Danse Macabre

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Summary

Some say vengeance is a dish, one best served cold, but those who seek it know it is a dance, one that must be finished once the first step has been taken. And once it starts, there's no telling where it will stop.

Notes

I wrote this many, many moons ago, in 2007. As such, it does not take into account the events of Books 6 or 7 of the HP canon, nor does it draw upon the subsequent revelations found in the mess that is Pottermore. Hence, the descriptions of the Wizarding War found herein bear no resemblance to the tepid events of Book 7. Many events are graphic and might be highly upsetting if you are sensitive to blood, wartime violence, or people enjoying the infliction of pain. Proceed with caution.

And yes, this fic is finished, so you won't be left hanging.
If she were honest with herself, she had known that this was the course events would take since she had seen Thomas Lessing's face at an arraignment hearing a week after he had buried Don and six other lives beneath an avalanche of rubble with his dirty bomb. It was the only time she'd left her love's side during the eight long days of his slumber, and even that hour had been one hour too long.

The D.A. had assured her that her presence had a profound impact upon the proceedings, and she did not doubt it, though truth be told, she had precious little faith in his assurances. He was, after all, the man who was seemingly content to let the man who had blown up her husband and killed six others pay his meager pittance swaddled in a blissful Thorazine haze of stupid unknowingness. Out of sight, out of mind. The D.A. could crow that he'd prosecuted a killer and gotten him off the streets. Good enough for government work.

Except it wasn't good enough. That knowledge had burned in her veins like lye and puckered her mouth with bitter, missed familiarity. Gall and wormwood and Communion wafers gone rancid on her tongue. She'd shaken with it, and it had brightened the austere colors of the courtroom to painful acuity. The inadequacy of modern Muggle justice was staggering, and as the lawyers had strutted and preened in their three-piece suits and pretended to greatness before a bored, myopic judge, she'd gripped the wheels of her chair and bitten the inside of her cheeks until she'd tasted copper to keep from cackling.

The irony of the situation hadn't been lost upon her. The old Puritans who had built these halls of justice had truly understood the meaning of the word, or at least been more honest in their interpretation and application of it. They had ascribed wholeheartedly to the notion of an eye for an eye, and they had made no apologies for it. The halls had run red with blood, and bones had been crushed to powder beneath pressing stones hewn from the earth by the zealous chisel of the righteous. Necks had snapped in the crushing embrace of the noose, and flesh had blackened and charred, licked by tongues of cleansing fire. Justice had been primal and pitiless and complete, and the victims could return to the remnants of their shattered lives with the small comfort of As I am, so you be. Those who persecuted them would not have the pleasure of revisiting sin upon them, and hated faces would return only in dreams.

The Puritans had understood that what the human soul craved was not justice, but retribution, and they had meted it out in bloody-handed glee. They had been steadfastly unmoved by the sorrowful tears of wives and children, and mercy had not lived within their granite hearts. They were speakers of God's voice, and they would not falter in His Divine mandate because of human frailty.

For all their claims to Gryffindor piety, the Puritans had been Slytherin to the marrow.

The Puritans had honored justice, had sanctified it with the harsh, smiting rod of Leviticus, but three hundred years later, their justice had been scourged from the walls, and the blood that doubtlessly cried out from the earth had been paved over with marble and hardwood that echoed its fairness with every well-heeled footfall. The measure of justice was determined by money and the worth of one's tears, and fates were decided on the strength of a lawyer's eloquence. The courts were easily seduced by honeyed tongues, and juries were cowed by the uneasy, looming specter of doubt.

But there were some who remembered the old justice, and who lived by it still. Wizards had not forgotten. Indeed, they had adopted the justice of their persecutors as their own, had honed it into a beautiful, Dark art without equal. There were tribunals, yes, and not every crime was punishable by
death, but more often than not, the righting of a wrong was left to the victim, and if a murderer or a child molester disappeared with nary a trace, no one raised the alarm. *He's gone to sit 'pon the lap of Hades,* would whisper the ghosts who flitted in the damp, yeasty corners of pubs, and those barflies not too soused to hear the words and understand them would raise their grimy steins in sardonic salutes and drink the knowledge away.

She had lived under the shadow or wizarding justice for three years as a girl, had turned its cruel lash to her own ends. She had pried pounds of flesh from writhing, tortured bones under the black shield of war and suffered no consequence, not even the pang of conscience. She had smiled with blood on her teeth like plum wine and bits of bone and brain in her hair. She had lied and manipulated and crushed weaker foes beneath her unsteady heel. She had killed men who had carried the titles of father and brother and lover and shed no tears. She had been judge, jury, and executioner, and in her more morbid moments, when Don was on the couch, nursing a beer and lamenting the loss of a dirtbag trophy on a technicality, she thought there was a cold pragmatism to vigilante justice.

She had put away those thoughts and longings when she'd left the world of dragons and Death Eaters, shunned them as unclean. Her Gryffindor love, with his belief in law and order and fairness, would not have understood them, would not have seen the warped beauty they possessed. He believed that justice was never for one man to decide, believed in the system he represented, no matter that it had disappointed him a thousand times and would do so a thousand more before the establishment he so loyally served stripped him of badge and gun and set him afield to totter and die. His was a world of black and white, and he would never concede that the only acceptable redress for a wrong came in the deepest shade of red.

So, that day, while he had dreamed his dreams in a place to which she could not follow him, she had tried, for his sake, to believe as he did. She had dragged herself to the courthouse in a suit that had fit poorly on her grief-ravaged bones and had sat in her chair beside the other victims of Lessing's madness-widows and widowers and hollow-eyed children temporarily stunned out of their grief by the grandeur of law. She had watched their solemn proceedings and listened to their motions and impassioned pleas. She had told herself that this was what her love would have asked of her if he could.

