door, then leapt to the other side of the room and pushed the button to seal off the safe again. As the secret panel slid shut, the Puppet ducked under the desk and pulled the executive chair over to further hide it from sight. When Chad opened the door, nothing could be seen of the Puppet except the twin points of its eyes shining out from the shadows, and those were not discernable after he switched on the overhead lights.

He, too, lost no time in opening the secret panel, but, like the Puppet, had no luck opening the safe. After a few minutes, he gave up and came to the desk, pulling the chair out with more force than necessary and dropping into its cushioned seat with a curse. He stretched his legs out, but the Puppet didn’t take up much room and avoiding contact wasn’t difficult. He rummaged through the desk in the listless manner of a man who knew he wasn’t going to find what he was looking for, but didn’t know where else to look, and it wasn’t long before he slammed the drawers shut.

“Stubborn old fuck,” he muttered, kicking back and onto his feet. “Why can’t you just die already?”

The Puppet’s eyes sparked a little brighter. It waited under the desk for Chad to leave, then crawled out from its hiding place, but if it had ever had any enthusiasm for its mission, that was long gone now. Its fingers played along the handle of the desk drawer without opening it as it stared at the door to the hallway, listening to Chad’s voice cajoling the girl away from his grandfather’s bed and back into his. The girl protested, and while the Puppet’s microphones couldn’t make out every word, she seemed to be saying something about the old man and how she maybe should stay with him for a while.

The Puppet looked at the wall with the safe concealed behind it, then moved away from the desk and over to the door, cracking it open for a cautious peek. It was rewarded with a glimpse of Chad just before he walked into Faust’s room.

“Don’t be stupid,” his voice came back. “He’s completely out of it. Let’s go.”

“But he’s so restless…What if he tries to get up? He could fall again!”
“Hey, Grandad! I’m going to take Stevie upstairs and rail her until she needs that chair more than you do. Think you can stay in bed for an hour or two until we’re done?” Another pause, during which the old man’s weak voice could only faintly be heard, then another laugh. “See? He says it’s fine.”

Chad reappeared in the hall, towing a pouty brunette behind him by the wrist.

“I can’t believe you did that!” she fumed. “That isn’t funny!”

“Oh, grow a sense of humor. You think he’s going to remember any of that in the morning? Hell, I could do you right on top of him and he wouldn’t remember it. He’s got enough dilaudid in him to drop an elephant.”

“I just don’t think—”

“Fortunately, I’m not asking you to think. I’m telling you to get back in bed, and to punish you for making me say it twice, you’re going to have to take your clothes off right here, right now.”

The girl stepped back, blushing, and whisper-hissed, “I’m not doing that!”

“Yeah, you are,” Chad replied comfortably, leaning himself against the wall.

“No, I’m not!”

“Yeah, you are. And you better do it fast and get your ass upstairs, because the longer we stand around, the better the odds of one of those snot-faced bastards wandering down for a glass of wawa and finding us, and if you say one more word, you’re not only going to have to get naked, but you’re also going to have to give me a blowjob before I let you go upstairs.”

“You going to make me?”

“I don’t have to make you. You want to. Yeah, laugh at me,” he said as she tossed her hair, “but you know you want to. You strut around in your flat heels and your poly-blend scrubs and your sensible haircut like you’re some halo-wearing angel of healing, but we both know the most glamorous part of your job is filling out the paperwork instead of wiping up drool, puke, piss and shit. Which is probably why you let your elderly, invalid client’s grandson finger you within an hour of meeting me, and six hours after that, you were jacking me off in the back row of the theater while a roomful of sugared-up kids watched cartoons on the big screen. Admit it,” he said, giving the very subdued girl a playful chuck under her downcast chin. “The only reason you waited this long to fuck was so you had a chance to go get that sexy little matching bra and panty set you couldn’t wait to show me instead of the sports bra and holey thunderpants I bet you usually wear. So don’t give me the prissy princess act now. It’s a little too late to pull it off after you’ve been sluttin it up for two days straight.”

“Don’t…Don’t call me that.”

“What, a slut? Why not?”

“It’s a dirty word.”

“So? You’re a dirty girl, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“No?”
“No, I’m not, and I… I don’t like it when you talk like that!”

The Puppet rolled the tiny lights of its eyes.

Chad heaved a groaning sigh and turned around. “Okay, fine. I’m not playing this game, Miss Stannick. Bye.”

“Wait.” She ran after him, catching at his hand only to have him pull away and give her a little shove back. “Wait!”

“For what? I don’t need a nurse. I want a dirty girl who wants to be my slut and you don’t like that, so—”

“Wait! I can…”

Chad stopped and looked back. “Yeah?”

The girl shifted from foot to foot, avoiding his direct smirking stare. “I can do it.”

“Do what? Say it.”

“I can… be your…”

The Puppet’s fingers flexed impatiently on the door’s handle.

The girl finally stopped squirming and whispered, “Slut.”

“Prove it.”

The girl made uncomfortable noises, but obeyed and soon stood naked in the hall outside Faust’s room, blushing as she folded her clothes into neat squares and stacked them together.

“Not bad,” Chad said, giving her bare ass a playful slap. “You know, if you ever decide nursing’s not your thing, you could probably make some decent bank as a stripper. They got a place a few miles down the road called the Wagon Wheel. You ever been?”

“Of course not!”

“Then I should take you some time. Buy you a lap dance.”

“Wh-What? I could never—”

“You want to think before you say ‘never’ to me. I just might believe you and find some other girl, one who doesn’t lie to me about wanting to be my slut and who’s actually happy when I offer lessons on how to do it right. Because I like you, Stevie, but I’m not going to waste my time with someone who doesn’t really want to be with me.”

“I do!”

“Well then, you need to understand what that means. I’m not some clueless old cuck like Grand-dad. I don’t have to impress women, I own them. If I want to go out, we’re going out. If I want to stay in, we’re staying in. If I buy you a neko set, you don’t ask me why. You put the ears and the mitts on and show me your ass so I can put the tail in, and then you are my cat-girl until I tell you you’re not. If I tell you I like blondes, you don’t dye your hair, you go the fuck out and find me a hot blonde, and if you’re very good, I’ll let you join us. If I do something that embarrasses you or scares you or hurts, too damn bad. I like it when you blush. I like it when you shiver. I love it when
you cry. Don’t you ever make the mistake of thinking you’re the queen just because you’re on my arm. You’re the king’s whore and if you’re not happy being the king’s whore, there’s the door. I can find another one like you tomorrow. Where is someone like you ever going to find another one like me?”

The girl didn’t answer.

In the office, the Puppet touched its sexless body wistfully and thought how true that old adage was, that youth was wasted on the young, and life wasted on the living.

“So are you done pouting or what?” Chad asked.

She nodded.

“Smile,” he ordered and she must have done it, because he smiled back and kissed her. “Okay then,” he said gently. “Let’s go.”

Off they went, their footsteps receding as they turned the corner at the end of the hall.

The Puppet watched them go, then glanced at the back wall with the secret space behind it. It knew what it should do and it knew there would be consequences for failure, but self-denial had never been one of the Puppet’s qualities, even when it had been human. It opened the door wider and slipped out, leaving the safe and its mission behind it. It knew there would be consequences for failure, but self-denial had never been one of the Puppet’s qualities, even when it had been human. It opened the door wider and slipped out, leaving the safe and its mission behind it. It stopped in again at Faust’s room long enough to make sure the old man was comfortable, then returned to the master suite and out onto the balcony, but did not jump down to the ground below. It climbed up onto the roof instead, and when it found the window with the best view of Chad’s bed, it settled in to watch.

By the time the show was over, the storm had moved on. Lightning still lashed up the skies far out over the desert’s horizon, but here, the rain had slackened and glimmers of moonlight could be seen through the thinning clouds. The Puppet adjusted its eyes to the best of its limited ability and began to make its way down the canyon cliffs. It did not run when it reached the desert floor. It had been sent on a mission and while it knew it had never had much chance of success, it was in no rush to disappoint its master.

The Puppet headed back, wandering from desert to road and back again as its moods took it, walking on two legs more and more often, and occasionally stopping just to look at its hands. The last of the clouds blew away as it walked, revealing a sky that was clear and deep and impossibly full of stars. The thirsty desert drank off the stormwater, leaving nothing but a spectral shine on its surface. To the Puppet, the pizzeria perched atop the bluff it also thought of as Edge of Nowhere looked like a charcoal sketch of an abandoned lighthouse, suspended on a rocky shoal between ocean and sky. There was even a light, small and yellow, that seemed to float above the pizzeria at the top of a vanished tower.

Romantic notion, but the Puppet knew better. It was no ghost-light, just the lamp at the end of the walkway in the front yard of the great stone house where the Puppet used to live. As the Puppet stared at it, thinking nostalgic thoughts of those years, the light went out. The man who lived there now had just shut it off. The man who lived there now had just shut it off. It gave the Puppet a pang to think of him putting himself to bed after spending the long night pacing in the empty halls, hugging on his plushie bunny for comfort as the thunder raged outside, perhaps even turning on the light in the hopes that the Puppet would see it and come to console him. Maybe tomorrow, the Puppet would be allowed to run to town and bring him presents instead of going off on another pointless excursion to Faust’s house, but tonight, it had to get home.

Now that the rain had stopped, the desert was disturbingly quiet, but the Puppet was depressed and
distracted and although it had been hearing the faint scratchy pulses of static as it crossed the vast broken parking lot, it hadn’t really noticed them. What it finally noticed—and only because it nearly stepped on it—was a large chunk of pink plastic lying in a rain puddle, round at one end and tapering to a sharp point.

The Puppet stared at it for a while, seeing its face reflected in ripples above it, angled almost so that the plastic piece seemed to be floating over its own chest. In its present morose mood, the Puppet thought the piece looked like half a heart…a broken heart.

As the Puppet picked it up, the static it had been hearing for some time, suddenly stopped. Only in its absence did the Puppet finally track the source to a heap of trash nearby, seen, like the static had been heard, but not noticed until now, when it was too late. A white fox head, still impressively intact, lifted itself out of the mess of animatronic parts and wire, rotting plushies and crumpled paper, wet rags and dead animals that was its body and turned until the Puppet could see its eyes—one broken camera and one red desert rock.

A feminine voice, small and scratchy, came from the speaker dangling under the head’s jaw. “Foxy? Is that you?”

The Puppet, frozen with fear, did not move.

The head bobbed on its long, snake-like neck. The speaker hissed and crackled for a few seconds before the girl’s voice spoke again, scarcely louder than a whisper. “I was bad again…I think. I taste blood…in my mouth. I’m lost. I can’t get backstage. I can’t see. I’m bleeding from my eyes.”

The piece of plastic dropped from the Puppet’s unfeeling hand and hit the puddle with a splash.

The broken ears atop the head twitched. The long neck stretched out, dropping crayons and bits of wire and rat bones as the thing pushed her head closer to the puddle, closer to the Puppet. “Foxy, where are you?”

A limb unfolded itself from the ruins of her body and reached out, grasping at the air until it found the ground. Impossible to say now whether it had been an arm or a leg once, or even if it had originally belonged to her. After the Bite of ’87, most of her major joints had been replaced so they were all the same size, with a few extra sockets and coupling joints installed around her frame.

When the kids got bored with pulling her apart and putting her back together the way she used to be, they could now put feet on her hands, put arms on her hips, plug in a wagging tail on the top of her head…the possibilities were endless. She had three legs now, six arms, two hands, four feet, two tails, and of course, the second head and one flapping wing that was all that remained of the animatronic parrot that used to ride on Foxanne’s shoulder, back when she’d been Foxanne…before she’d been broken on the rack in Kiddie Cove, subjected to electric shocks to make her ‘dance’ on the table, pulled apart and put together and pulled apart again while music played through the speakers and all the children laughed.

A part of her had never left that table. She still lived in those memories, although she would not have recognized the name Foxanne if she heard it again, no more than she would have recognized “Polly Pull-A-Part” or even Naomi Taylor, whose last memory—the taste of blood in her mouth as the Devil kissed her to sleep—haunted every moment of this nightmarish life. She had no name now, only the mangle of her mind, full of colors and sounds without sense, incapable of reasoning thought.

Arms and legs coiled around each other with surprising grace as Mangle raised herself off the wet ground. Mangle herself did not consciously direct them. She wanted to move and, like the pili of a unicellular organism, they moved her, sinking the hooked claws that tipped her interchangeable
hands and feet into whatever was there, pulling or pushing as necessary while the rest of her body hung suspended at the center of these many limbs. When chunks of the parking lot broke off in her grip, she ate them, metal jaws easily breaking the asphalt down into smaller pieces that tumbled down her throat, plinked musically over her battery case and off her ribs, then either got trapped in the pockets of trash with which she had stuffed herself over the years or fell out from her open belly back onto the parking lot.

Until this point, the Puppet had not moved. It crouched, one hand still raised and curled around the empty space where the plastic piece used to be, watching in frozen terror as Mangle twisted and lurched closer and closer. Mangle couldn’t see it, hadn’t yet realized it was any different from any other part of the lifeless landscape surrounding her. She couldn’t think, didn’t know where she was, but whether she consciously knew it or not, her CPU’s pathing program registered her position relative to the Parts Room backstage and compelled her to go to the repair dock there and wait for a full diagnostics sweep.

The Puppet should have known all this. If it had been thinking, it should have known that if it just kept quiet and didn’t move, Mangle would leave on her own soon enough. But the Puppet wasn’t used to doing its own thinking and never had a lot of nerve. As Mangle crawled nearer, the Puppet’s paralysis broke. It would have screamed if it still had its speaker, which was the very worst thing it could have done. As it was, it did the next-worst thing.

It ran.

Mangle knew a split-second of confusion and fear as the Puppet sprang away. She couldn’t see, could only hear…and remember. The Puppet’s legs knocked on the hardtop, but Mangle heard heeled shoes running down a long hall…

(purple shoes brand new bought that afternoon as a surprise because she knew it was his favorite color and they were so new so stiff too tight and the heels were like spikes tall and too narrow she was afraid to walk down the stairs so sure she’d fall and break her ankle but he said if she fell he’d carry her and it was just a little further and there was a special room a special place he wanted to take her and she wanted to be special for him wanted marion to see that she was the special one now she was so special so special and beautiful he told her she was beautiful as he cut the buttons off her dress with his sharp knife and the straps of her brand new bra and the sides of her panties and he kept cutting kept cutting kept cutting but he left her shoes on the stupid shoes the purple shoes she wore just for him purple and red now so red because she was so special and she couldn’t run in these goddamn shoes and she probably did break her ankle after all but she couldn’t even tell because there was so much other pain so much red so much blood and she could feel the bleeding feel it smell it taste it but it wasn’t over wasn’t even close he just picked her up like he promised he would and carried her back to his special place with the bed and the heads and the knife)

She did not understand the pictures and phantom sensations chewing up her brain, but some buried part of her knew how it would end and it frightened her. She thrashed, snapping and clawing all around her like these memories were an enemy she could kill, only to lose her precarious balance and fall into a shallow pothole, where she thrashed, churning rainwater into mud. She didn’t know where she was. Everything was open and full of sounds she couldn’t identify. The world had swallowed her and now it was pulling her apart again, building her back as a person she could not remember ever being, bringing her to life just to kill her again. And again. And again.

Trapped inside herself, Mangle fled the only way she could. She went black.