But it hadn't mattered, not when it had become increasingly apparent that the justice within those walls was not the justice of old, not the ravening beast of rending vengeance, but the toothless, milktoast justice of those who had never lost or even been threatened with the possibility. A scant week after her world had been rocked to the foundations, the anger aroused by the faint echoes of 9/11 was already cooling, fading into blissful forgetting. Her husband's blood had been squeegeed from the tile floor of the hospital, and even Mac, who had held his pulsing artery in his gritty, bloody fingers and held vigil with her at Don's bedside was conceding that Lessing was too mad to know that what he had done was wrong.

Then those shunned comforts had returned, hot and gnawing and narcotic as poppies. They had offered her serrated hope, and she had clutched them in her clenched fists while defense attorneys had lobbied for confinement to Bellevue rather than the needle their client so richly deserved. They had cut her fingers to ribbons and reestablished an equilibrium she had thought forever lost. The unexpected rediscovery of the bloodlust she had tried so hard to smother beneath the social niceties had startled a smile from her frozen lips, and the D.A., who had just finished delivering his initial list of demands for bail and confinement, had mistaken her expression for approval and smiled.

*Fool,* she'd thought sourly, and grinned all the wider.

She'd studied Lessing while the chess pieces droned. He'd grown large and vivid in her
imagination, and even the grainy newspaper photo had made him seem a monster, a wraith that stole life from afar. In the flesh, he'd been sunken and sallow and insignificant in his bright orange jumpsuit, and for a while, she'd stared in gummy, raw-eyed disbelief. Nothing so pathetic should have been able to bring her white knight low, and yet he had.

He hadn't looked at her, the little man with the receding hairline and the gaunt features that spoke of a restless mind. He'd been too fixated on the men he'd thought to be deciding his fate. She had watched him in inscrutable silence, and the lines, juts, and sunken hollows of his face had become as familiar as the one she cupped every day in the ICU. She'd even known how his stubble would feel between her fingers, rough and prickling and brittle as dried grass. She'd wondered what it would be like to wrap her thin fingers around his pipestem neck and squeeze until his dull eyes bulged from their sockets and burned and guttered with the knowledge of approaching oblivion. The mole in the hollow of his throat would feel like a pebble beneath her palm, round and unexpectedly cool, and as his pulse grew erratic between her fingers, she would pry it from his flesh in bloody, ragged tribute.

She'd told herself that such musings were nothing but dark fantasies born of a feverish, exhausted mind, but even then, she had been planning, pondering the minutiae of retribution in savage, clinical detail. While the lawyers had bandied pre-trial hearings and psychological evaluations, she'd unearthed spells buried beneath thick layers of dust, considered and rejected places she could go and methods she could use. She'd descended into herself and gauged the magic that had gone fallow in her veins, flexed her fingers to coax it into her sleeping limbs. She had drunk from the deep and poisonous wellspring of her long-guarded hatred, and the water had been sweet on her parched tongue. By the time the judge had adjourned the season and remanded Lessing to his cell, she was already weaving his shroud.

Not that she'd admitted it at first. Not when her love still slept. She'd set vengeance aside in favor of holding his cool, limp hand and professing her love for him in endless entreaty. She had sung it like a song: *I love you. I need you. Stay. Stay. Come home, love. Love, love, love.* It was a refrain interwoven with scraps of the life he was missing—Letterman and Sportscenter and the Rangers’ standing in the Stanley Cup hunt. It was whispered between sobs that were breathless, soundless screams as she rocked in her chair with her hands clamped around her bony knees. She had sung the song until her voice was raw and scoured, had willed him to hear it and follow her home.

And then he had, and though the melody remained the same, the words had changed. Now it was *Hello, love* and *I've missed you, love,* and *It's all right, love.* It had been rehab sessions and shrink sessions and listening to him curl in on himself in their bedroom and retch against the pain because he was too damn stubborn to take the pills. It had been days and weeks of stony, wounded silence wrought by a misplaced hand. Coldness had crept into the gentle warmth of their bed, and she had become reacquainted with the merciless hour of none.

*You know all about that hour, don't you, girl?* said her grandfather, gruff and forlorn inside her head. *It's what's driven you to sit out here in front of this godforsaken nuthouse in the middle of the night with venom in your mouth. You learned about it as a little girl, felt its cold caress in the darkest watches of the night while your parents drew blood with whiskey-soaked tongues. It was your childhood companion when the lights went out, and it curled beneath the coverlet and tickled your skin with its clittering claws. There was no hope of escaping it, no hope at all, and you could only draw yourself up into a protective ball and pray for it to go away.*

*But it never did. It followed you to D.A.I.M.S., grew stronger there despite the watery sodium lights that never let the darkness deepen to true black, lest the children who lived within its diseased walls lose themselves. Sometimes, they were lost anyway, there one night and gone the next, and you knew why. The hour of none had gobbled them up. It had slipped into their rooms on fat,
panther feet and swallowed them whole.

Except for Judith Pruitt. Even the hour of none couldn't stomach her rancid porkfat-weakness, and it vomited her up on a wet gout of blood. You waited for it to come for you in the nights after the paramedics had wheeled her out the rear entrance of the school with the mournful squeal of unoiled gurney wheel. Why shouldn't it come for you, come for all of you? After all, you had offered her up as a sacrifice so that it would pass you by.

So you waited with bated breath to hear the stealthy creep of its entrance, to hear the raspy, meaty pant of its breathing. You watched for its long, lean shadows from the corner of your eye, and your nostrils flared as you searched for its primal stink beneath the astringent reek of Pine Sol and Clorox.

It never came for you, at least not to strike the killing blow. That was reserved for everyone around you. It stole your best friend, Brad, in the pre-dawn hours, left nothing behind but wisps of hair strewn over the pillow, pennies tossed into a stagnant wishing well. It came for the fourteen of your friends who had once danced in its lair, and it left them stacked against Hagrid's hut like cordwood. Broken dolls. It left you unscathed, because by then, you were its most intimate partner in the dance, and though its touch was still cold, you reveled in the dance.