Instantly, her terrified struggles ceased. Her body righted itself. Her ears rotated, microphones
taking everything in and audio program cleaning it up, filtering out ambient noise one by one until all it was left with was the Puppet. Once pinpointed, every surviving sensor in Mangle’s system locked on her target. Her speaker crackled once, then blatted out a series of whistles, bells and electronic tones at maximum volume as her hunting protocols booted up and overrode all other directives.

The Puppet saw none of this as it bounded across the lot, but it knew what that sound meant. Panic briefly swelled even larger than before, enveloping her like a second, silent storm, and at its nearly-quiet eye, one thought: It was running the wrong way.

Because Mangle had been between it and the pizzeria when the Puppet had first stumbled across her, running away from her meant running away from the building and instead toward…what? There were a few dozen Joshua trees arranged around the edge of the bluff on which the pizzeria had been built, none of them tall enough to take the Puppet out of Mangle’s reach. Most were dead anyway, and unlikely to hold up under even the Puppet’s slight weight, let alone the savagery of Mangle’s claws. Beyond the trees on this side of the bluff was a fifty-foot drop where a descent meant climbing on wet rocks loosened by heavy rain. Boulders that had already succumbed littered the base of the bluff, and while the Puppet had no bones to break, its body was old, dry wood over an industrial steel frame. Just because it could survive a fall didn’t mean it could still run afterwards. And even if it reached the desert floor, where would it go from there? It was faster than it had been in its human body, but not a lot faster, and Mangle was slower now than when she’d been whole, but she was still faster than a human. How much faster? The Puppet didn’t know, but it wasn’t ready to bet its life on winning this race.

It had been a long time since the Puppet had last thought of itself as ‘alive,’ but in that moment, all those years were wiped away as easily as a crying face drawn in steam on a window and for one terrifying endless second, it was not the Puppet, but Marion Blaylock, not wood and wire and steel, but flesh and blood and bone. She had a heart and it was racing in terror, had breath hot and sour with adrenaline aching in her breast, had a son who would never see his mother again, and it was that fear that was greatest, that primal bolt of fear-lightning that struck down through the storm of her panic and burned it all away.

She pivoted, legs skidding out in front of her, stripping away paint from her footless heels all the way to her hip on the left side, then scrambled up again and ran for the pizzeria. She tried not to look at Mangle, but the cameras of her eyes brought everything into sharp focus indiscriminately. She could see the bulk of her monstrous body closing the distance between them, gouging up fresh potholes and splashing through old ones, her jaws already snapping in anticipation of the kill. Then Mangle was behind her, close enough that Marion imagined she could feel hot breath blowing on her bare back, imagined she could smell it—the familiar if long-forgotten stink of oil and blood. She had not felt pain in twelve years, but she would feel it next, she knew. Mangle’s claws would punch through her skin, hook into bone, pull her back to those jaws. Death would not be quick, unless Mangle bit through her skull and destroyed her CPU. Nothing else could really kill her. Even if her mechanical heart were ripped from her chest and scattered over the ground in front of her, it would take at least two minutes for her CPU to shut down for lack of power.

She knew about time, how it stretches to fill certain spaces. Two minutes could be an eternity when you were waiting to die. She’d died before. She remembered.

Marion had no strength to gather, no adrenaline to fuel one final burst of speed. She didn’t even have a voice to utter one last desperate prayer or time to wonder what kind of God would answer it, coming from her. She had only this moment and then it was gone.

She jumped, kicking off from the ground with all the considerable force this body could provide
and reaching desperately out for the eaves that overhung the loading dock. An easy jump to make from the roof of Ana’s truck if she left it parked here, or from the top of the fence that surrounded the playground if she hadn’t, but not one Marion had ever attempted from ground-level.

The very tips of her claws caught the very edge of the rain-gutter, enough to keep her from falling back into Mangle’s reach, not enough for a good grip. Instead of flipping acrobatically up and onto the roof as she had done a thousand times before, she swung forward and her lower half crashed into the loading dock door.

Immediately afterward, Mangle slammed into the concrete ledge of the dock, breaking off the weathered safety rail with the force of her impact. She seized it in her jaws, bending and biting at the rusted metal bar while Marion hung by three fingers just above her thrashing body. If Marion could just hold still and stay quiet, Mangle would have surely moved on once she was satisfied that her ‘prey’ was dead, but seeing the rail crushed and bent in Mangle’s jaws, fear overtook her once again. She flailed for a new grip on the gutters, her entire body bucking and clawing…and kicking.

Mangle’s evisceration of the safety rail made some noise.

Marion’s legs drumming on the loading dock door made even more.

Mangle’s ears twitched. Her long neck twisted around and up, a length of rail still pinned between her jaws. Her eyes, one broken camera and one round stone, saw nothing as the Puppet scrambled over the eaves, but she listened.

Mangle’s twisted body reared up, tracking the sounds of the Puppet’s uncharacteristically clumsy footsteps, and as she did so, her many arms and legs scraped up over the side of the loading dock and found a flat surface. She had no conscious thoughts, but her navigational systems processed this information and rewrote the barrier before her as a platform of finite, undetermined proportions.

While the Puppet paced on the roof, reassuring herself through movement that she had indeed escaped, Mangle climbed onto the dock.

Extending her arms and legs and the twin whip-like tendrils of her tails, Mangle mapped out its dimensions until she discovered the wall. If she had moved a little to the left, or if she could just see, she’d have found the much weaker door instead and its evaluation would have changed dramatically, but the wall was enough to let her reach up along its face.

On the roof, the Puppet had regained enough of her composure to stop her aimless scuttling back and forth. She could hear Mangle moving around below her, of course, but the scratching of Mangle’s claws as she moved slowly up the side of the building toward the eaves was quieter, and therefore less worrisome, than the violence of her attack on the safety rail. Her human memories, her Marion-ness, had been too long-buried; the mother in her would have instantly known what it means when something that should be noisy goes suddenly quiet.

But the Puppet didn’t think about that. The Puppet checked herself for damage, twisting her long body around in ways only she could, inspecting every new chip and scratch while, behind her, one of Mangle’s hands groped up and came down, claws curling around the lip of the gutter. Another gutter would have pulled loose and dropped Mangle to shatter on the concrete block below. Hell, another gutter might not have survived the Puppet’s reckless climb, but Ana Stark had installed this one and Ana Stark did not half-ass a job. This roof was built to last another twenty years at least. No cheap vinyl here, no aluminum. This was a stainless steel gutter with roofing screws every six inches anchoring it to the building’s frame. It bent under Mangle’s weight, but it held her.
The Puppet took off her mask and wiped a blob of mud off its perfect white cheek, oblivious, as one hand after another after another came over the lip of the roof and found a grip. Then Mangle’s head rose up on its long neck, the white fox’s face broken away in places, exposing the mechanisms beneath. Static crackled from the speaker dangling on wires below her snapping jaws as she turned her head left to right, listening.

The Puppet put her mask back on and turned around and there was Mangle, looking blindly back at her, and after one thousand silent staring years, the race was on again.

The Puppet had only a few seconds advantage before Mangle pulled enough of her dangling body together to manage a chase. No time for finesse. The Puppet dropped to all fours and sprinted for the ventilation pipe she had crawled out of hours ago and dove in. This was a snug fit under any circumstances. The Puppet’s shoulders were only two inches narrower than the shaft was wide, which was clearance enough to crawl through, but the shaft made a right angle where it joined to the HVAC duct, and jumping in head-first was the very worst way to approach that bend. The Puppet had only just worked her head and one arm into the much wider air duct when she was yanked violently back. Not far—the same tight squeeze and sharp turn that hindered her now also prevented her from being easily extracted—but before it could happen again, the Puppet planted her long arms on either side of the duct’s opening and pulled, kicking with all her desperate might.

It worked. Mangle let go and the Puppet fled to the safety of the deep recesses of the ventilation system. Screaming, Mangle bit at the ventilation pipe, crushing and puncturing it and finally ripping it away. She could wedge her head inside the hole this opened, but no matter how she scratched and heaved, she couldn’t go further than her neck would extend, and at last, she had to pull herself free. Her hanging speaker caught on the base fixture and came away. The snaps and pops of static instantly silenced, but Mangle heard it fall onto the roof. She ate it, picked it up where it fell out of her, and ate it again, then lay down as a cat settles beside a mousehole, listening. Without stimulus to retrigger her hunting protocols, she would eventually come out of the black into the blind nightmare of her life. And although she did not know where she was or how she got there, her navigations system would report that she was inside the building’s perimeter and within her designated path of operations, so she simply moved to the area directly over the Parts Room and lay down again, patching herself up as best she could and eating the pieces that could not be salvaged.

As for the Puppet, a blind scramble through the air ducts and then the crawlway brought her to the basement seemingly in no time at all, where she swung herself gracefully out only to clatter to the concrete floor. She tried to get up and fell again, this time landing squarely on her face. The mask split in half—it had been broken once before and the glue that held it together had grown old and brittle—but the Puppet didn’t immediately notice. As she sat up, the leather strap that formerly held her mask to the front of her head slipped around her neck. It was the sound of the porcelain pieces of her face tapping at her flat wooden chest that made her look down, and such was her confused state of mind that at first she thought she was looking at a bra, even though it had been twelve years and another lifetime ago since she’d last worn one. Belatedly, she felt at her face, her claws sliding over the perfectly smooth plane of the front of her head. She had no nose, no mouth, not even bumps to show where they should have been…nothing but her eyes, glowing out from lidless sockets.

The dead man had been sitting at the security desk—he hadn’t left the chair since the power had come on, even now, when there was nothing in the empty building above them to look at—and now he leaned to one side, letting the light from the monitors fall over her.

Now she saw her knee. One of the springs had popped loose. She stared and stared and stared and finally took it and carefully fit the hooked end back into the proper hole on its joint. Then she just
sat and held the broken halves of her face in her hands, making no effort to test the stability of her simple repair, because below the knee, there were three painted stripes—white and black and white again—and then an ugly splintered mess and then nothing.

Without a biological system, it was probably impossible to be in shock. Nevertheless, she was in something very much like it, enough that the rest of the world—and the man who had been her whole world since the day he’d first smiled at her—ceased to exist. She was alone with herself and her own broken body until the rusty scream of metal on metal woke her out of herself.

The dead man was going through the drawers of the desk, fighting them open, banging them closed, and eventually coming up with a roll of duct tape. “A temporary setback,” he told her, beckoning. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll be out of that body soon. All you got to do is make it work until Ana’s back. Come on, give me your leg and I’ll put it on for you. Where is it?” He bent, looking under the desk, then sat up, peering at the opening to the pipeshaft. “You lose it in the maze or…?”

Although it had been months since the Puppet had a voice, she had never lost the habit of speech. She answered, but the words that came so easily to her mind died on the wires sticking out of her throat where her speaker used to be. She clutched at her neck, then began to gesture, making biting motions with her hands and pointing wildly upward.

“What are you saying, something…bit it off? What do you mean? Like a dog?”

The Puppet shook her head, her movements growing more forceful and less coherent until it occurred to her to cover one eye and make a hook-shape with the long fingers of her other hand.

The dead man’s eyes sparked. “Foxy? They’re back?” He sent a sharp glance at the monitors, which still showed him the same empty rooms he’d been staring at all night, and then a flinch arced through his ears and he looked back at the Puppet, as wide-eyed as his failing facial mechanisms could manage. “Wait a minute, are you trying to say Foxanne? Are you telling me the fucking Mangle is back?”

The Puppet nodded, sagging back into a forlorn huddle and clutching at the stump below her right knee.

“I thought they got rid of her months ago. Where has she been all this time? No, don’t try to answer that, I know you don’t know. I don’t suppose you took her down?”

The Puppet shook her head, making silent excuses with her hands which the dead man impatiently waved away.

“Yeah, yeah, I knew it wasn’t likely. Well, where is she now? Back in the crawlway? No? That’s a relief. Where, then? Slow down…The roof? Okay…okay, that’s workable. Did you get the keys?”

The Puppet had been mute; now it was speechless. It stared at the dead man, arms still raised in its last incomplete gesture, as if it were truly seeing him for the very first time.

One of the rabbit’s ears flattened. The other, broken off at the hinge, only twitched. He shoved himself back from the desk and onto his feet, lurching toward her in that zombie walk that still haunted Ana’s nightmares after seeing it only once on Mike Schmidt’s tablet, months ago. The Puppet shrank back, but did not fight when he reached for her, seizing her by her limp shoulders and yanking her up. She staggered, trying to find her balance on one peg-like leg and when she almost had it, he gave her a single hard shake, so that her leg twisted out from under her and she sagged in his grip, held and supported only by his clenched fists.
“You,” he said, speaker crackling with the quiet force of his anger.

The Puppet flinched, covering her featureless face with her claws.

“—are the most important thing in the world to me.”

The Puppet flinched again, then slowly spread her claws and peeped between them.

The dead man pulled her roughly closer, inches from the rotted grinning rabbit head that was his face now. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he snarled. “I don’t even want to think about that. I need you.”

The Puppet shivered. Her hands lowered slowly from her face and came to skittish rest on his wrists.

“You’re the only one I have now, the only one I’ve ever been able to really trust. I can’t lose you.” He gave her another shake, harder, and released her, letting her spill onto the floor at his feet. “I know Foxanne scares you. You should be scared. She’ll kill you and there’s nothing you can do to stop her, but I can shut her down. All I have to do is get close enough and I can put her on standby with a voice command. Hell, I can fry her neural net with the right words and if I have to, I’ll go face-to-face with the crazy bitch and I’ll kill her with my bare hands, because there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Mare, but I can’t do any of it from in here!”

The last word was a roar of feedback and static. The dead man swung around with a blatt of wordless frustration and punched the wall next to the room’s only door, careful even in his rage not to hit the keypad—a touchscreen, dark now, and a single star-shaped keyhole centered below it. He stared at this, venting his cooling system in slow, deliberate pulses that were not breaths, no matter how hard he pretended they were. “I’d risk my life for you without hesitation,” the rusty speaker snarled, “and if you loved me like you say you do, you’d do the same. You’d risk anything to free me, but instead, you seem to think that this—” He punched the wall again, which had no effect at all on the concrete, but did considerable damage to his fist. “—is okay. That this place, this hell where we’re boxed in with those…those walking mechanical abortions is the happily-ever-after that we did everything for! Is that it? Is this what you wanted?”

Silence.

He glanced around.

The Puppet, still huddled on the floor where she’d fallen, shook her head.

“Then you got the keys, right? You’d never come back to me without the keys…right?”

The Puppet drew her long body in a little smaller and did not answer.

The dead man’s eyes whined, turning from solid white circles sunk in the head’s sockets to white rings around rapidly growing black pupils.

The Puppet raised a hand imploringly, looked around, then lifted off the pieces of her mask and set them aside, upside-down, where the damage wouldn’t show. This done, she crawled over to one of the room’s few furnishings—a steel table fitted with restraints—and crouched under it. Using the tip of one claw as a pencil (or a nib), she scratched at the floor, where the blood spilled in this room by five lucky golden ticket winners during the Grand Opening’s closing ceremonies had dried into a black crust.

The dead man grunted, watching her through his filthy eyes, then jerked his chin in that direction
and raised a beckoning arm. “Not you,” he snapped as nearly all the servile things occupying this prison with him surged forward. “When has it ever been you I wanted, you useless little shits? Go lie down!” He pointed. “You.”

Hiding out of sight of her brothers and sister, trying very hard to be invisible, Peggy Pigtailed slowly climbed down off the Press. Her pretty pink and black hooves tapped at the concrete floor as she crept over to the Puppet. “She’s writing.”

“No shit. What’s she saying? Read it out to me.”

Peggy switched the lights of her eyes on and bent over to read over the Puppet’s narrow shoulders. “Too many…people.”

The dead man scowled, his ear lifting up somewhere between curious and furious. “What people? There shouldn’t be anyone there if...” Dark emotions shivered through his ear. “Is that little shit throwing a goddamn party? Or...did he sell the house? I’ll kill him if he did. Who’s living there now?”

The Puppet shook her head again and scratched some more.

“Oh, Abby,” read Peggy. “And a lot of other—”

“Abby? Who the hell is...wait a minute, my Abby? Abby Mills?”

The Puppet nodded.

“No kidding. Abby. So she finally came crawling back...” The dead man’s ear came all the way up and slowly folded back again. “He knew where she was the whole time, didn’t he? They’ve been in contact all these years. Huh.” He was quiet for a moment, then suddenly laughed, not hard and not long, but not angrily either, and at the end of it, his eyes were once more little white circles. “How’d she look?”

The Puppet looked at him, then wrote a single word.

“Old,” Peggy read.

The dead man laughed again, shaking his head. “Was Randy there?”

The Puppet wrote.

“Didn’t see him,” Peggy read. “Child...oh. I guess that’s ‘Chad,’ not ‘child.’ Chad was.” She hesitated, then timidly asked, “Who’s Chad?”

“No one important. Just a particularly stupid twig on the family tree. Not my side,” he stressed. “That’s Abby’s blood coming through. Nothing good was ever going to come out of Randy. Even the name is stupid,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over the rabbit’s snout. “Not that I’d want to waste a good name on a dumb kid, but I told her, Alexander if it’s a boy...and she told me if I didn’t marry her, I didn’t get a vote, and let me tell you, if she hadn’t been carrying my kid at the time, those would have been the last words she ever said to anyone.”

The rabbit’s eyes darkened, then flashed pale again as he laughed. “But that’s always been my problem, I’m too sentimental. I let her live...and the kid turned out to be Randy, that snot-nosed, mouth-breathing, bed-wetting dimwit.” The dead man laughed once, low and bitter, then shook his head again. “I swear there’s something in the water around here, something seeping out of the quarry, maybe. I should have had a hundred ankle-biters the way I went at it, but I barely had any
and most of them were defective.”

The Puppet had no features now, not even the painted ones on her mask, but she managed somehow to look hurt nonetheless.

The dead man glanced at her and his ears rotated out of their black mood into one that was almost as good as a smile. “I said ‘most,’ didn’t I? You grew me a good one, Mare. I just wish you could have grown me a couple more, and yeah,” he sighed as the Puppet dropped her eyes, “I know it was hard on you, being so young, and you really scared me there at the end, the way you were bleeding…but I still didn’t think they were going to take your works out. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad they did! They saved you and the baby and that’s all that mattered at the time. I’m just saying…” He raised his arms in an expansive shrug. “You gave me a good one, Mare…but there should have been more.”

The Puppet nodded without raising her head, accepting this reprimand without protest.

“At least one more. Like the kings of old would say, an heir and a spare. You know.” The dead man turned his head, looking through the agitated figures vying for his attention to the slumped shape in the far corner. Not an animatronic like these others, but another springlock suit. The first springlock suit, even—old Fredbear himself, of Fredbear’s Family Diner, or at least it had been, years ago. It hadn’t been Fredbear for almost thirty years now. It wasn’t much of anyone anymore. “Just in case something happened to the first one.”

The suit did nothing.

The dead man started to turn away, only to sigh and walk over. The suit did not respond to his approach in any way, but when the dead man placed one gentle hand on its slumped shoulder, a puff of dust blew out through its joints and the head raised itself off the motionless chest. The speaker set in its neck crackled. A voice, young and tired and confused but still recognizable, whispered, “Mom?”

“Dad,” the dead man corrected, and stroked the suit’s shoulder as it sagged forward again. He waited, but that appeared to be it. He couldn’t say he was surprised. “Whatever,” his speaker said as his cooling system vented a long sigh. “It is what it is. And now Abby’s back. Who else is there?”

Peggy watched the Puppet write and shook her head. “She keeps pointing at ‘a lot,’” and now she’s saying…Freddy was there.”

The dead man turned around, too fast for the suit entombing him. Something cracked inside him. A little fall of bone fragments spilled out and fell around his rusty metal feet. A pair of once-expensive black leather shoes was still strapped inside them, and inside those, another pair of feet. Moving carefully back to his chair at the security desk, the dead man sat so he couldn’t do more damage to a body that was already well beyond salvage. “What do you mean he was there? I thought he was…Where’s he been all this time?”

“Hospital,” Peggy told him, reading. “He…broke his leg or something? He’s in a wheelchair now.”

“Ah jeez.” The rabbit’s remaining ear lowered. “He’s been gone this long over a broken leg? That’s bad. God, I keep forgetting how old he is. We’ve got to get him out of that body before it’s too late, Mare. I’ll never understand why he did this,” he said, looking around the concrete walls, “but I love the stupid son of a bitch. I understand the feeling may not exactly be mutual at first, but I can fix that in the transfer. I can fix everything…if I had my eyes back, I mean…and my hands…” He looked at them, flexing the creaking fingers into fists, slamming them into the
desktop hard enough to leave fresh dents in an already well-cratered surface. “And if I could just get the fuck out of here!”

“She says he woke up when she found him,” Peggy read, “and he seemed like he was glad to see her.”

“Yeah? Yeah. See? We were always a team. Him and me…and you, Mare. We were family. And we’re going to be family again. It’s all going to be just like it used to be.”

“But he’s been gone a long time and now he’s home, so…she thinks that’s why everyone is there,” said Peggy. “The house is full of people and some of them were still awake. Chad was right there in the room with…the safe?”

The dead man nodded thoughtfully, then beckoned, continuing to hold out his arm as the Puppet crawled clumsily over to him and helping her climb up into his lap. He put his arms around her as she snuggled against the rabbit’s threadbare chest, stroking his metal fingers down her smooth wooden back. “You did the right thing, Mare. That’s not the kind of situation you can just kill your way out of if you’re seen. And hell, Freddy hates having people around. Probably just there to welcome him home and see if they can’t get money out of him or something. They won’t stay long.” He sighed, tipping his head back to glare at the ceiling while his hand continued to pet the Puppet. “And now the Mangle’s loose again. Things always got to get worse before they get better, huh? But listen…things’ll work out for us, baby. You said she’s on the roof, right? Not in the crawlway. You can just go out the front door, right?”

The Puppet did not answer, except to hug him a little tighter.

“Yeah, I know you’re scared. You should be. She’ll kill you if she can and without your voice, you can’t stop her. Don’t think I don’t know that and never think I don’t care. But—hey, look at me,” the dead man said, hooking two fingers under the Puppet’s chin and tipping her featureless face back until the silver points of her eyes had nowhere to go except to him. “But we’re not getting out of here without those keys, okay? And you are the only one who can get them, so that’s what you’ve got to do, even if there were a hundred Mangles out there. You don’t have to go yet,” he said, cuddling her closer. “We’ll give it a few days, let Abby play whatever game she thinks she’s playing until Freddy kicks her and all his other little well-wishers the hell out of our house. But then you’re going to be Daddy’s brave baby, right? And you’re going to go get those goddamn keys.”

After a long, tense silence, the Puppet nodded.

“That’s my girl,” the dead man crooned. “It won’t be much longer, Mare. It’s been a long time, but it’s really almost over. And once we’re out, I promise you, no one will ever lock us up again.”
Foxy spent the night in a bad mood, for which his own arse-headedness was only partly to blame. Cards had just not been a good idea. On the rare occasion that they played back at the pizzeria, whichever pizzeria that was, Freddy was always dealer (and, coincidentally, always won). His absence now cast a gloom over the good time they were supposed to be having. They didn’t fight, exactly, but there was some bickering over rules, sore losers and sore winners, and a lot of silence.

The quiet made it possible to listen through the thin walls that separated Yoshi’s workshop from the office where Ana thrashed and moaned in her sleep. Foxy was no expert, having only sat up with Ana on two previous occasions, but it didn’t take an expert to know that she was having a bad time of it tonight. Worse than usual? He didn’t know. It seemed to him that she’d done some twitching and mewing the other times, but she hadn’t exactly been sober then either. Maybe it was something to do with the smoking, maybe not. He didn’t know enough about Ana’s sleeping habits—or anyone’s sleeping habits—to have any kind of intelligent opinion on the reasons or wherefores. He only knew it was hard to listen to, and worse even than that was knowing Bon was listening too, and taking it just as hard. Maybe harder. Just like he had some kind of personal stake in the girl’s well-being.

“Just friends, me fuzzy arse,” Foxy muttered and tossed a few bolts in the poker pot.

Bonnie flicked an ear and looked stupidly around. “Huh?”

“I said, I see the lady’s bet and raise three bolts. What’s yer move, mate?”

Bonnie focused on the cards in his hand with obvious effort, frowning like it was the first time he’d ever seen them in his life. “Right,” he muttered, picking through the loose bolts in front of him. “So what are we up to? Three plus…? Did you call or raise, Chica?”

“Ye might find it easier to follow if ye paid attention,” Foxy remarked.

“I raised three,” Chica said, looking fretfully at her cards. “But I really should have folded again. This is a terrible hand.”

Foxy groaned.

“I haven’t had a good hand yet,” Chica complained. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Ye dealt ’em, luv,” Foxy reminded her.

“That’s not what I meant. And it’s not that I’m not having fun,” she added with earnest apology. “It’s just that the best I’ve done all night was that stupid pair of threes. I don’t have anything in this hand!”

“Then why did ye raise, ye featherhead?”

“I was bluffing!”

“Oh, good on ye, luv.” Foxy rolled his eyes. “Had me proper fooled. What about ye, Bon?”
“Uh huh,” Bonnie said vaguely. His ears—and his attention—had shifted to the office door again.

Foxy scowled and tapped his cards against the table as loud as he could, for all the good that did. In the other room, tired springs creaked as Ana rolled herself around some more. If he listened close, he could even hear the little sounds she made as she dreamed, faint but desperate, like the death cries of a rat caught in Foxanne’s jaws.

The image hooked on Foxy’s anemic conscience. He hadn’t thought about her in a while. Should have at least climbed down to visit with her the night before leaving on this trip. He’d meant to, planned to, but Ana had changed the departure date from “maybe this weekend” to “tomorrow” so fast, he hadn’t had time. And sure, maybe he could have made time. There’d been enough hours that last night, even after waiting up for Ana to come creeping in looking for her dashing captain to put her sails up for her, but hell, it weren’t like Foxanne were pining away for him. She slept most days, raged the rest, and only sometimes knew he was there even when she was calling out to him.

And for the first time, Foxy found himself wondering...What kind of life was that?

‘One worth saving,’ Foxy told himself brusquely, but the doubts remained. Was that even what he was doing? Easy enough to believe it when the only other choice was putting his hand through his pretty girl’s heart and watching the life bleed out of her poor, broken body, but was that saving her, to instead bury her alive and leave her in the lonely dark? Was he truly comforting a friend when he went to sing to her on his (less and less frequent) visits? Or was he tending a grave?

Foxy’s wandering thoughts snapped back to the here and now as Bonnie abruptly set down his cards and turned away from the table.

“Oh, can’t ye leave her alone for one bloody night?” Foxy snapped, then had to force a derisive laugh to dilute the venom in his words into mere scorn. “Have some dignity! And if’n ye can’t do that, have some common sense. She don’t need anyone fretting over her, she just needs some damn sleep.”

Bonnie’s ears briefly flattened, so it couldn’t be said he ignored him, but he limped on.

“Ye leave the table and ye forfeit yer hand!” Foxy warned, which was exactly as effective as he thought it would be. He put his own cards down—two pair, aces and eights—and flipped Bon’s over. “Straight flush,” he said loudly as Chica tried to hush him. “Best hand o’ the night and ye threw it away, for what? So ye can make a damn fool o’ yerself over a girl what ain’t even yers!”

Bonnie opened the door and ducked through. The room beyond was dark, lit only by the dim red, blue and yellow glow of various sleeping equipment, and Bon’s own eyes, of course, but that was enough to see Ana tangled up in blankets and bad dreams. As Foxy fumed from a distance, the big lummox struggled down onto one knee beside the couch and reached out for her shoulder. “Wake up,” he said softly. “Come on, baby girl. You’re okay now. Wake—”

Ana came up swinging, her wee fist smacking straight into the side of Bon’s muzzle hard enough to crack the shellac. Bon’s only response was to catch up her hands and hold them both together between his as he said soft words that Foxy’s mic, presently aimed at his own head under a flat ear, could not bring in clear. Didn’t much look like Ana heard them either. She stared at Bon, ice-blue eyes huge in her pale face until, right in the middle of whatever cozening crap he was nattering at her, she suddenly burst into tears.

Nothing in it. She’d broken down much the same just the other night. Only difference was, when the storm came on, she’d hid from Foxy, but she hugged on Bon’s neck.
And he hugged her back, big git.

“I killed you,” Ana moaned, her voice shaky with tears and muffled against Bonnie’s chest. “Oh God, I’m so sorry! I killed you!”

“You’re dreaming, baby,” Bonnie crooned, rocking her safe in his arms. “I’m right here and I’m fine.”

“I know it wasn’t you, but it was you,” she insisted sensibly. “It was you and I did it! I killed you!”

“Baby, I’m fine!” Bonnie said and even laughed a little. “Kind of hard to kill me when I’m not even technically—”

Ana shoved herself back (but still clenched her tiny fists in the seams of Bonnie’s shoulder casings, holding on to him). “Yes, you are!” she shouted into Bonnie’s big stupid face. “You are! You’re alive and it matters!” Her anger wavered, crumpled into pain. “It matters,” she whispered and off went the sprinklers out’n her eyes again.

Bonnie wrapped her up in his arms, folding his ears low over her shaking head, closing her off from the big, bad world into a smaller one that had only room for her and him.

Foxy watched them, thinking after all these years hearing the phrase, saying it, he himself finally knew how it tasted to eat his bloody heart out.

It was Chica who put an end to it, toddling over to gently shut the door. “Let’s give them some privacy,” she whispered, returning to the table to gather up the cards since the game was good and over. “He knows how to get her to talk, but it’ll be much easier if we’re not listening. Don’t listen, Foxy,” she admonished, since Foxy’s ear was in fact aimed at the wall, filtering out the little rise and fall of Ana’s voice from Bonnie’s. “If she wants you to know, she’ll tell you.”

“She tells me plenty,” Foxy grumped and took himself to the window. Not much to look at. Cloudy night, no stars, just a smudge of light on the horizon to prove there were people out there somewhere, living their lives without him.

Chica joined him, resting her fingertips on the dusty sill and tap-tap-tapping in her restless way. She looked at all the same things he looked at, but he’d wager she saw it all differently. He was tempted to ask, to give her a chance to divert her out of this dark pit in which he’d sunk himself, but before he could muster up the energy to do it, she had to go and say, “Gosh, I hope they get back together soon.”