You learned the most intricate steps and its most secret face at Hogwarts, in the dungeon classroom that became your crucible. It taught you the rhythm in the slow, exacting quill strokes you repeated night after night and hour after hour while the sand sifted through the hourglass and the torches popped and spit in their brackets. Nuance was found in the endless stirring of potions in their cauldrons, drummed into your aching wrists and forearms by repetition.

Your amorphous, universal hatred was shaped in those damp, cold rooms in the bowels of the castle. It was focused to a hard, cruel tip and tempered with a loyalty so strong Muggle psychiatrists would doubtless call it mania, and they would be right. What is love but an acceptable mania? You bled for the hour of none, lied for it and killed for it and would have died for it had you not fled before its callous rejection.

Before the end, it offered you its fleshless arm and invited you to its darkest cotillion. You danced in its bloody ballroom of hillocks and cratered dunes and bloody, broken bodies, and your feet, which did not move, were the most graceful of all. You had danced long before the others had learned the steps, and your feet were surest on blood-soaked ground. You whirled and pirouetted and dipped as low as your creaking spine would allow—lower when bare-balled determination demanded it—and you were exhilarated. You smiled with blood on your teeth and misted over your face like freckles because for once, you had no equal. This was the maddest dance, and you were its mad queen.

Others fell, broken children of the dust, but not you. You rode the howling winds and opened your mouth to receive the mud and blood that splashed your face. You sang in concert with the maelstrom, poured your rage and your bitterness into it, and it loved you well. It made you strong and hard, sheared away the excess of wish and sugary expectation, made you forget compassion and love and even the luxury of hesitation. Decisions were made in the blink of an eye and the flick of a wrist, and you were as insubstantial as smoke inside your clothes.

Eventually, you wearied of the dance. Exhilaration soured to mindless adrenaline, and you longed to feel the sunshine on your face and taste things that didn't coat your mouth like ash. The first Georgia peach that you ate after you touched down in St. Augustine was so sweet that you cried and tipped your head back to let the juice trickle down your throat. You sucked the pit until there were no traces left and scoured your sticky tongue over the woody wrinkles. It was a glimpse of
sanity, and you hadn't tasted it in three years.

You did your best to remember what it was to be human. You used your intelligence for something other than savagery and deceit, turned its power to the mundane comfort of term papers and theses and dull words on bonded paper. Numbers became beneficent once more and sat innocently upon the page. One plus one was two unless it was zero, and duels gave way to harmless if vociferous debates over tea and hot chocolate.

You exchanged bloodstained, black robes for clean garnet ones, and at twenty-one, you made your home in New York, the great stone dragon where you could live and never be noticed. You learned that happiness was not anathema, and in the months before you met Don on 34th, you trundled to Central Park with a good book and sunned yourself while you watched the world go by.

Then there was Don, your love, and the world regained its color, bright and bold and beautiful. You found emotions you had buried and discarded as useless and dangerous. You found wonder in your first glimpse of him as he straddled a screaming, struggling suspect on the sidewalk. Attraction was hidden in the warmth of his palm as he shook your hand outside the hospital, and in the way he smelled as he drove you home-polished leather and wool and cologne. It was heady and masculine, and you closed your eyes and let your head sag against the backrest, lulled by the smell and the motion of the car.

Want was in his lips on that first kiss, as was hope, fragile and beautiful as butterfly wings. Without a word, he told you that there was more to life than simply holding on with both hands until they were bloodless and numb and your nails were ragged from clawing at unforgiving walls. It was all right to just breathe, and the fact that you walked the earth wasn't an error in need of justification.

Love was unearthed in a grotty diner on 34th, that street of miracles. You reached for his hand and found it in the spaces between your interlaced fingers and in the way he chattered as if talking to you was the highlight of his day. It was in the quiet, comfortable silences when no words were needed and the conspiratorial grins of happy companionship.

Desire was in all those places and a thousand others, in the bed you would eventually share, and it gave you the courage to plan for the future, to dream recklessly. By 1997, life had broken you, and by 2003, when you shed your name like unwanted skin and became another, love had rebuilt you and rounded your sharpest, most poisonous edges. You were still dying, but it was a gentle death now, a death of degrees, and it was made sweeter with every shared look in a crowded room and every I love you spoken over morning coffee and burbled between mouthfuls of shower water.

But the knowledge of the dance never left you entirely. You had danced it for too long and too well, and it was ingrained in the tissue and sinew of your spindly arms and bony legs. It echoed in every heartbeat, and sometimes, when you least expect it, you feel its clawing tug in your veins. Copper and venom flood your mouth, and the world bleeds its colors from a mortal wound.

On those blessedly rare days, your restored humanity chafes like an unwanted binding, and your jaws ache with the desire to rend and snap and fill with blood and retribution. You long for the brutal simplicity of black or white, life or death, and you wonder why you ever allowed yourself such a killing weakness as love.

Then you look at Don, padding to the bathroom in his well-worn boxers and trying to yawn and talk at the same time, and you remember. The music that calls you to the dance fades into insignificance, and by the time he's relinquished the bathroom, the color has returned to your world. The single-minded drive that has dominated your life for so long has been tamed by the milk of his kindness and the sweet harmony of marriage.
Oh, there have been a few times when you almost succumbed to the temptation. When Gavin Moran bet his badge and lost, it broke your heart to see Don grapple with the realization that even heroes can have feet of clay. You watched him as he sat on the couch, eyes fogged with the temporary anesthesia of whiskey, and the need to take up the dance was an overwhelming compulsion. You knew the exact steps it would take, that dance, and your cold, blue feet twitched with them. You would begin by visiting the sins of the son unto the father, and then you would end it by paying a visit to Hector in his cell. You would mete out a more fitting punishment than life in a cold, grey box.

Then there was the day Aiden Burn came home to the lab in the backseat of a burned-out car. God help you, but your first thought—before decency reared its head with more acceptable fodder—was that she had lived up to her name. It was a macabre thought that stank of bitter gallows humor, and you hated yourself for it, but you couldn’t help it and wouldn’t disown it. So there it sat, lodged like a popcorn hull between your teeth while Don sat on the couch and nursed a beer to drown his sorrow.

Mac caught D.J. Pratt and consigned him to the pretty box where he hid all his monsters, and you knew by the quietly smug expression on his face that he considered the matter closed. Right was right, and done was done, and beneath his clothes, he wore Lycra underpants. But for the others, the cut wasn’t so clean. You know because it was your job to see. Don drove a wasted Danny home and came to you with the sickly-sweet odor of another man’s vomit on his clothes. He drank too much and spoke too little, and he came to you after midnight, listing and smelling of yeast and fermented sorrow. His hands were rough and clumsy, and if it wasn’t the best you’ve ever had, you could hardly fault him. Hiding was seldom a graceful business.

You went to Aiden’s funeral and watched your husband and Danny Messer as they carried her to her final rest, grave and possessed of cold beauty in their dress blues, tin soldiers who had learned to walk. Don’s eyes were dry but anguished, and Danny’s were wet and furious. Mac, who had proclaimed himself her mentor, did not join the march, and his eyes were blank and guarded as marbles. They refused to look at Aiden’s casket, but focused instead on the muted gleam of polished buttons and meticulously shined shoes.

You’d learn later about Mac’s ever-shifting loyalty, that Slytherin sense of self-preservation lurking behind his carefully-applied Gryffindor façade. Danny could have told you, and Aiden, too, now that you think about it. He abandoned them both when push came to shove. But you didn’t want to believe it, not after that May, when he held Don’s pulsing artery between his fingers. In May, he was your hero, imploring your love to open his eyes, and in October, he turned on the life he had saved and tore it out again. You don’t know exactly how because Don won’t tell you. He just came home and got plowed and came to you to soothe the pain away with the balm between your open legs. Some of the light he had regained since returning to the beat has guttered and died, and you know that it will never rekindle. Some flames burn only once.

But Aiden was before the pall fell over you and your house, and you stood beside your husband on that April afternoon and watched him mourn. Aiden had never been your friend; she had been kind to you, and on your wedding day, she’d painted your toenails and made you laugh to keep you from throwing up, but she was part of his world not yours. Part of his landscape was no more, and the ruthless, new topography cut deeply. He was stoic and proud, but he was still looking for her even as they lowered her into the earth, and for that you would cheerfully have killed D.J. Pratt.

You didn’t, though, because in your heart, you knew it wasn’t your vengeance to take, your right as friend or lover. That lay with Danny or Flack or Stella. Besides, you couldn’t stand the thought of how he would look at you if he found out what you had done. He has spent his life defending the
weak from the predations of murderers and rapists, so how could he love you if you spat upon his life’s work and came home with iron and vengeance on your clothes?

You set the bloodlust aside then, but you can’t now. Lessing blew a hole in his gut and let the darkness in, and you cannot resist the call to the danse macabre. It's too strong, too seductive, sex and sweat in a darkened room with currant wine on your lips and arsenic on your tongue. You have to drink from the poisoned river one last time, slake the thirst that will never die, and that burns in your belly like vinegar. It's either that, or succumb to the madness that threatens each time the D.A. flashes you a distracted, disingenuous smile and assures you that he's vigorously pursuing his bland, paper justice.

You began to make plans without really knowing it. You found yourself missing magic with an inexplicable, blinding ferocity. You’d be folding Don's boxers in front of the TV, and the need for it would strike like a cramp and claw your fingers in the thin fabric. You'd grit your teeth and double over in your chair, and the voice of Bill Kurtis and his Investigative Reports would be drowned beneath a ravening need to hex and Curse and feel the authoritative heft of a killing wand in your palm. Sometimes you’d retch, and impotent rage would burn on your tongue, sweet and deadly as a mouthful of antifreeze. You never said a word to Don; you just swallowed the taste and let him heal and hurt in his nest on the couch.

You started making trips to Knockturn Alley in October to buy ingredients for Potions. Healing Potions, you told yourself, never mind that Knockturn Alley was a place where goodness and mercy did not follow. You gathered bunches of nightshade and jimson weed, bought phials of powdered aconite and unicorn blood. You paid stupendous sums for bone fragments from a stillborn child's skull, and the knowledge of what it was failed to arouse disgust or shame. It was a means to an end. Just in case.

You went to Borgin and Burke's and traded for a Hand of Glory, that most illegal and coveted of Dark artefacts, and you slipped into the forgotten, labyrinthine aisles of the library at Alexandria to peruse the scrolls of the dead and read the legends more prudent souls had tried to banish forever. You inhaled perversions not seen since Euripides, ground them into the ridges and whorls of your fingerprints, and it was good.

You studied the reflections in magic’s darkened pools, but never at home, where your love might find it and wonder, and never at NYU, where an enterprising student might chance upon your calculations and Runes and archaic formulas and set out decipher their meaning. You took your books and cauldrons, mortars and pestles and ensconced yourself in a secret lair where no feet have disturbed the dust in twelve years. The people of Hogsmeade still think the Shrieking Shack is inhabited by ghosts and gibbering ghouls, and after tonight, they'll go on believing it for another thirty years. Maybe forever.

Your love doesn't suspect a thing, not even when you come home with Egyptian sand in the creases of your skirt, smelling of dust and crumbling papyrus. He should, God knows, but love is blinding. You could confess your sin with the bloody proof of it still on your hands, and he would deny it because he refuses to believe you capable of such an infernal atrocity.