“Well, they ain’t!” he snapped. He recovered himself in the few seconds it took Chica to shush him and anxiously check the closed door, and when she came back to him, he had his poker face on again. “Never were together and ye know it,” he told her gruffly. “If Bon were dumb enough to let himself believe they were, that makes him half the halfwit I always thought he was, but it still don’t mean there’s a ‘together’ to get back to. Ana were only funning around with him, precisely,” he emphasized, “because she didn’t think he was real! So don’t ye go making this some grand romance where they dance in and out of each other’s arms until they falls in love again, because that ain’t happening.”

“No, it isn’t,” Chica agreed. “They’re not falling in love ‘again’ because they never fell out of love in the first place, either of them.” When Foxy glared at her, Chica merely shrugged. “I hate to say it so bluntly, but you’re never around, Foxy. You don’t see them together, not like I do.”

That stung and without thinking, Foxy fired back: “Maybe not, but I sees her, and plenty of her at
that, and she sure don’t act like a girl in love with Bonnie when she’s with me.”

The meaning of those words made a near-audible whooshing noise as they passed clean over sweet Chica’s innocent head. “She loves him,” she insisted sadly. “She just…has intimacy issues. I’m sure it’s easier for her to pretend she never meant any of it, the same way it’s easier for her to fight with Freddy than to let him take care of her. Her whole sense of self is founded on not needing anyone for anything.”

“More o’ yer armchair psychobabble,” Foxy muttered, raking his hook down the side of his muzzle.

“Don’t do that, please.”

“What, call yer therapeutic credentials into question?”

Chica met his scorn with her most potent weapon—sincere sympathy. “Please don’t cut yourself.”

“Why the hell not?” he challenged, although he was sure that if he had not deliberately broken the bulbs on the insides of his pointy cheeks years ago, they’d be lit up now and blushing bright as a maiden having her first kiss. That he carved on himself from time to time was not much of a secret—for certain, there was no hiding the scars—but he didn’t do it in front of others. Not on purpose, anyway. “I ain’t hurting meself.”

He could see Chica trying in her unhappy way to find some non-confrontational response, and bless her, she found one.

“Yoshi took pictures. He’ll know it’s new damage.”

“Lots o’ ways crusty old animatronics can get banged up,” Foxy countered, but he folded his arms and went back to looking out the window.

In another few minutes—and long minutes they were, full of oceans of time and no wind at all to fill the sails of his thoughts—the office door opened again and Bonnie backed himself through it. Foxy scarcely got a glimpse of his girl’s pale arm flung out over the side of the sofa before Bonnie closed the door and turned around, his ears as low as a lop’s.

“Is she okay?” Chica ventured, tapping her fingertips.

“I don’t know. I mean, yeah,” Bonnie said, giving the door behind him a troubled glance as he returned to the card game they’d all abandoned. “She’s already asleep again. She wasn’t exactly awake in the first place.”

“Did she say anything?” Chica wanted to know next.

Bonnie shook his head. “Nothing that made much sense. She had a bad dream, is all. Something about the guy she…met on Halloween. I guess she dreamed it was me or something. I don’t know. She was half-asleep. And stoned,” he snapped at Foxy, misreading Foxy’s flat ear and narrow stare.

“Well, thank God ye were there to comfort her,” Foxy snapped back. “Don’t know what she’d do without ye. Ain’t like she’s been getting high and managing her own bad dreams all her damn life.”

“And you don’t think the situation here is a little special?”

“Oh, everything yer one and only does is special, according to ye.”
Bonnie’s ears rotated away from their melancholy droop and locked into an irritated, incredulous angle. “You’re seriously this pissed about a lousy card game?”

“I don’t give a toss about the bloody game!”

Bonnie rolled his eyes, blissfully unaware of how close he was to having a hook run right the hell through his stupid bunny face. “Okay, it’s going to be one of those days again. Awesome. Are you going to be like this the whole time we’re here? Oh wait, I forget. It’s obviously my fault. Do you mind telling me what the hell I did this time?”

Nothing. He couldn’t even rightly say Bon was flirting up Foxy’s girl, in lesser part because Bonnie’s brand of comforting had been perfectly above-board, and in greater part because as far as Ana had let it be known, she was no one’s girl. But on the other hand, Bon had gone tiptoeing into the lady’s room in the middle of the night and didn’t the bloke who had the job of lighting her powder get to say something about that?

Never mind. Bonnie hadn’t gone in there with any romantical notions, but only to fuss over a little whimpering. She’d been half asleep and buzzed besides. She probably wouldn’t even remember Bon’s snuggles in the morning, which was all the gelded git could give her, so never mind.

But he minded. He could not have said exactly what he minded or why, but he minded it.

Elsewhere in the world, Chica was smoothing out prickly feelings and Bonnie was at least pretending to go along with it, but Foxy wasn’t in the world anymore. He wasn’t in the black either. He was in someplace new, someplace pale and far distant where even his own thoughts and feelings might as well be a stranger’s.

“Look,” said Bonnie now, opening his hands and lowering his ears in a pissed-off-looking peace gesture. “I’m sorry. Whatever it is you’re up your own butt about—”

“Bonnie,” Chica sighed.

“—I’m sorry. Whether I did it or not. I don’t even care. Can we please just put it the hell behind us? Or if you don’t want to do that, can we wait until we’re back home to get into it so we don’t have to spend the next two weeks just soaking in your bad mood?”

Chica opened her beak for another peacemaking effort, only to close it again. She tapped her fingertips, peeking at Foxy from the very edges of her unhappy eyes, and didn’t say anything. That had all been said, too. Almost everything had been said, in fact, except the teensy tiny questions of just whose girl lay sleeping in the other room, whose job it was to wipe her tears as needed, and who’d better keep his goddamn bunny hands off her.

In the end, Foxy said nothing, but only because he didn’t trust himself to say anything at the moment. Not when every word wanted to turn in his mouth and come out as, of all things, the truth. But Bonnie couldn’t see the mercy behind his silence, only the flat shine in his eye and the black humor in his smile (because it was funny, damn him, and Foxy could never help but laugh when the joke stabbed itself in and twisted).

“Come on, man, what the hell is your—” Bonnie broke off there, venting his cooling system hard, then pushed his ears upright (not without a low creak of strain) and said, “Look, I’m willing to agree that I’m the asshole here if you’ll agree that this stupid trip is harder on Ana than any of us.” His eyes cut aside and turned slightly chagrined. “Except maybe Freddy. But Ana’s the one who’s got to spend the time and money to be here, not to mention whether she’ll still have a job when she
gets home, in addition to whatever else she’ll find at home once the postcard-writing jackasses in
town realize she’s not there to defend it if they decide to break a few windows or, hell, burn the
place down. Okay? She’s got a lot going on and she doesn’t know what to do about it, so she’s
doing what she always does and pretending it doesn’t matter, but it does. She’s worried, okay? And
if she doesn’t feel safe being worried, then I’ll be worried for her. I don’t care! I’ll be obnoxiously,
laughably, stupidly worried and if you want to call me out for it, fine, but don’t tell me to just leave
her alone, because she’s not fucking alone,” Bonnie spat with sudden furious intensity. He took
another short pause to cool and collect himself, then went on, almost calmly, “She’s not alone and
she shouldn’t have to act like she’s okay all the time just to make you happy.”

Foxy bristled. “I never said she did!”

“No, you never say anything, you just make fun of me because I won’t sit out here and play
fucking cards while she’s in there, miserable and alone. And what do you want to do about that if
I’m out here pretending that’s fine? Are you going to go in there and comfort her?”

Foxy kept his ear up, but couldn’t quite filter out the growl in his voice when he said, “Ye say that
like ye don’t think I could.”

Bonnie snorted. “Let’s just say that, seeing as you don’t even think there’s a reason to try, I have
some doubts.”

“Shows what ye know, don’t it?” Foxy made a conscious break on that line of thought before he
could say something he didn’t mean, or worse, something he did. Instead, and hopefully without a
discernable pause, he said, “I’ve been there for her plenty. When she really needs it, I’m always
there.”

“You’re there?!” One of Bonnie’s ears twitched. He tried to laugh and only spat static. “You’re
there, huh?”

“Bonnie,” Chica pleaded.

Bonnie ignored her, exploding, “Dude, you’re never there for anyone! We’ve been literally locked
up together in one place or another for something like fifty fucking years and even I barely see
you!”

“Did I say I were there for ye?”

Bonnie rolled his eyes savagely, nodding. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I forgot you’re
only there for the ones that need you.”

“Bonnie!” Chica snapped.

“Don’t get yer feathers in a ruffle, luv,” Foxy drawled. “He’s just speaking his mind, ain’t he?
Truth hurts, is all.”

“Oh, cry me a fucking river!” Bonnie swung around to point at him—one of Freddy’s habits when
he was good and pissed. “You’ve gone out of your way for years, for decades, to show us you
don’t give a rat’s ass about any one of us, and now I’m hurting your feelings?”

“Out o’ me way, eh? Since when have I even been considered part o’ the family?”

“Since forever, fuckhead!” Bonnie shouted. “You’re the one freezing us out!”

“Oh sure and it’s all me,” Foxy sneered. “Separate acts, separate stages, separate ends o’ the
bloody building—"

“I didn’t design the fucking restaurant!”

“And if ye did, I wouldn’t be in it at all, would I? Ye fucking hate me!”

“No, I don’t, you fucking tool! Because despite how hard you’ve worked at it all these years, you’re still my fucking family! I don’t always like you, but you’re my brother and I love you!”

“Oh fuck ye!”

“Fuck you, too!”

As if some invisible white flag shot up between them and meekly fluttered down again, they both shut up at the same time and stood, each silently fuming, avoiding one another’s eyes while Chica’s nervous fingers tapped out the time.

At last, still without looking at him, Foxy growled, “I’m sorry, mate. I am. I ain’t been meself.”

“Yeah. Must have been a rough…shit…lifetime. But especially the last few days.” Bon stopped himself there, vented some more heat, and then offered up his empty hands. “Just tell me we can please move on now.”

Foxy nodded, then shook his head, then laughed—that black bite of humor had him again in its teeth—and said, “I can’t, mate. I wish I could. Ye’ve no idea how much I wish this whole mess were settled between us, but it ain’t and until it is, we can’t be friends. Brothers, sure…but not friends.”

“We can’t even pretend? For two lousy weeks? Come on, man, meet me halfway on this.”

Foxy shook his head again, not without real regret. “Believe me when I say that’ll just make it worse.”

Bonnie rolled his eyes and raked a hand over the bald top of his head, then glanced at Freddy lying so still and in so many pieces on the table in the other end of the room—a tangible reminder of all the ways this was not the time to thrash this out. His ears lowered, then rose. When he looked at Foxy again, he was smiling. “Okay,” he said and put out his hand. “Here’s to holding grudges quietly until we can get home and fight ‘em out.”

“This is so unhealthy,” Chica murmured as Foxy offered his hook for a shake of confirmation.

“You want to play another hand?” Bonnie asked, nodding at the cards.

“Aye, why not? Passes the time. Ye want in on this, lass?”

Chica tipped her head back and loudly sighed, “Men!” at the ceiling, but then she waddled over and joined them, and the rest of the night passed quietly, as it so often does just before the worst storms come.

* * *

Yoshi’s stuff was nowhere near as strong as Rider’s, but Ana had been living with too much stress and too little sleep long enough that it didn’t take much to push her deep out into Sleep’s waters and let her drown. She dreamed of Blue and Bonnie and the narrowing differences between them as
she killed him over and over, but even that was preferable on some level than dreaming of eleven-year-old David in his bloody t-shirt and torn paper Freddy mask, or the Puppet combing her hair with its long claws, or the purple ghost haunting her house leaning over her for a goodnight kiss. Those dreams had a way of blurring the lines of reality, bringing phantom sensations of touch and smell that seemed to linger on even after she woke up. Killing Blue—killing Bonnie—was bad, but even her subconscious self recognized it was just a dream, and when the violins of her phone’s alarm woke her, it all melted away like the nothing it was.

It took a few fuzzy moments to orient herself, but by the time Ana had dragged herself into a sitting position, she knew who and where she was, what she was doing here and why, and most importantly of all, how little time she had to do it. She fumbled at the wall until she found the lightswitch and as soon as her eyes had adjusted to its unwelcome brilliance, she got up and limped over to the coffee maker.

Her head hurt. Well, everything hurt, but her head hurt the worst, which was weird because it wasn’t a sharp sort of pain at all. Yesterday, her headache had felt like a wild animal, biting and scratching at every sight and sound, intent on escaping a skull two sizes too small to house it. This headache was smaller…but smaller wasn’t the right word, was it? The pain still barely fit in her head. She could feel its pulse behind her eyes, threatening to push them right out of her sockets if it flexed just right, but it didn’t. It just sat there, swollen and sullen, chewing on its claws to keep them sharp and muttering just loud enough to make itself heard. Not like a hangover, but almost like it thought it ought to be.

And as the smell of hot coffee filling her mug woke Ana up a little more, she became gradually aware that the rest of her hurt in much the same way. Physical pain was no stranger to her. She’d been taking beatings for as long as she could remember—longer, even, since some of those beatings had affected her ability to remember them. She knew she wasn’t all that badly injured (especially considering who she’d gone up against), but she hurt anyway, much more than she knew she should. Her joints were understandably stiff, but also oddly restless. Her muscles ached more like a cramp about to happen rather than bruises on the mend. So there was pain, but there was also a strange echo of an idea of pain, something she instinctively wanted to stretch or rub away, only that didn’t work. If anything, fidgeting only fed the beast, making all the hurts both real and imaginary that much more intense, and the urge to keep moving that much harder to resist. She shuffled from foot to foot as she watched coffee trickle into her mug, rubbing her shoulder, cracking her knuckles, rolling her neck, and all of it hurt but none of it helped. What was wrong with her?

“Nothing!” she told herself crossly. “You got beat up by an animatronic a few nights ago, that’s all. Did you really think you were just going to walk that off?”

No, but…hell, she’d fallen through the roof this last summer and gotten banged up way worse than this, but she couldn’t remember dealing with this phantom-prickly sensation crawling under her skin afterwards.

“You were medicating then,” she reminded herself. “You’re straight now.”

That made sense, in an irritating way. And if all it took to shake this off was a shot of whiskey…

No. She’d dumped her bottle on the drive down.

Yeah, but she could always get another one. It wasn’t like she really needed to prove a point. She knew she wasn’t an alcoholic. It was medicinal. She didn’t want to drink for the fun of it, she just wanted—
To numb the pain. To steady her hands. To drink until she couldn’t feel her feelings. And if that wasn’t the definition of an alcoholic, what the hell was?

Scowling, Ana seized that entire train of thought and shut it all away in the deepest, darkest quarry in the back of her mind. It was all horseshit anyhow. The only thing she needed to drink was coffee.

She drank some, grimacing at the taste. No creamer. She had another swallow to prove she didn’t need that either and went to check on the others.

She could sort of remember Foxy or Bonnie or someone saying something about playing cards last night, but if they ever had, they’d cleaned up the game and returned to their places, so that everything looked the way it had when Yoshi left, as far as Ana could recall.

“Morning,” she mumbled, limping over to check on Freddy, not that he needed checking on. It gave her something to do with her hands anyway.

Chica greeted her with her usual sunny cheer, Foxy grunted, and Bonnie’s ears came to troubled attention as he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just early, my man.”

He nodded, but his ears stayed up, broadcasting his concern. “You had kind of a rough night.”

“Did I?” Ana shook her head and drank some more bitter coffee. “Strange places give me bad dreams. Whatever. I don’t have to get used to it. What about you?”

“Strange places,” Bonnie echoed, looking around. “They always feel kind of weird at first. We don’t get them very often. And this place is nothing like any place we’ve ever been in before, so… yeah. Safe to say we were a little on edge last night,” he concluded with a touch of ironic understatement in his tone and a sidelong glance at Foxy.

Chica also glanced at Foxy, so Ana looked at him too, only to find that Foxy was ignoring them completely in favor of using his hook to pick dried gunk out from under his clawed metal fingers.

“Apart from that, it was a quiet night,” Bonnie went on, bringing his ears up and folding them forward in a relaxed, cheerful manner. “No unscheduled inspections, no one peeking in the window—”

“Nobody here but us chickens?” Ana guessed, tossing a lackluster smile in Chica’s direction.

Chica rolled her pink eyes and vented her cooling system. “Oh, very funny.”

“Sorry, sister, that’s as funny as I get at this hour.” Ana indulged herself in a yawn, taking advantage of the accompanying stretch to massage at her neck, which did not soothe any nerves but only agitated them even more. She forced herself to stop before her twitchiness became obvious.

“It wasn’t terrible, was it? You weren’t too bored?”

“Oh no,” said Chica at once. “No, no. We were fine.”

“It was pretty bad, not gonna lie, baby,” Bonnie drawled. “We played cards for a while, but when there’s no stakes, there’s not a lot of point.”

“There’s always strip poker,” said Ana.
“No, there isn’t,” Chica said with a prim little sniff.

“No, none of us are wearing clothes at the moment,” Bonnie added. “We’re in disguise, remember?”

Ana glanced at Foxy again, waiting for one of those ribald remarks with which he was always armed, but Foxy wasn’t in the mood to play along. Turning back to Bonnie, she said, “I’ll make sure my tablet’s charged up tonight so you can at least watch some movies or something. And it’s all temporary, ruh—right?” she finished around another yawn. “Ugh. You know, I like a cinnamon-hazelnut-vanilla-soy-milk coffee as much as the next guy, but there is not enough actual caffeine in this candied-up shit.”

“Don’t blame the coffee, baby, it’s just really early,” Bonnie said, nodding out the window at a sky not even a little bit touched by the sun. “Seriously, you could go back to bed for another hour, maybe two. If Yoshi shows up, I’ll glitch out and sing something, top volume.”

The suggestion, and the devil on her shoulder that urged her to consider it, was the last motivation Ana needed to turn away from Freddy on the worktable and find her work belt in the mess of parts and tools she’d brought with her. “Yoshi said we were starting at the crack of dawn,” she said sourly, loading her belt for battle. “And by God, dawn has cracked. I’m going to head over to the house and fuck around until I passive aggressively wake him up. He might want to eat or whatever, I don’t know, but then I saddle him up and put him on the track and that boy better be ready to run. I won’t be able to squeeze sixteen-hour shifts out of him every day, so I need to take advantage of his enthusiasm while I can. Sorry,” she added to Foxy.

His expression, what there was of it, did not change, but his gaze shifted from Bonnie to her. “For what?”

‘I don’t fucking know, whatever it is you’re pissed off about,’ Ana thought, but didn’t say it and didn’t let it show on her face. She couldn’t blame him for being worked up. The situation was all risk with no guarantee of reward, and while they were all feeling it, Ana at least could step out and blow off some steam if the pressure got to her. “Another sixteen hours of standing still and keeping quiet,” she said instead. “I may not know how that feels, but I know it sucks.”

Foxy shrugged off her sympathy. “I don’t have to get used to it, as someone or another once said. I just has to live with it awhile.”

“That’s the spirit.” Ana got her safety goggles, wearing them high on her head until she needed them, and tucked a pair of gloves into the back of her jeans. “All right, here I go. I may run to town later, get some better coffee if nothing else. Anyone want anything? Chica? Sudoku book?”

“Oh, I’d better not, but thanks for asking.”

“You sure? I know there’s not much to do. You don’t have to be bored all day and all night.”

“I’m not!” Chica assured her.

“Plenty to think about,” Foxy added.

Something in the way he said it—quiet, absent his usual sarcasm, but edged all the same with some kind of indeterminate emotion—caught her attention.

He did not respond to her quizzical frown, just stared her down.

Oh. So that’s what this was really about.
“Well, all right,” she said slowly, holding his gaze without flinching. “If you’re telling me nothing has to change, then nothing will.”

Foxy’s ear twitched.

“Just remember, we agreed,” she continued, looking at nothing and nobody but him. “You don’t get to come bitching at me later just because you changed your mind.”

“Got it,” said Chica.

“No bitching,” Bonnie promised.

Foxy said nothing.

“See you in a bit,” said Ana and walked past him (the space between her shoulder blades tickled, the same way it did when she turned her back on a gun) and out the door. She put her mug back by the coffee maker but didn’t start another cup brewing. If she had to stand around for another sixty seconds while the machine pissed into her cup, she was going to end up marching back into the workshop and letting her headache say things she did not want to say. There was no room in her schedule to pick a fight today. She had real shit to do and it was time to get to work.
It had been a long time since Ana had last been on any kind of a vacation, but she remembered what it felt like and she could say with confidence that this wasn’t it. Neither was it work, exactly. It wouldn’t be so bad if she just had more to do. Yoshi’s hotel-renovating friend hadn’t called back yet (annoying, but she supposed six in the morning was a little early to call him again), so all Ana could do was rip out the old flooring while she waited for him to roll his ass out of bed, and even then, it was a long wait. The man slept like his parents had offended a fairy. Tearing up the carpets in the tiny house failed to rouse him. She had to go into the bathroom, which shared a wall with the headboard of his bed, before he even started making wake-up noises in there, and even then, she got the linoleum up, the old wallpaper down and the sink out before he actually put in an appearance.

As predicted, he wanted breakfast, so instead of getting to work, they got pancakes at the smallish mom-and-pop diner up the road. It was not Gallifrey’s, neither in quality nor in price, and impatience did not improve her appetite, but she managed to eat half an overcooked pancake, a greasy egg and a slice of limp bacon, which she thought was pretty good right up until she came back from the restroom and caught Yoshi snapping a picture of her mostly untouched plate and sending it to ‘someone’. It was too early in the day to start a fight, so she let that slide and was rewarded for her forgiveness by having him sneak another picture when she went to the cashier’s stand to pay…this time of her. If it was just a little something for his personal spank-bank, she wouldn’t care, but she was pretty sure he sent that one off, too. So she had that to look forward to.

Afterwards, more delays. He wanted to stop at the supermarket to stock up on quick snacks and more drinks, because he’d seriously underestimated how many Monsters she could drink in a day, after which, Ana gave in and made him find a hardware depot because by this time, it was almost nine in the freaking morning, and obviously Yoshi’s hotel-friend had other things to do today that did not include driving spare tools and upcycled what-the-fuck out to the edge of the desert and dropping it off. As someone who’d had their real work interrupted more than once by favors for friends, Ana understood, but at the same time, fuck that guy.

She left Yoshi texting in the car while she went into the store alone. Quicker that way and, frankly, she almost wanted him to complain about the tiles and paint she picked out so she could tell him to tell Rider all about it. On the other hand, even at her pettiest, Ana Stark did not half-ass a job, so it was unlikely he’d complain at all. Sure enough, when she returned to the car and he bounced out to help her load the trunk, he expressed nothing but enthusiastic approval for her choices.

She hated spending Faust’s money so soon. Although part of her wanted to just get everything, or at least all the flooring, since that was relatively quick and easy, she restrained herself to just what was necessary to get the bathroom in order. The second day in was a little too soon to write the other guy off completely and just start splurging. It was also too soon to lose sight of why she was really here, and it wasn’t to fix up some old hoarder house.

So first things first. Once back at Yoshi’s, Ana went straight to the workshop where they continued stripping parts for the scanner, until Freddy was nothing but a metal skull attached by cables to a battery case…and one delicate wire that used to run from the back of his CPU around the inside wall of his chest casing, terminating in a button-sized pressure pad. Ana wasn’t sure how sensitive it was or whether its little weight, if turned upside-down on the table, would be enough to wake
Freddy up, so she made damn sure it stayed sensor-pad-up and hoped that meant he was still asleep and not somewhere inside there, now awake and aware and mouthlessly screaming.

Yoshi, to his credit, didn’t argue or even ask why it was so important. He just did what he was told. Ana got the feeling he’d given up even trying to understand what she wanted, embracing his role as another object of function in her personal machinery and not as an operator.

She felt bad, but honestly, that made him a lot easier to work with.

At last, everything was disassembled and there was nothing else to do except run parts through the analyzer…slowly…and scan them into the system…slowly…and watch the computer file the data away through various information trees…slowly. He did a lot of fiddling with his phone while his equipment worked and Ana had to remind herself that there was nothing wrong with that. What did she expect him to do, stand at attention and salute? The computer did not need to be kept company, it only needed someone to notice when it was done with one task so another could be loaded up. This would be tedious enough for just one person to oversee, there was no reason at all for two people to be there. She knew it and yet Ana stuck around, making busy-work out of sorting animatronic parts that didn’t need sorting while Yoshi did his best to pretend she was doing something useful and important to his process.

She wasn’t. She knew that, but in her secret heart, she couldn’t help but think that if she had his computers and enough time and training in the necessary programs, she could do this job without him, whereas he would never be able to do this without her. He’d been one of the greats in his day and she had no doubt that he was still right the hell up there, in spite of his frequent self-deprecations to the contrary. He was good…but he didn’t have what Ana had. He couldn’t just look at a part and see what it was or how it worked. He could stare at Freddy’s deconstructed endoskeleton for hours and talk the whole time about how impossible it was, when there were three other working (sort of) models right next to him, nakedly displaying all their secrets. Hell, she left the man putting together a leg-pump, one of the few objects of function which could be pre-assembled without calibration, while she took her hardware haul into the house, pulled all the plumbing fixtures, capped the pipes temporarily, finished scraping the floor, spread mortar and lay tiles, came back to the workshop to remind him that nature had become his bathroom until further notice and he was still working on the same leg-pump!

She wanted so badly to ask him whether he was incompetent or had he just been playing on his phone the whole time she was gone, but she didn’t. She just got some parts and built the second leg-pump in front of him, talking him through each step in the most patient and dispassionate tone she could muster, right up to the end, when she smacked the completed pump down and said (not yelled, just said), “What was that, five minutes? Ten, tops? What’s wrong with you?” and then felt like a raging asshole when he didn’t answer, just sat there looking at the parts in front of him the same way all those other kids had looked at the algebra problems that old bitch Mrs. Kellar kept on the blackboard to torture misbehaving fifth graders.

To be fair, nothing about Fred Faust’s animatronics was simple, but these were the least complicated parts and he could barely cope with them. When it came to things like the cooling system, the facial rig, and of course, the ways and means of making the animatronic walk on its own, Yoshi freely admitted he was in way over his head. That wouldn’t be so bad except that he had an irritating habit of insisting she was in over her head, too. When she suggested modifications to improve maneuverability and balance, he flatly told her it wouldn’t work. Even after she took the keyboard away from him and proved it could be done—as far as a schematic could prove anything before simulations had been run—he just sat there, shaking his head.

At least until his phone buzzed at him.
“Sorry,” he said, like he always said when his phone went off, but just like he always did, sorry or not, he took it out and thumbed at it. “This will just take a second and then we’ll get right back at it.”

“Right,” muttered Ana, rubbing at her throbbing head.

“Or are you hungry?” Yoshi asked, texting madly. “Maybe we should grab some lunch or something. It seems like a good stopping place.”

A good stopping place. Ana glanced at the door closing off the shop, where Freddy lay in pieces and the other three stood untouched. Yesterday, they had managed to analyze, scan and upload two animatronic legs. Today was half gone and they hadn’t even finished scanning one arm.

Fuck this.

“Sounds good,” Ana said and pulled out her own phone. “You mind if I make a quick call first?”

“No, go ahead,” said Yoshi with flustered relief. “I’ll just…um…yeah.”

Ana tapped open her contacts and selected the one at the top of her fairly short list. She turned a polite angle away from Yoshi while it rang through, symbolically separating herself from his personal space while making sure he could hear every word she was about to say.

The other end picked up.

Ana said, “Hey Rider.”

Yoshi looked up with the wide trapped eyes of a deer in the headlights of an approaching car.

“Bout goddamn time I heard from you,” Rider said in her ear. “You’re supposed to be checking in with me on the regular, pony. Regular, you know what that word means? News flash, it does not mean every two or three weeks or whenever the fuck it is you feel like it.”

“Noted,” she said politely. “And since I’ve got you on the line, there’s something I’d like you to do for me.”

“Of course there fucking is. I should have known. Why else would you even call?”

“Well, you’ve got a birthday in another month. I’m sure I’ll make the time then.”

“Your sarcasm loses its effect when I don’t hear from you.”

“And your temper-tantrums lose their effect with distance.”

“I’ll remember that. So? Let’s hear it. What do you want this time?”

“I want you to stop monopolizing my goddamn technician’s time,” she replied evenly.

The Nevada color poured away from Yoshi’s face.

“I’m paying for the man’s undivided attention,” Ana continued, “and you’re dividing it. What the fuck gives with that? You want to know what I’m doing, you call me and ask, you don’t spy on me through my business associates. That kind of horseshit makes you and me look unprofessional as hell.”

“Oh, is that all I got to do, huh? Okay. Sure. I’ll give it a shot. How you doing, pony?”
“Fine,” she said and hung up on him. She put her phone away and smiled at Yoshi. “You get things squared out with your mom?”

Yoshi flinched, looked at his phone, looked at her, and fumbled it into his pocket. “Yeah. Yeah, we’re all good.”

Ana gave that moment a little more time to ferment, then let it go and stood up. “Ready to eat?”

Was that nice? No. But it got the goddamn job done, or at least, he stayed off his phone while they were out sampling one of the many, many excellent buffets in Vegas, and when they got back, Ana geared up and started in on the porch, Yoshi rather meekly sat himself at his workspace next to Freddy’s CPU and started putting parts together, and Rider slammed himself behind the wheel of his car and started driving.

* * *

It was a long day for Foxy, longer than the hours that were in it. It was his own fault and he knew it. Bad things have a way of stretching time out. Bad memories, bad thoughts, bad feelings…and Foxy had plenty of all three rattling around in his rusty heart. Bad enough when it was just the three of them (or four, if you could count Fred, which was hard to do when he weren’t but a battery case and a brainpan connected by cables at one end of a table), but Yoshi had rediscovered his work ethic since Ana’s last visit and hadn’t left them alone longer than it took to get a drink or take a piss.

That alone wouldn’t be so bad if the bloke would only talk to them. Ana talked when she worked. She talked, swore, played loud music…took occasional turns around the dance floor with Bonnie…and generally made herself the center of a storm of creation. The man Foxy refused to think of as their father used to talk, too. Hell, even the Purple Man would hum or whistle to himself when he had to do maintenance on one of his Toys back in Mulholland. But although Yoshi had proven to be a chatty bloke in the past, after Ana brought him back from their afternoon break, he never made a bleeding sound. There he sat, tinkering at the table next to Freddy’s odds and ends and holding all the rest of them immobilized with nothing but his insufferable presence.