You go while he sleeps, slip from the bed while the cold light of the moon still falls over the bedroom in a silver curtain. You do not depart with a kiss. That would smack too much of Iscariot’s treachery, but you draw your fingers over his face like settling dust and flee before the dull gleam of his badge on the dresser pricks your dying conscience like a needle. You close your eyes and wish yourself into another world, and when you open them again, you stand in a Ninth Circle of your own making.
You fuck him to rid yourself of the taint. That's the worst of it. Sometimes, it's before, to make him sleepy and pliant and too numb to ponder why there is no trace of sleepiness in your eyes. Most of the time, it's after, expiation wrung from hands and mouth and possessive, pulsing prick. You go to him with sand in your mouth and embedded beneath your nails like a curse, and he never questions why you are so hard and rough around the edges. He just takes you in his arms and arches into you, convinced he's helping you heal the festering wound of May and maybe-just maybe-planting the seed for his future family. He looks up at you, guileless and beautiful in his vulnerability, and you can only turn your head and cry in breathless gasps in time to his thrusts.

It's not fair. He deserves better, and there is a part of you—perhaps the deeply-buried kernel that prompted the Headmaster to place you in Gryffindor in spite of your twisted, serpent's heart—that shies away from the deeds that draw you from your bed at the hour of none. What you do now, here on this sidewalk, is an abomination that has no place in this happy, well-ordered life you have made for yourself. It flies in the face of everything in which your love believes, and for it, there can never be any pardon. You would stop if you could, even now at the hour of none, because it is an Unforgivable more heinous than any Curse you could ever utter. But you can't, and you won't. You're too far gone, and hatred has always been stronger than mercy.

You know the precise moment when maybe and just in case gave way to absolute certainty. It was the day he came home with weariness smudged beneath his eyes and confusion in them. It was in the clink of the whiskey bottle and the tart sweetness of booze on his tongue when he kissed you. It was in the mindless roughness of his hands as they pulled off your clothes and kneaded delicate flesh.

I'm a good cop, he said in the darkness when it was over. You've never forgotten it. A damn good cop. Over and over again, as though there were doubt upon the matter. The tumblers clicked into place, and you knew. You waited and watched and you loved, and on the first of November, you fucked him into glassy-eyed complacency and visited Mount Pleasant Cemetery to gather grave dirt. The Day of the Dead has a power all its own, and you intended to harness it.

Maybe you could have made peace with the memories of the eight days he spent drifting between the present and the hereafter. Maybe you could have lived with the knowledge of what your husband looks like with a nasogastric tube jammed up nose and an adult diaper on his ass. Maybe you could even have reconciled yourself to the hateful, ugly scar that will be with him to the end of his days. What you couldn't abide was the uncertainty you saw in his eyes, the sneaking, incredulous suspicion that he wasn't good enough to carry the badge he holds so dear. Lessing had robbed him of his light, introduced him to the terrible power of the hour of none, and for that, he had to pay.

She sat on the sidewalk, concealed from passersby by a Disillusionment Charm. To anyone who might have looked in her direction, she would be nothing more than a fragment of shadow cast by the arc-sodium lights over the hospital entrance and the neon lights from the all-deli across the street. It was bitterly cold, and the air was thick and sharp with the promise of snow; her breath cut the roof of her mouth and made her teeth ache.

Magic crackled and vibrated against her skin, and she couldn't resist a small smile at the comforting familiarity of it as it thrummed in her veins. As a girl, she had lived and died by its power, spent hours swaddled in a protective cocoon of shielding and concealing spells. She had prowled the halls of Hogwarts on silent wheels, a ghost-child who had never paid the penance of flesh. She had slept behind wards and been lulled to dreamless sleep by its gentle vibrations. It had been her constant companion, her conduit to equality, and she had missed it.

That's not all you miss, is it? You miss the bloodletting. You miss the killing.
She pushed the thought away and watched the entrance to the hospital, where an orderly was indulging in a smoke break. His face was haggard and lined in the unforgiving light on the street, and there were stains on his wrinkled, green smock. Blood. Vomit. Shit. The hallmarks of lost dignity. He turned his head and released a puff of smoke, and for an instant, he looked right at her.

She smirked when he dropped his gaze without hesitation. Of course you didn’t see me. Your kind never did, even when I was right under your noses. You knew me by condition and number, and the use of my given name was a rarity reserved only for the psychotherapists who wanted to catalogue my every thought. They tainted it, made it sound lewd and dirty, and I wished they would use the number instead. Even if you could see me now, I’d be another scrap of breathing meat to be kneaded and massaged and pounded into submission.

His gaze flitted over her again, and she fought the urge to giggle. Peek-a-boo, and I see you.

He took a final drag from his cigarette and stubbed it out against the wall. "Shit," he muttered disconsolately, and trudged toward the door.

She darted forward, lips pressed together in concentration. The chair glided soundlessly over the pavement, its wheels buoyed by the Levitation Charms merry Professor Flitwick had taught her a lifetime ago. It responded to the merest brush of her hands on the rims, and her teeth bared in an unconscious snarl of triumph.

Athena has risen, she thought savagely, and swallowed a spate of mindless laughter.

The orderly slipped through the glass door, and she followed close on his heels, a fetch once more, chest light and mouth sour with adrenaline. He passed the information desk and a bored receptionist who wore a floral-print blouse and shuffled to another desk tucked discreetly out of sight. Another receptionist sat behind it, filing her nails and chewing gum. The orderly reached over the desk and picked up a clipboard.

"Heya, Doreen," he grunted, and his mouth was full of smoke and ash, grating and phlegmatic.

"'Lo, Jack," she answered, and her emery board sped up.

"Anythin' excitin' on the floor tonight?" Jack asked. He picked up the pen that dangled from the clipboard and scrawled his name on the sign-in sheet.

"Nah. Some cops from the 31st brought in a tweaker for overnight observation, but the Screamer has been quiet, and nobody's tried to shiv themselves with a goddamn bedspring."

"Well, will wonders never cease?" he retorted wryly, and Rebecca smothered a bark of appreciative laughter.

Oh, Jack, my friend, I think your night is going to pick up considerably.

He dropped the clipboard onto the desk, gave Doreen a jaunty salute, and stalked down the hallway, crepe soles whispering sullen secrets to the scuffed, linoleum floor. This close, she could smell the nicotine on his clothes and skin, and her nose wrinkled in disgust. He scratched idly at the seat of his pants and whistled tunelessly as he walked. Somewhere, a patient began to scream.