He built a couple arm-pumps, left and right, assembled half a dozen sub-component modules, and was presently working on what looked like the sensor link harness for Fred’s new left leg, all while interrupting himself several times to check on things in the other room, and in all that time, he spoke only once, about ten minutes ago, when he’d called Ana on the phone to tell her he was ordering dinner and did she want Chinese or pizza? Foxy didn’t even get to know what she’d picked, because he did the actual ordering on his phone, in silence.

So Foxy couldn’t help but notice when the car pulled in. Having lived on the edge of nowhere as long as he had, every engine that rumbled by caught his ear, and more than one had pulled in just to turn around, but this one came right up to the workshop and stopped. A car door opened and closed. Feet crunched on gravel. Praise the Powers. Even if it was just the bloke delivering dinner, it would something to break up this godawful silence.

But the man who let himself in did not appear to be anyone’s delivery boy. He was tallish for a human, fairly fit for his age, but the first thing Foxy saw—the first thing anyone would see—was the chaotic mess of tattoos covering both arms from wrists to shirt-sleeves, and creeping up his neck. He shaved the sides of his head, making room for more ink—a horned skull nested in a writhing band of knotwork—but grew the top long enough to tie back in a rust-colored tail. He also had a beard, just beginning the shift to grey. His hands were rough; the knuckles, scarred. He had
the look of a man born out of time, a man better-suited to ride horses and swing battle-axes than drive cars and text.

Yoshi had looked around when the door opened, but apart from that first split-second, his hands never stopped their steady work and his attention soon returned to them.

“No hello?” the other man asked. His voice, somewhat at odds with his appearance, was relaxed and good-natured. “I ain’t seen you in how many years and you don’t even bat an eye when I walk through your door?”

“Trust me, I’m very quietly freaking out,” Yoshi replied. “Dare I ask why you’re here?”

“Checking on my girl, that’s all. Where is she?”

“Uh, she was working on the porch. She’s not still there?”

“Naw, but she’s clearly doing something over there. Must have stepped inside for a drink or a piss. That’s good. She didn’t see me. That means we got a few minutes before she sees the car and starts wondering who’s monopolizing her technician’s time now.” The man made his way across the workshop, taking in the sights with an air of distracted interest. He glanced at Foxy and Bonnie in passing, only coming to a stop to study the meticulous inner workings of Freddy’s battery through the glass case. “That gives us a little time to talk.”

“Um…okay?” Yoshi pushed himself back from the table a few inches and tried to assume a casual posture, one that only highlighted his growing unease. “About what?”

“How’s she doing?”

“I met her yesterday, man. You tell me how she’s doing.”

The man nodded as if this were any kind of an answer and turned away, catching sight of Freddy’s old skin, the various casings arranged on a mannequin so that, if you didn’t know better, you’d think it was the bear himself standing there. The man got a little closer, staring into Freddy’s empty eye sockets. “This doesn’t look like your usual shit. This the job I’m taking you away from?”

“Yeah and no offense, but it’s a pretty intense job. Complete rebuilds, all four of them, inside and out. Totally unique designs, totally unique materials. It’s crazy in here.”

The man nodded thoughtfully, cold eyes moving around the shop. Foxy could almost feel that stare when it came to him, tickling at him like the point of a blade. “Looks like a lot of work.”

“Yeah.” Yoshi laughed a little, but without relaxing. “Yeah, it is, and you would not believe how fast she expects me to do it, so…not to be rude, but…”

“A lot of work,” the man said again, returning his appraising stare to Freddy. “Short timeline. Sounds expensive.”

“Uh…”

“How is my pony paying you?”

“Oh. Well, uh, we’ve got an arrangement, so—”

“You fucking her?”
“What? No! I swear, it’s not that kind of trade! I’m a robotics engineer! I don’t know anything about ancient Rome!”

“Relax. I was just asking.” The man turned around, spreading his arms wide open with a deceptive lack of concern utterly belied by that steel-sharp glint in his eye. “Hell, you know me. Half the world’s problems can be solved with a good dicking. And the other half with the proper application of some common chemicals in the correct proportions. When the latter ain’t working, a little more of the former couldn’t hurt.” The man approached the worktable where Yoshi sat frozen, picked up a pair of needlenose pliers and turned them thoughtfully in his hand. “Having said that, I will admit that we would be having a very different conversation right now if I thought you were taking advantage of her fragile state of mind.”

“Well, I’m not!”

“Why you shouting, man? I’m right here. Relax,” he said, putting the pliers down and patting Yoshi, hard, on the shoulder. “Ain’t nothing to me who she fucks. If she ain’t feeling it, she knows how to take a man’s balls off without my help.”

Yoshi hunched a little lower over the table and loudly said, “It’s nothing like that. The deal is, I fix her bots and she fixes my house. That’s it!”

“That’s a sweet deal,” the man said appreciatively. “I ain’t even lying. I’ve seen that girl put houses together like she was pulling ‘em whole out of a fucking hat. It’s practically a superpower.”

The sudden de-escalation of the conversation clearly threw Yoshi off his stride. “Yeah, you said she was good at it.”

“Good ain’t even the word. She sees things differently,” the other man mused, looking out the window. “She sees the way things fit together, how they work, what they do. If she could look at people the way she looks at brick and wood and wire, she could rule the fucking world.” He paused to inspect Yoshi’s work table again. “I’m kind of surprised she thinks she needs someone else to do whatever the hell you’re doing.”

“Don’t tell anyone, but so am I.” Yoshi uttered a thin, nervous laugh and shook his head. “She doesn’t really need me as much as she needs my shop. Without the right tools, she could break them and they’re, uh…they’re pretty irreplaceable.”

“So is she. Which brings me to my next question. What kind of trouble is she in?”

Yoshi hitched one shoulder in a nervous shrug. “She hasn’t said one way or the other, but it stands to reason, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does. But if she hasn’t told you what it’s about yet, she ain’t gonna.” The other man grunted, glanced at the workshop window and tracked some moving object behind the glass Foxy couldn’t see from this angle. “Listen. I need to talk to her.”

“Want me to clear out?” Yoshi asked hopefully.

“Naw, I can see you’re working. Just understand that things may get a bit dramatic, but I’m in control. It may not look like I am, but I am.”

“Uh…okay, but there’s a lot of breakable stuff in here, so how much drama did you have in mind?”

“Whatever it takes,” the man said, showing no concern as the sound of approaching boots paused…and broke into a run. “No offense, but all my fucks are presently tasked with getting my
pony the hell home and I got none left to worry myself with your tinkery shit. Something gets broke, I’ll replace it. If that ain’t good enough for you, we can talk about it afterwards.” The man turned his back on this door as the one in the other room banged open, assuming a practiced posture of nonchalance. “This shit’s gone on long enough and it ends…right now.”

In the very next instant, following his words as closely as the little dot that ends the sentence, Ana exploded into the workshop, yelling, “What the fuck, Rider?! Tell me you did not drive a thousand miles through the ass-crack of America to creep on me!”

“I did not. I only drove in from the airport and it ain’t a thousand miles to my place anyhow. Not even half that.” The man, the infamous Rider, spared her a reproachful glance. “You always did get hyperbolic when you get your wind up.”

“You got to have the last word in a fucking fight so bad that you literally catch a plane to fucking finish it and you call me hyperbolic?”

“We fighting, pony?” Rider inquired mildly. He reached up to feel the fuzz on one of Freddy’s ears. “That what we’re doing? And is that what you want me to do next? Finish it? Think before you answer.”

Ana rolled her eyes, then her gaze flicked to what he was doing and her scowl slipped from the confrontational to the defensive. “Don’t touch that.”

Rider finished feeling up Freddy’s ear while Foxy thought how fortunate it was, for man and animatronic both, that Fred wasn’t awake and wearing that head at the moment. When he was done making his point, however, he clasped his hands behind his back and moved on to look at, but not touch, Bonnie. “Where’d you find these?”

“Storage unit auction,” said Yoshi, looking anxiously between them. His repetition of the lie only made it that much more apparent.

Ana turned on him fast. “You seriously want to stay out of this. And so the fuck do you,” she went on, glaring at Rider. “Do I ask you where you get shit?”

“What are you doing with them?” Rider asked, unperturbed.

Her glare wavered. “I…Fixing them up.”

“Yeah, I see that. Why?”

She didn’t have an answer for that and didn’t seem to be able to think one up on the spot. “What difference does it make to you?”

“Well, if your plan is to sell them, I could certainly help you get a buyer. Specialty items like these can be tricky and hooking people up with products is kind of what I do. As evidenced by the fact that you are here right now, in spitting distance of the man I found on the spur of a moment to fix your freaky-ass robot buddies and not charge you a dime.”

“Please do not spit on the engineer,” said Yoshi.

They both ignored him.

“A lot of people would just take that for granted,” Rider mused. “Lot of takers in my business. But not you. Oh no. You always knew where the butter on your bread comes from and you always say grace before you sit at my table. Always.”
A little extra pink touched Ana’s face. She knew it and put on her armor. “Thanks for setting this up, Rider,” she said, shoulders squared for battle.

“Anytime. Don’t even mention it, pony. Me and you, we quit keeping score a long time ago.” The man, the infamous Rider, glanced at her again and resumed his study of Bonnie, who was studying him right back. “You may be nothing but a pace horse, but you are still a thoroughbred. You’re competent, hard-working, loyal, fearless and, above all, sincerely respectful. And I got to tell you, it’s the respect that matters most to me. It’s a rare quality in my kind of social circle. I never take it for granted. Even when we disagree, you do so respectfully. We have our little squabbles from time to time, but in all the years I known you, you never threw hands at me, never threatened me…hell, I can count on the fingers of one hand—” He brought his arm up fast, to just a height and just an angle that could be nothing but a slap.

Yoshi jumped in his chair and Foxy heard Bonnie’s ears (and his own) snap up to full attention, but Ana didn’t flinch.

“—how many times you ever even raised your voice to me,” Rider concluded, lowering his arm with a creak of leather, a jingle of chain. “And you would never…ever…hang up on me when I ask you, from a place of concern, how you’re doing. Another man might think you had. Another man might even feel himself offended and be moved to retaliate. But I know better. I know we had to have had us some trouble on the phone. Bad signal, dropped call. It happens.” He came a step closer where a whole step’s worth of distance did not quite exist; Ana did not back up. “But such is my respect for you that I booked me a flight and rented me a car and came out here in person to finish that call face to face. So here I am and we are going to finish it.” He leaned over her, biting close, glaring down into her stubborn face, and quietly said, “How you doing, pony?”

“Fine.”

“You sure?”

“I said I’m fine.”

“I heard.”

“Then why’d you ask twice?”

Rider ran his eyes over her face, down her body and up again. “You look like someone ought to be asking.”

“Oh fuck you,” Ana snapped, sounding merely annoyed rather than angry. “I’m so sorry I’m not making your mental masturbation movie list at the moment. I’m working!”

“Did I say that? No, I did not. You got a bad habit of putting words in other people’s mouths, darlin’, I will jerk off to you anytime.” Rider turned around and took a few unhurried steps away. He walked past Foxy without so much as a sidelong glance, but stopped again at Bonnie and gave his ear a tug. Bonnie elected to let him, for now, although Foxy could see him thinking about it really hard before the decision was made. “But since you bring it up, you have put some city miles on since the last time I saw you. You having any problems out there in Mormon country?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“The hell kind of question is that? Of course I’m sure! Quit touching my animatronics!”
“Darlin’, I love you, but you need to amend your tone right now or you and me got problems.”

“I’m not amending jack-shit! You don’t come barging in here on a fucking ego-trip and expect to get your ass licked! This is nothing to do with you, Rider! You set it up. Sure, thanks, but that does not mean I owe you a fucking explanation! Now get the fuck out of here and let me get back to work!”

Rider did not immediately answer, but his eyes hardened. “You don’t owe me, huh?” he said finally. “You don’t owe me. That is a hell of a thing to say after everything I done for you.”

“Oh here we go,” said Ana, flinging out her arms and stomping theatrically to the other side of the room.

“I kept you in school,” Rider said. “I got you a trade. I put a roof over your head when you showed up on my doorstep in your soaking wet socks. It is by the sweat of my brow that you are fed and clothed to this day. And whenever you get a bug up that sweet ass about going straight, don’t I always let you?”

Ana’s cheeks flamed with high embarrassed color. “You want to not air this shit in front of my people?!?”

Rider squinted at her, turned deliberately and looked at the only ‘people’ in the room for him—Yoshi—then turned back to her and shrugged. “My boy ain’t hearing this, are you?”

“No,” said Yoshi at once and fumbled some parts together with 110% of his attention.

“Go easy on that shit!” Ana snapped at him, then glared at Rider. “Okay, you know what? Yeah, fine, you let me. In fact, you let me walk right out your fucking door months ago. You gave me your blessing and a goddamn Easy Bake Oven so I could start a new life—”

“Not this one.”

“You don’t get to tell me when and where and how. All you get to say is goodbye and good luck, so save this Dealer Knows Best bullshit for the next girl and ride your ass out of here or watch me kick it through the fucking door!”

Rider took that in without expression, then sucked a little air through his teeth, pushed it out again and nodded. “All right. Well, I tried to talk this out like a gentleman, but you ain’t in the mood, so we’re going to do it this way.”

Suddenly there was a gun in his hand and aimed dead between Ana’s eyes.

“You got two minutes to pack your fucking bag and get in the fucking car,” said Rider calmly. “I got to do it for you, you are not going to like how it gets done.”

Ana not only did not flinch, but she actually laughed. “You have no idea the scope of the mistake you are making right now,” she told him. “Put that away.”

“Or you’ll do what?” Rider demanded with just a hint of frustration.

“Nothing. Not a solitary goddamn thing will I do. I am fully prepared to stand here and do absolutely nothing to stop what is about to happen if you don’t put that fucking thing away right now.”

Foxy checked Yoshi, who had stopped working and was just staring fixedly at his frozen hands and
a half-built accelerometer. He caught Chica’s eye next, directing her to Yoshi with the smallest of nods, so she knew who to grab if this went sour. Last of all, he glanced at Bonnie, because the worst of all likely circumstances was that gormless idiot going black and rampaging through the room with Fred’s battery spectacularly undefended, but Bonnie’s eyes were open and green all around, and when he caught Foxy’s glance, he flicked the tips of his ears to show he was ready for a fight. All that was left was to see what Rider would do.

Rider frowned, searching Ana’s face, and he must have seen something in it because he took his finger off the trigger and lowered his arm. “I wouldn’t shoot you,” he said. “You know that.”

“Yeah, I do, actually. Which is why I’m a bit confused as to why you’d want me to think you would, let alone why you think I’d be so overwhelmed with gratitude about almost getting shot that I’d go any fucking where with you afterwards. You don’t even have the decency to use one of your own guns,” she said with singular scorn. “You’re going to do me with some cheap burner you picked up on the way from the airport and you lecture me about disrespect?”

Rider rolled his eyes and tucked the gun away. “Don’t take that personal. You try getting a piece through TSA in these enlightened times.”

“What are you doing here, Rider?” Ana asked, and if she didn’t exactly give off an aura of reconciliation, at least she said it without shouting. “I got a place to live and a straight job. What exactly am I doing that you think you need to rescue me from?”

“I don’t fucking know, because you won’t fucking tell me, but clearly, there is something wrong!”

“I’m fine.”

“Sure, you are. Look at your damn self! You lost weight, you ain’t been sleeping, and that makeup you got plastered on with a fucking trowel ain’t fooling nobody. You been beat up, down and sideways!”

“You work construction, you get hurt.”

“Fuck that. You got bruised up at work, you’d let ‘em show. You’re hiding them, which means someone went at you and you’re lying to me about it. To me,” he said, thumping his fist against his chest. “And if that ain’t a good enough reason to get myself involved, I’d like to know what is. I always been there for you, haven’t I? Always! And now you shut me out? What the fuck is that about? Did it ever occur to you that whatever problems you got breathing down your goddamn neck, I can make ‘em stop breathing? Don’t look at him, look at me,” he snapped when Ana cut her eyes at Yoshi. “What the hell is going on with you? Why are you acting like this?”

“Oh, am I the one acting out?” she retorted. “You just pulled a gun on me, Rider!”

“I’m trying to get through to you, that’s all. If I’m not going about it the right way, it’s only because I’ve done it the right way and you’ve blown me off consistently for nine fucking months! Nine! You about ready to give birth to the complete lack of fucks you’ve had for my concern!”

“Because I’m fine!”

“Fuck your fine, pony! Whatever you’re into, whatever’s into you, it’s bad! Do you really not see that?”

“Wow,” said Ana flatly. “Sixteen fucking years in your stable and suddenly you think I don’t know what bad looks like?”
“Apparently the fuck not and if sixteen years in my fucking stable hasn’t taught you yet what real trouble looks like, maybe it’s time you took someone else’s word for it before you get your dumb ass killed!”

“My dumb ass is not your problem anymore!”

“Yeah? Well, it was when you needed your robot repaired,” Rider said, making an obvious effort to keep calm while his voice steadily rose. “It was when you needed a free ticket to your stupid salvage wonderland. It was when you needed a lawyer to pull your house off the goddamned chopping block. In fact, every fucking time you decide the real world is too much fucking effort, you’re happy to let your dumb ass be my problem! Well, this is how I solve them! Get your shit and let’s go!”

“You going to make me, tough guy?”

“You think I won’t?” he demanded with furious incredulity. “After all the men you seen me put in the ground, you think I’ll hesitate to put your high-toned ass in a car? Woman, you got one choice, one! You want to ride in the front seat or the fucking trunk? Choose!”

Yoshi picked up a screwdriver and used it to strike a ringing note off the hollow metal leg of his worktable. Both Ana and Rider looked around, nearly with the same scowl.

“Ten second break,” said Yoshi. “Go to your corners.”

Rider’s head tipped as he regarded other man in a thoughtful, amused manner. Ana paced away, restless as a cat in a cage.

Ten seconds spooled out.

Yoshi said, “Round Two,” and kept working.

Rider and Ana looked at each other.

“You want to start?” Rider asked finally.

Ana threw a hand at him in tight-lipped acquiescence and folded her arms.

“Fine. So. You say the plan is to fix these things up, but it has to be right now, under some extremely eclectic terms. I admit I can’t figure what the hell kind of trouble that is, but it’s trouble, all right, so don’t insult my fucking intelligence by telling me it ain’t.” He took two long strides toward her, thumping himself on the chest as he snarled, “I! Can! Help! You! It is a slap in my fucking face that I even got to say that to you! Just tell me what the hell is going on!”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You’re fine.” Rider clapped both hands to the tattooed side of his skull and rubbed. “Uh huh. Okay. You seen Mason lately?”

Ana’s eyelashes fluttered as she fought not to react to that. “Why would I? He was a job and that job did not include staying friends and hanging out.”

“Still, it’s a small town, ain’t it?” Rider fired back. “It’s not so hard to imagine you’d bump into him now and then. Buying gas. Picking up groceries. Perusing the goods down at the local church bake sale to fund the Friends of Christ or whatever the fuck they fund out there. In fact, I believe it was you who told me the two of you were going to meet, that it was impossible to avoid it, so at
the risk of repeating myself—or should I say, your risk of making me repeat myself—you seen him around?"

“No.”

“And you don’t find that strange?”

Ana’s only answer was a tight shrug.

“Well, I do. I was checking in with him pretty regular while the job was on. He started out pissed that I sent him a girl, but he eased up as the days went by. When whatever happened between you two—”

“Nothing happened!”

“Well, when whatever didn’t happen happened, I let him know the job was over and he and I would not be doing further business. He went off for about fifteen minutes straight about how I was a four-letter this and that, but you know what he didn’t do? He didn’t bring you into it.” Rider gave that a moment to soak up some significance, then paced away, faking nonchalance as he inspected things on shelves and in boxes and hanging from racks, but never standing still long enough to get a good look at any of it. “And that sure struck me funny, because he had to have known what that was really about, but he never hit on it, not even to call you a fucking liar for ratting on him or brag about me getting back used goods. Closest he ever came was something along the lines of, ‘I don’t need you or your loudmouthed cunt telling me how to run my business.’ And that was the end of it, which for Mason, is practically parting on good terms. I actually started thinking maybe nothing really did happen, even though I knew nothing doesn’t happen with Mason too goddamn often. But there you were, pissing away my concern and telling me you were fine—”

“I am fine.”

“—until one day, out of the clear blue, I get a call from him telling me if I want to see my bitch alive and in one piece, I should come and get her before he does, and there’s the Mace I remember, threatening to carve you up and mail you to me after he and all his boys has taken turns with every hole you got and a few more besides, and all of this long after the two of you should have been quit, so I got to wondering…what really did go down between you?”

“Nothing.”

“Tried to call,” Rider went on, giving that answer all the weight it deserved. “You never picked up. Got in the car half a dozen times, but you know how it is. If shit was hitting in Mammon, it’d be over by the time I got there. Nothing to do but wait and see. I passed a sleepless fucking night, let me tell you, but in the morning, who should call me up but you? And do you tell me you spent the night under siege or, hell, burying bodies? No. You want an animatronic repairman. Eight hours prior, Mason is threatening to call his dogs and tear your ass in two, but not once did his name slip your loving lips. What in the fuck is up with that?”

Ana’s eyes flicked at Foxy, found him already looking back at her, and her blush deepened. She didn’t answer.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. You’re fine. I know that because you keep telling me so.” Rider reached up to pluck one of Chica’s few surviving head-feathers and study it. “But I haven’t heard from ol’ Mace since. Nobody has, in fact. Him and his entire crew just picked up and cruised on out of town.”
“Is that so.”

“That’s what I hear. Left his stash, left his cash, left his momma.” Rider dropped the plastic feather and would have plucked another one, if Ana hadn’t stomped over and slapped his hand for him. “Him and all his crew,” Rider said again, unruffled.

“Greener pastures, I guess,” said Ana, taking up a defensive position in front of Chica.

Rider snorted and moved on, now heading for Bonnie again. “If that’s where he’s gone, he’s under ‘em, I guaran-goddamn-tee it. Everyone who ever knew Mace, with the possible exception of his loving mama, knew he was coming to a bad end sooner rather than later, but if you think the shitstorm is over just because he’s gone, you are grossly mistaken. Remember, it’s not just him, it’s him and all his crew, which by my count is sixteen missing men, and if that turns out to mean sixteen dead men in a small town, then local law is definitely looking for someone to blame who isn’t a friend or a relative or the guy sitting next to them on the pew on Sunday. So who are they gonna look at, huh?”

“They can side-eye me all they want, I didn’t do it.”

“Can you prove that? Where were you the night Mace and fifteen of his close friends vanished off the face of the Earth?”

“Look, Rider, I don’t know how many different ways I can say it. I did not disappear the man!”

“That ain’t what I asked, pony. I asked where you were.”

“Home,” Ana said curtly.

“Alone?”

A nod.

“Uh huh. So what you’re telling me is, you have no alibi for a possible mass murder in a town where you’ve already told me the sheriff is dogging you, and you don’t think that’s going to be a problem? Either Mason’s dead and you are at the top of a damned short list of suspects, or he’s not dead and you are at the top of even shorter list of loose ends to tie up when he gets out of whatever mess he’s in. That about sum it up?”

Ana didn’t even bother with another I’m-fine, just folded her arms and squared her jaw and glared at him.

Rider waited, waited, and finally quit waiting. He shrugged out of the act like it was a coat and the man beneath said, “You are in trouble, Ana, whether you want to admit it or not, so whether you like it or not, you are coming home with me.”

“No.”

“Today.”

“No.”

“Right now.”

“No,” Ana said tightly. “This is not a fucking fairy tale, Rider. You don’t ask three times and break the magic spell that binds me. I have work to do in Mammon. I have work to do here! And
the time I’m wasting taking life advice from my fucking drug dealer is time I could be working! I’m! Fine! Who the fuck do you think you are telling me I’m not? Telling me to come home? I am home, damn it! I made a fucking home and you don’t get to tell me I don’t belong there just because you’re not part of it anymore!”

Rider looked at her for a long time while the only sounds in the room were the little taps and tinking of Yoshi fitting metal pieces together. “Who the fuck do I think I am?” he repeated at last. “Really? I known you since you were twelve. You been my pony since you were fifteen. You ate my food. You slept in my bed. You wore my fucking shirts. You had your first smoke with me, dug your first hole in the desert with me…hell, I bought your first box of tampons. And after all these years, all those firsts, you ask me who the fuck I think I am?” His voice, which had risen to a proper thunder, now fell away and became just a man’s. “I think I’m your friend, Ana. Am I wrong?”

Ana said nothing. She breathed, but she was quiet.

“And friends tell each other the truth, even when it hurts. Truth is…Mace Kellar and whatever the fuck happened with him…that ain’t the reason I want you home. Even if none of that shit ever happened, I’d still be here right now saying this, because he’s just a small part of what’s really wrong.”

Ana forced out a choked laugh. “Oh by all means, tell me everything that’s wrong with me.”

“Not you. Mammon.” Rider looked at the space between them—all of it, not just the physical aspect—then looked her in the eye and softly said, “That place you’re living now is poison and you have got to get clear of it before it kills you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, darlin’.” He laughed without a shred of humor. “I may not know Mammon from the seventh circle of hell, but there ain’t nothing I don’t know about poison. Ain’t I put enough of it in your pocket? In your mouth?” He pointed at her suddenly; she did not flinch. “That place is poison. Your aunt’s house is poison. Your cousin, God rest his lost little bones, is poison.”

Each ‘poison’ was a bullet. Each bullet hit.

“It may not be that way to anyone else, but it is poison to you, darlin’, and always has been. As long as I’ve known you, I’ve been watching you die slow from what that place did to you. Ever since you told me you were going back, I have been waiting to get that phone call that tells me you’re dead.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Who’s being hyperbolic now?”

“The night I got Mace’s last call, that was the worst of the waiting,” he said, right over the top of her. “But when I heard from you the next day, I was not relieved. Happy, sure, but not relieved. Because I was still waiting. I’d always be waiting and who the hell would ever know to call me anyway? If I wrote my fucking name and number across your forehead, still, who the hell would ever see it? You’ve got no one. And I realized right there and then that I’d probably seen the last of you and, in all honesty, I got drunker than I’d ever been in my life. I fucking waked you, Ana, because I knew no one else on this green Earth would ever know you’d lived or died but me. Your footprints blew away before you even made ‘em.”

Ana, silent, breathed.
“You think I don’t care about you just because I am what I am and I do what I do? I know what I am,” said Rider evenly, “and I sleep like a fucking baby most nights, but I ain’t slept right since I let you drive away. I got a mom, two grand-dads, six brothers, three sisters, a metric fuck-ton of cousins and aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews and maybe even kids, who the hell knows, but you, pony, you are my only real family. The only one.” He shook his head several times, throat working, and finally snarled, “I care about you, goddamn it! And if you care about me at all, you’ll listen to what I’m about to say and do the right thing. How much do you want for your aunt’s house?”

No answer, only a narrowing of her fierce eyes.

“I’ll give you four-fifty, as is.”

She shook her head harder.

“Six. I don’t care if the roof’s gone and you got a family of badgers in the bathtub.”

She shook her head, teeth bared like a bite was coming. Foxy felt his hand twitch; the servos sounded very loud.

“This is money,” said Rider with a hint of frustration. “This has to be money. You call me out of nowhere, you need a surgeon for your broke-down toys and you drop your whole life and fucking Mammon itself to get ‘em out here, and that’s…that’s got to be money. So you tell me who you’re into and how deep. I will put it in your hand and all you got to do is come with me away from that goddamned town.”

Ana’s hands tightened on her biceps, fingernails digging at her skin until she scratched up a little blood.

“One million dollars. Not a loan. Not an advance. One million dollars,” Rider said, staring her down. “If you want to walk out my door when our business is done and never come back, I’ll let you do it on your given word that you will go anywhere in the world but Mammon, Utah.”

Ana breathed and was too quiet.

“You think I’m going to turn it into a meth lab. Well, I won’t. I’ll sell it to whoever will buy or I’ll turn it into no-kill shelter for stray cats or, hell, burn it to the ground and get a priest to bless the ashes. I’ll do right by you, even if all you want me to do is leave it the fuck alone. One million dollars, darlin’. What do you say?”

Ana’s lips moved, breathing the word, “No,” without sound.

Rider bent his neck, toed at a loose bolt on the ground, then looked up and thumbed back at Bonnie. “One million dollars for the toys.”

Ana did not hesitate. “No.”

“Each.”

“No!”

“Ten million for the house and toys together.”

Ana advanced on him, teeth bared and hands in fists, snarling, “I am not my goddamned mother! Stop trying to buy me! Stop trying to control me! Just fucking stop! You don’t get to say Thing
One to me about how I live my life!”

“Yes, I do, darlin’. As long as you are in my stables, you are my pony and I am your rider and I say Thing One, Ten, and Fifty-fucking-thousand. However high you’re counting, that’s how many things I get to say. Stop trying to buy you? Trying? I already bought you,” said Rider, taking up the few inches she had left between them and leaning in close enough they could have been kissing.

“You are my pony, paid in full, and I am telling you now, when I tell my pony to get in the fucking car and come home, she trots to the fucking car and comes home. So you listen close, because it is the last, and I mean the very last time I’m asking.” His head cocked, but his eyes remained level and unblinking. “Get your bag and get in the fucking car.”

“No.”

“No, you won’t?”

“No, I won’t.”

Rider nodded, just once. “Then you ain’t my pony, is that what you’re telling me?”

Ana kept glaring, but her brows knitted.

“Say it,” said Rider, no louder, but infinitely harsher. “Loud and proud. Look me in the eye, this one right here, and tell me we’re done.”

Ana pushed her face right up into his, blue eyes blazing. “You pulled a goddamn gun on me,” she said in a voice like ripping paper. “You told me we’re done.”

And with that, she stormed out, quieter than she’d stormed in, but no less dangerous.

Rider did not go after her. He stared for a time into the empty space she’d left, then turned around and pretended interest in Bonnie while cracking his knuckles, one by one by one. “You don’t want to do that,” he said since Yoshi had stood up. “She’ll lock herself down pretty quick, but until she does, she really ain’t safe to be around.”

Yoshi nodded, sinking tensely back onto his seat. “Okay. Um…are you?”