"Ain't that a peach?" he grumbled, and she bit the inside of her cheek.

She accompanied him on his rounds, and with each step and turn of the wheel, the music of the dance grew louder. She could hear it beneath the squeak of crepe soles and the screams of damned souls trapped in dreams from which they would never awaken. It was discordant and hypnotic and
graceful, and her limbs twitched with desire to relive the steps she told herself she had foresworn.

She made herself wait. She was so close now, and there could be no room for error. If she were discovered now, there would be no plausible reason for skulking around the nuthouse where her husband's assailant lived in the middle of the night. She measured the revolutions of her wheels and counted the tiles of linoleum over which she passed, and from her vantage point, she watched the familiar rhythm of life behind the walls.

Only the name had changed. The methods and madness were the same. The same grey walls, the same soulless wards devoid of color or hope. The same piss covered by the chemical stink of disinfectant. When Jack peered into the square portholes of patients' rooms, the same squalid, hopeless lives greeted him. The disorders on the charts hanging from every plastic bedframe like toe-tags for the prematurely discarded were different, but the faces were the same, broken and vacant and wholly disinterested in the joyless acts of breathing and pissing and shitting and swallowing pills that looked like candy to mask their stupefying poison.

That wasn't to say that there wasn't resistance to the regimentation. Even madness longed for freedom of expression, and in Pod 3D, a madwoman still had the strength for insurrection. She clawed at the walls with bloody, ruined fingers and left gaudy smears of defiance on the grimy, white plaster. She spoke in the language sane minds called gibberish. *The sacred chord that pleased the Lord,* she thought, and smiled.

The insurrection ended as all the others had before it and as all those that came after it ever would— with needles and restraints and brute force wielded against the weak. Soon, the woman's guttural screams of defiance became glottal, watery moans of defeat, and eyes that saw the secret face of God were blinded by Haldol and Thorazine, and Rebecca watched it dispassionately from her place beside the door. It was a familiar outcome, and it brought no horror, only a dull, simmering anger that coiled around her heart like a fist.

She found Lessing in Pod 5F, the ward for high-stakes offenders. Blowing a hole in her husband's gut and taking six other lives had cost him dearly…and yet, not so dearly as he deserved. He still lived and breathed, and aside from a loss of liberty, he suffered no hardship. His cell was clean and private, and when she peered through the porthole in the door, she saw that the walls were lined with pictures of his family—a woman and child who smiled beatifically at him from the creased photo paper.

She stared at the photos for a very long time and told herself that there was still a chance to let go, to go home to her own husband, who slept and dreamed of bouncing babies in swaddles and of houses with white picket fences. She tried to place herself in the shoes of the woman in the photograph, who had done nothing but marry a lunatic. It was useless because she had been in that woman's shoes, had committed no sin but to marry a police officer, and she had found herself clinging to his limp, cold hand and bargaining with God to let him stay. There had been no pity for her then, and there would be none *from* her now.

She took a deep breath and raised her wand. She pointed it at the heavy, iron hinges of the door. "*Muffliato!*" A flick of her wrist, and the delicate, wavering tip pointed at the lock. "*Alohamora!*"

The tumblers surrendered with a ratcheting click, and the door swung open in mute invitation.

She rolled inside and beckoned to the door, which closed behind her. It was stale inside the cell, and it reeked of unlaundered clothes and unwashed body. Lessing lay on his cot and gazed at the pictures taped to the wall. His fingers grazed a dog-eared photo of his wife with reverent yearning.
You want to fuck her again, Lessing? Never again. Not on this side of Hell. She murmured "Muffliato!" again, and the silence fell like smothering dust.

Lessing shifted on his cot. "Is someone there?" he called uncertainly, and peered at the door in anticipation of movement. When none came, he returned his attention to the photograph.

"Look all you want, because that's as close as you're ever going to get," she said.

Lessing whirled on his cot, and his bare feet struck the floor with a meaty thud. He shot to his feet. "Is someone there? Who is it?" he demanded, and his eyes bulged in their sockets.

"I'm right here," she answered mildly, and laughed, a cold, mocking caw that had once come from the throat of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Lessing danced from foot to foot and turned in a haphazard circle. "Where?" Spittle flew from his lips.

"Right here, Mr. Lessing. Finite incantatem!" The Disillusionment Charm evaporated, and she shivered at the sudden release of pressure.

Lessing's mouth sagged in a boneless gape. "Y-oo-uu," he said slowly, a warped record on its last feeble revolution. "How did you-? Guards! Orderly! There's a woman in my cell!"

"They can't hear you, Mr. Lessing." Patient, bored. "No one can."

"How do you know my name? Do I know you?"

"No. But you will. Oh, I promise you will." Before he could reply, she raised her wand. "Stupefy!"

Lessing crumpled, and a small, satisfied smile curled in the corners of her mouth. There was no hurry, not with magic to protect her and hide her from prying eyes. She could even toy with him if she wanted, make him writhe and bleed while his screams echoed off the walls. But no. She had waited too long, planned too carefully to squander her plans at the eleventh hour.

She bent and seized his bony wrist in her burning fingers, and then she began to laugh. The dance had begun, and it was glorious. She Disapparated with a thunderclap. Outside the hospital, the wind wailed as though in mourning, and inside, the receptionist's clock struck the hour of none.
Midnight Toil

She didn't know what the dilapidated old ruin had been before local gossip and legend had rechristened it the Shrieking Shack. A millinery, she supposed, or perhaps a tavern that had fallen out of favor when The Three Broomsticks and the Hog's Head had opened their doors. Hermione Granger would have known, but Granger now resided in the secretive netherworld of the Unspeakables, and in any case, they had never been bosom buddies, not even when they were shoulder to shoulder in a trench run muddy with blood.