“I ain’t going to shoot you, if that’s what you’re asking. Although I must admit, if I had a sledgehammer handy, I would go to town on these fucking toys of hers, because you’re part of it, aren’t you?” Rider said, staring Bonnie right in the eye while Bonnie stared back, neither of them smiling. “Yeah, you are. I don’t know how, but you are.”

Hell of a stupid thing to get jealous over, but there it was, whispering up from the purplettest shadow of Foxy’s burning heart: ‘So am I, damn it.’

“God, these things reek,” Rider muttered, although he didn’t put any distance between him and Bonnie. “Why in the hell is she throwing away her life for them?”

Yoshi opened his mouth, wisely closed it, and nervously watched as Rider tugged Bonnie’s jaw down to have a look at his teeth, leaving it hanging open while he pushed Bonnie’s head left and right, tugged on his ears, even gave his nose a squeeze.

“Something here I’m not seeing?” Rider asked as Bonnie’s hands slowly closed into fists, unnoticed by anyone except Foxy. “For real now, are these fuck-ugly things worth anything? I know, I know. People will pay out the ass for all kinds of junk, but what I mean is, are they really worth what she’s doing?”
“You're asking the wrong guy,” said Yoshi. “I wouldn’t take a million bucks for ‘em either.”

“You? That makes me feel a little better.” Rider gave Bonnie’s cheek a final dismissive pat and turned around, digging in his jeans pocket. He came up with a few folded bills and tossed them on the table, saying, “This is for you.”

Yoshi reached for the money like he thought it would bite. “Why?”

“Payment for services rendered. And this—” A few more bills hit the table next to the first ones. “—is for your continued service.”

Yoshi pulled his hand back empty, shaking his head. “Man, I can’t do that anymore. She is not having it.”

“Relax. You don’t have to check in. All I’m asking is, if she flips her shit, call me and not the cops.”

Yoshi looked queasily around at all the defenseless and no doubt expensive equipment cluttering up his shop. “When you say ‘flip her shit,’ how much damage are we talking about? Because some of this stuff is really hard to come by.”

“Ana ain’t the kind of girl who goes after a man’s toys. If she’s mad enough to break things, she’ll go for bones. But that ain’t likely,” Rider added as Yoshi recoiled. “She’s just going to want to blow off some steam before she decides to be reasonable, and if you’re a guy who ain’t used to seeing it, the temptation to put a blue line between you and her might be strong. Resist. If someone needs calling, call me. Nod your head.”

Yoshi nodded.

“I’ll stick around until she changes her mind. How long did you say she was planning to be here?”

“A couple weeks, she thinks.” Yoshi indicated the parts in front of him and the animatronics around him with a wide sweep of his hand. “However long this takes. It’s sure not going to take less than that.”

“Like I’m made of time,” Rider muttered and headed for the door, but allowed himself to become distracted by Foxy, or at least to pretend he had, although being face to face as they were, Foxy couldn’t help but notice that Rider’s gaze was aimed over Foxy’s shoulder and out the window.

Yoshi watched him, visibly working up his nerve and rehearsing his line, and finally said, “She might not change her mind, you know.”

“She will,” Rider said without hesitation. “She always does. She don’t like the bit, that’s all. Every now and then, she’s got to run, just to prove to herself she could still make it as a wild horse if she wanted, but at the end of the day, she’s my pony. I let her go back to that shithole to pay her respects, not to stay. She doesn’t get to die there. It ain’t her life to lose. She belongs to me.”

“Metaphorically.” Yoshi flinched when Rider looked back at him, but said the rest: “You don’t literally own her. You didn’t…literally…buy her?”

“Oh, you bet I did. By way of her momma. There was a piece of work, let me tell you,” said Rider with a reflexive curl of his lip, his eyes deep in the past. “I don’t know how she found me. Folks like that just do. I was dealing out of some cheap motel by the airport in those days and one night, this car rolls up, suitcases and shit all piled up in the back, and this woman gets out and says she’ll blow me for a rock. Not even a little tempted. Should have been, maybe,” he added with an
introspective air. “She wasn’t ugly. Hard, though…but I’ve sure fucked harder. I don’t know, something about her just screamed no. Or get away. Or just…screamed. Yeah,” he said, nodding to himself. “Something about her was always just screaming. Anyway, I say no and she’s trying to bargain, not getting desperate, just getting pissed, and finally she goes back to her junk ride and I think she’s leaving, but instead, she goes in with a punch and drags out this kid. And she says she’ll give me twenty minutes with the kid for a dime. And for a biscuit, I can keep her. You believe that shit?” he asked, twisting around to sneer at Yoshi. “Kid was this high, skinny as a rake, beat-up and titless, and that bitch thought she could get a fucking full rack for her.”

Yoshi just stared, open eyes and open mouth.

“I didn’t know what the fuck to do,” said Rider with an angry laugh. “All I could think was, ‘I say no and this bitch’ll just peddle her off to the next guy,’ so I gave the bitch a couple rocks and took the kid inside. Bitch is out smoking in the parking lot and I’m left staring at this kid. And you’ve seen her, she’s got the eyes of a fucking demon. She’s looking at me and I don’t where it comes from, but suddenly I’m asking her if she’s done this before.” Rider paused, shaking his head slightly. “I don’t know why. What was I going to do if she had, call the cops? No. No, I know I wouldn’t have done that, so what’s it matter in the end?”

He looked out the window again and only Foxy could see that little shine of regret deep in the eyes of a man who probably didn’t even know it was there. “But she didn’t. She said…She said ‘I don’t know,’ and then she just looked at me, waiting to see what I’m going to do. And I don’t even know what I’m going to do, but ‘I don’t know’? What kind of shit has that fucking kid been through where she don’t even if she’s been pimped out before by her own fucking mom?! And there’s me. Me!” He swung around and smacked himself in the chest with both scarred hands, putting himself and all the hard-traveled years of his life on display with an expression of savage fury that slowly died down to coals. “Five minutes ago, I’m the baddest son of a bitch that ever lived and now all I want to do is save this little kid and I…can’t. All I’ve got is a bag of burgers on the bed, so I gave her one, and a little bit later, we’re watching TV together and I’m smoking off my nerves and I just didn’t even think, I took a hit and passed it. And she took a hit. I could tell it was her first, but she put it in her mouth like it was a gun and pulled the trigger. Twelve years old. And her momma in the car just outside, getting high. And that’s how it started. Every few days, her momma’d show up and sell her to me for a few hours, so whenever I had to move on, I made sure her momma knew where I’d be. Before long, she was spending more days at my house than her own. Shit, man, there’s a damn good chance she was in the back room when you used to come over. She probably bagged the ice that got you thrown out of the House of Mouse. How’s that for Fate?” Rider mused, shifting his gaze to Foxy at last. “With a capital F.”

“Bagged the ice?” Yoshi echoed, openly appalled. “You put her to work?”

“Had to do something with her. And don’t you look at me like that. Anyone else would have got her hooked first and hooking second, used her up before she was bleeding, but not me. I take care of her. When the whole rest of the world threw her away, I took her in. And she knows it. Hell, when her momma died, who did she go to, huh? Who did she trust to keep her from falling into the wrong hands?”

“Dude, have you even seen her?” Yoshi blurted, then flinched again and mumbled, “No offense, but if that’s what your tender loving care did to her, you are the wrong hands.”

“Do you think the cops would have even looked for her if I hadn’t made her talk to them? You think Child Services gave a shit when she slipped the system? Naw, man, that was me. I took her in. Yeah, I stabled her. She’s a good worker. Also, she had tits by then,” he added with a nostalgic smile. “You think she’s hot now, you should have seen her then. Fifteen-year-old Ana. My aching
balls. But that ain’t why I kept her. With all the guys I had by that time, there was no one I trusted more than that kid. And hungry as she was, she never pocketed so much as an extra penny. She was my rock.”

“No, she was a kid,” said Yoshi gravely. “And you’re a very bad man.”

“Well, I’m Swedish, you know. Viking stock. When the best Viking warrior goes into battle, he takes a shield-maiden with him. Not for fucking, but to stand in front of him with this dink-ass little circle of steel while arrows are raining down in front and axes are swinging all around her and bash the way clear to the enemy. That’s Ana. She’s strong when she’s strong and even when she’s not, she’ll bash ahead and never flinch, no matter how many arrows are coming at her or how tiny a shield you give her. I wouldn’t want to be stranded on a desert island with her, but if you asked who I’d want with me for the zombie apocalypse, I’d say Ana Stark every goddamn time. She’s all teeth and she’ll fucking bite back.” Rider glanced at Foxy’s teeth, felt at the point of the gold one, then reached up to wiggle his eyepatch up and down while his gaze wandered back out the window. “And when the zombies finally get you, she won’t go all girly about how she can’t or some bullshit. She’ll look you in the eye, kiss you on the lips, and cut your fucking head off. She might cry about it later, but she’ll cry while she’s bashing the fuck ahead. I did that,” he insisted with fierce pride of ownership.

Yoshi didn’t argue, just bent over the table and pretended he was working.

Rider stared out the window, fingering at Foxy’s eyepatch while Yoshi tinkered uncomfortably behind him. Then, softly, just a breath really, so thin that even Foxy couldn’t have heard him if he hadn’t been saying it right into his ear, Rider said it again, absent all pride, but owning it all the same: “I did that.”

It didn’t last long, a few seconds at most, but it was a few seconds staring into the bleeding eyes of a man who’d had a good thing—one small light in a darkness he had mostly built himself—and tried to do good by her, and couldn’t. That just by touching her, he’d only left more scars. Like his hands were made of hooks.

“Incidentally,” said Rider, in a voice that was only a little bit roughened, “if she knew I told you any of that, she’d probably carve the memory right back out of your brain with a fucking drill, so maybe keep that shit between us.”

“Right,” said Yoshi.

Rider nodded, gave Foxy’s eyepatch a final dismissive flick, and turned around. “I’m out of here. Remember, if she gets mean or starts throwing shit around, call me and I’ll come clean it up, but she probably won’t. She’ll simmer a few days and call me herself. Just don’t tell her I’m waiting on her or she’ll never come the fuck around.”

“What are you going to do if she doesn’t?” asked Yoshi apprehensively.

Rider shrugged. “I ain’t had to lay hands on that girl in over ten years. I hate to break a winning streak, but if I got to beat a bitch down, that’s what I’ll do. If I can’t get through to her, then she’s going back to Mammon and she’ll die there.”

Yoshi opened his mouth, then just closed it and went back to work, obviously uncomfortable.

“No, you’re right. She won’t die, she’ll disappear,” he said with a sneer. “Like everyone else in that pisshole town. She’ll disappear, they’ll foreclose on her fucking house again and in another twelve years, some dumb fuck from the bank will find her in the fucking basement. Is that any way
to be found?” he demanded. “By the fucking bank? Ain’t she been through enough shit in her goddamn life? She deserves better than that.”

Rider sent a savage glance back at Foxy. Just because he was closest, sure. Because there was a shelf between him and Bonnie, and the whole workshop and Yoshi besides between him and Chica, and Freddy’s empty casing off in the darkest corner, so of course it was Foxy he looked at and Foxy who had to stand silent when Rider said, “She deserves better than you.”

He slammed himself out of the workshop and back into his car. Gravel sprayed the side of the building as he pulled out, narrowly missing the pizza guy just pulling in. A brief exchange of pleasantries and he was gone. Yoshi got up fast and ran out to play interference before the poor bastard could blunder up to Ana, leaving the lights on in his hurry.

He shouldn’t ought to move. Dark outside, lights inside. The window next to Foxy was good as a television screen and himself the star if he were stupid enough to step in front of it. He knew it and still he leaned over where he could watch Yoshi send the delivery driver away and then cautiously approach the storm in female form raging on the porch with a peace offering of pepperoni. He couldn’t hear what he said to her and only some of what she said to him, but it ended with, “I need a fucking drink!” And Yoshi, proper gentleman that he was, immediately took the lady to his chariot, tossed the pizza in the back seat and drove them both away.

They were free to move about now, but none of them were quick to do so. In the end, it was Chica who broke the silence, her small voice harsh in the heavy air, saying, “I think I feel like I want to throw up.”

Foxy had never felt less in his life like laughing, but it came out of him anyway. “Weird feeling, ain’t it?” And to keep the silence from closing in again, he added, “Ye all right there, Bon?”

“Yeah.”

“Expected ye to shove me out’n yer way by now, trying to catch a glimpse o’ her taillights a’fore they were gone.”

No answer.

“Lighten up,” Foxy said irritably, glaring back and forth between them. “Ye act like she ain’t coming back.”

“I know she’s coming back,” said Bonnie. “She always comes back. But she ran out on him and that means he’s right about at least some of what he said. And if that’s true…maybe she shouldn’t come back.”

“And ye could let her go, could ye?” Foxy scoffed. “Ye can’t even let her go long enough to sleep through the bloody night!”

“It’s not about me!” Bonnie shoved himself off the wall and swung around to face him, ears flat and hands in fists. “It’s about her and what’s best for her, not us! Fuck us! Look what we’re doing to her!”

“We’re giving her a home and a family, mate. What’s yer grief?”

“Oh for…Even you can’t have your head up your own ass so deep that you can’t see what’s happening to her. He’s right,” Bonnie said, pointing at the door like Rider was still standing there. “She has lost weight. She’s always getting hurt. She barely sleeps.” He paused, visibly struggling to fully embrace certain ugly truths, and finally said, “She’s drinking way too much.”
“Taking yer managerial duties a mite too seriously, ain’t ye, Buster? Ye sound like Freddy now.”

Bonnie sent the CPU on the table a bleak sidelong glance. “Yeah, and I blew him off too when he started saying it, but he was right and so am I. She went from having a couple beers a couple times a week to getting stagger-drunk every single night and going to work hung over every single morning. And it’s more than that. I don’t know what, all I know is, we used to be the place she’d go when she had to get away from the bad stuff. We were the thing that helped her relax and recharge so she could get through whatever was happening out in the rest of the world. But ever since summer ended…I don’t know!” he burst out. “Something changed. Something is making her miserable and she’s not getting better when she’s with us, she’s getting worse!”

Since summer ended, eh? Since her birthday, maybe. Now what could have possibly changed since then?

“She’s a woman grown,” Foxy argued. He didn’t like the tone of his voice, too loud and too fierce for the circumstances. Like a lie. “She knows what she’s doing. I ain’t…No one’s forcing her to do anything.”

“I know, I know. She’s her own person.” Bonnie raked a hand over the bald top of his broken head and paced away while Chica watched them in silence, not even tapping her wee fingers. “And, God, this is not the time or place to start more drama, I know that too. I just…” He shook his head at the uselessness of words when it came to pegging down feelings. “It feels like…we’re running out of time. I know how that sounds, but it’s how it feels. I’m scared and yeah, okay, I’m an idiot and I’m not over my ex-girlfriend, but there’s something wrong with her and I don’t know what it is.”

‘It’s me,’ thought Foxy and said, gruffly, “I don’t know what to tell ye, mate, but yer right about one thing: This ain’t the time. Let’s get her home, eh? Let’s get us all home and just see how many of all our troubles magically sort themselves out.”

Bonnie looked back at Chica, who nodded with that sad-eyed sympathy that was as good as a hug, even from across the room. He passed the nod on to Foxy, shoulders slumped and ears low. “Okay,” he said and put himself back in his place beside the shelf, leaving Foxy alone by the window, just waiting.

And thinking.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!