Besides, Granger's legendary intelligence was little more than the product of Slytherin cunning and Hufflepuff diligence, a regurgitation of obscure facts no one else cared to learn. It was not an inaccessible art. She had practiced the same art in her preparation for this dance. She had researched and turned her palsied fingertips yellow with the slough of ancient pages and parchments. She had inhaled the dust of untold pages, coated her throat and lungs with it, and her eyes had burned with exhaustion and raw determination. Hermione would scarcely have recognized her.

Neither, she thought as she molded the wet earth between her hands, would Don. Her Muggle clothes lay forgotten in the corner, her bra coiled atop her blouse like a dead snake. Her breasts hung freely inside her scarlet robes, and the absence of fabric against her crotch was a welcome change. Her hair, unfettered by plait or barette, spilled over her scrawny, hunched shoulders and down her thin back. It shimmered in the flickering, illusory light of the lone torch she'd lit, a beautiful nest of golden serpents slithering in a pool of blood.

He would have recognized her expression, though, that implacable, pitiless mask that heralded the march to war. She wore it every day, from the moment she rose to the instant she settled into his arms at night in temporary truce with the world. It was a look that yielded no compromise. It wasn't an expression she had purposely cultivated; it was simply there, her Patronus against the ignorance and unwitting cruelty of the world, and she was seldom without it. Even Charlie Eppes, with whom she had once spent three days at a math conference, had noticed it, and his colleague, Dr. Fleinhart had once called it her "Amazonian scowl." Her mouth had laughed, had toed the expected social line, but her soul had capered with undignified glee.

Seamus Finnegan saw it, and he had a name for it, too, her grandfather said. He called it your Death mask. It was a joke the first time he said it, but not the second, and never again. Even when his mouth was laughing, his eyes weren't. They were dazed and sad and wary, as if he expected you to batten onto his throat and tear it out. Maybe he thought that to speak of it was to invoke. Seamus was smarter than most people gave him credit for. He'd never be Hermione Granger, knower of all things and spouter of most; he knew the virtue of keeping his mouth shut. But he saw. He was a keeper of secrets just like you. He kept his eyes open for the shadows that lurked in daylight and could be seen if you turned your head at just the right angle. He saw your shadows, and he called you his friend in spite of them.

He was the one who told you that you wore the Death mask all the time, that it rippled and bulged beneath your skin like the malleable bones of a newborn. He understood that it was your true face, the one in which you were most comfortable. It was the face that had been molded over your bones by the rough, cold hands of circumstance and unkind experience, and he wasn't stupid or arrogant enough to think that he could change it. He just tried to convince you that life could be lived without it.

They all did. Even Harry, prat that he could be. He did, after all, owe you a life debt. The twins
made their own contribution to your happiness with the broom they made for you the summer the war began. That old Comet, with its purloined Gryffindor Tower armchair bolted to the frame, was the closest you ever came to believing in Heaven. You could almost touch it in that miraculous, wonderful confabulation of ingenuity, kindness, and youthful optimism, and in the spring, when the blanket of ice retreated to Mother Nature's wardrobe, you'd strap yourself into the seat, grab the bicycle handlebars that served as rudder and grip, and slip the tethers of earth.

You'd let your toes skim the grass in a lingering farewell, and then you'd nudge the broom skyward, away from gravity and sour memories. On clear days, you'd tilt your face to the sun and bask in its warmth. You circled the turrets and the parapets, and you tempted the snapping flags and standards to slap your brazen face. Sometimes, they'd miss, cheated by scant inches. Occasionally, they'd find their mark and leave stinging, red heat on your cheek. You never faulted them their successes. The object of the game was always to win, and Hogwarts was a proud castle.

You took to the broom the same way you took to the dance. You'd never play Quidditch—a single blow from a Bludger or a Beater's bat would shatter bone—but you learned to guide your improbable, wooden sky chariot with a modicum of grace. You did barrel rolls over the moat, and the fierce tug of the lap belt as it fought gravity for possession of your ramshackle body gave you an erotic, dry-mouthed thrill that made you light inside your robes.

Moonlight rides were your favorite. With no sun to illuminate the harsh, awkward angles of your body, you could pretend that you were lovely and loved. You could close your eyes and imagine that the wind in your hair was the gentle touch of a lover, and you could fashion his face in your mind's eye. Sometimes it was familiar—Seamus or George or even The Princeling—but sometimes, it was a face of your own creation. Never the face that you'd come to love more than the breath that sustains you. He was a gift beyond mortal reckoning. But they were enticing in their own right. In your most fanciful moments, you drew close to the moon and studied your reflection in its benign, silver mirror. Until Don and his little band of gold, the moon and its silver was the sweetest magic you knew, and you miss it still.

The broom was almost enough to convince you that life could be kind, and then the War struck the U.K. like pestilence and smothered the moon in a perpetual eclipse. Brooms became weapons of war or kindling for funeral pyres. There were no toys, no childhood, and no innocence. Voldemort corrupted everything to which he set his inhuman, decaying hand. You had always been a lily bloomed in shadow, but he showed you deepest black, and you developed a taste for it.

The broom that the twins built for you was one of the few things from your past that you couldn't surrender entirely. You consigned it to your vault in Gringotts, where it gathers dust and years. Had you left it at Hogwarts, it would've been burned or broken apart in the name of a conflict that no longer bears the legitimacy of war. Nine years after Voldemort fell to the Boy Who Conquered, his followers refuse to yield. They live in ragtag enclaves scattered over the world like pockets of virulent contagion, and no matter how hard the Aurors try, they can't scourge them from the earth.

Evidence of their survival is everywhere. Hogwarts had been restored shortly after Voldemort fell, and most of its scars have been smoothed away thanks to generous donations from anonymous benefactors and its Board of Governors, but Hogsmeade is still rife with scars. Some are old and toughened by years, but others—far more than you ever would have thought—are fresh enough to bleed. The thatching on Rosmerta's roof bears the blackened marks of a recent attack, and Honeydukes still smells of brine and old Curses beneath its sweet displays.

Magical London is no better. Florean Fortescue's is still deserted, untended and uninhabited since the proprietor disappeared in your fifth year. The sign hangs above the door, but it does not blink in merry invitation, and the windows are cataracted with dust and hairline cracks that mar the
bleary panes like astigmatism. There is precious little laughter in the streets, and when it comes, it is rusty and faint, as though it dares not give itself away.

Knockturn Alley is more diseased than ever. It seethes with rats of all species and pulses with its vibrant, dark life. Its cramped alleys are thronged with people who never sleep. The whores and fruit peddlers ply their wares, and both are rotten-soft to the touch. Doors lead nowhere, and the cobbled stones are slick with slime and blood. The air stinks of violence and sex and Curses not yet loosed. It is lawless and fetid and exotic, and you breathe deeply of its atmosphere even as your skin crawls in revulsion.

The Ministry would have you believe that the War is over, that it ended with the death of Voldemort, but you know better. You and every other wizard that fought in that War. You carry that smoking battlefield with you everywhere you go, tucked into the deepest recesses of your mind and the most withered cockles of your heart. You dream of those times now and then, though they have grown less vivid with the passage of time. You smell the smoke, taste the blood, and hear the screams, and then you awaken with a whimper and seek Don’s warmth to keep the monsters at bay.

The War will not end until the last of you has died, and maybe not even then. Ghosts carry their memories with them into the afterlife in lieu of the cerements they have eschewed, and perhaps you and the others will spend your eternities flitting in the drafty corners of bars and brothels and lodging houses, reminding a new generation that here there was war. Even those who do not return as spirits may leave the War as a legacy to their children by repainting the squalid atrocity of war as heroic, grand adventure. War is an urge as primitive as sex, and it will never die. It only sleeps.

The long sleep was coming to an end. She felt the nascent stirrings in her bones. Nine years away, and she could still read the rhythm and pulse of this world as easily as she had once read the shimmering, Arithmantic threads of fortune. It was in the air, a furtive restlessness that spoke of old ideas renewed. Voldemort hadn’t been the first to espouse the purity of blood; before him, there had been Grindewald, and while he had terrorized the Wizarding world and left villages and lives in smoking ruin, Hitler had matched him step for step in the Muggle world. Nor would he be the last.

She’d heard the whispers in Knockturn Alley as she’d wended her way through the narrow, claustrophobic streets towards Borgin and Burkes. She’d seen black-toothed youths passing out leaflets outside seedy pubs and boarding houses, and some passing hands had accepted them. She had even taken one as a matter of course, but it remained unread inside the pocket of her robes. Matters of war no longer interested her. Her only concern was the task at hand.

She sat propped against the moldering, plaster wall, supported by Stabilizing Charms. Beside her was an enormous pile of dirt that she had taken from the cemetery and a pail of water. The water was cold enough to burn her fingertips whenever she dipped them into it, which was often. They were red and numb as she smoothed the mud into the discernible shape of a human body.

Tonight wasn’t the first time she had undertaken the project. There had been practice runs since she’d first gathered the dirt under the cold, lidless eyes of the stars on the Day of the Dead. She’d brought the dirt here in the endless hour of none and heaped it on the rotting floorboards. The first night, she’d merely gathered the dirt in her hands and sifted it through her fingers. She’d wanted to familiarize herself with its consistency and texture and train her recalcitrant hands and fingers in its handling. Four hours of lifting and drizzling and packing and tamping, and then she’d spent another half an hour scrubbing her hands in the freezing, dirty water that splurted from the spigot in the kitchen. Then she’d gone home to Don and crept into bed, and he’d turned in his sleep and gathered her cold hands beneath his body, nurturing her even in dreams. The unthinking tenderness had
inspired a brief, savage spasm of guilt and what she was doing in his name, and she'd wept, face pressed into the pillow to muffle her sobs.

There was no guilt now. It had been washed away by the agonizing recollection of sitting outside his pre-op room with her hands pressed to the glass because minds that had forded the fierce waters of medical school hadn't been able to find a way to sterilize her chair so she wouldn't kill him with her presence. That single, lonely hour had been as terrible and wrenching as the eight days that followed it. Now there was only the serenity of purpose and the effort of marshalling twitching limbs to delicate detail work.

She'd begun the grunt work of forming the body on the third run, ensconced here in this derelict house without history. It had been long, laborious work, and her muscles had ached and burned, unaccustomed to such prolonged strenuous activity. She'd cut away the excess dirt and set it aside for use as patch and shaped the body with her hands and her wand. Her hands, mostly. The texts had emphasized the importance of infusing the end result with sufficient familiarity of its creator to ensure obedience.

It had taken her five visits and twenty-five hours to fashion it to her satisfaction, and there were still details to be considered. Like its genitalia. Were it up to her, it would remain sexless, but fitting as it might be, a missing penis was out of the question. Even the thickest dolt would notice a missing dingus, and she was a perfectionist at heart. She paused in her construction of an ear to survey Lessing, who lay inert upon the sofa on which she had deposited him upon arrival. Her lips pursed in contemplation, and then she resumed her toil, suddenly resolute. She might not be able to get away with no prick, but no one ever said it couldn't be a miniscule one. Her lips twitched in satisfaction, however petty.

The mud was thick and cool beneath her manipulating fingers, and she indulged in a brief, sardonic smile as she wondered what her physical and occupational therapists would think of how she'd chosen to employ their endless hours of simpering, bull-necked training at an oval, laminate table in a cheerless room marked simply PT/OT. No doubt they'd assumed that their endless, soporific dexterity exercises would serve her well in her job as a coin roller at a local bank. Certainly they had never foreseen the unhallowed acts in which she was so earnestly engaged.

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Unhallowed acts, she thought absently. How very Frankenstinian. And how apt. She tittered to herself and used the tip of her wand to shape the nautilus of the ear.

There was a gurgling groan from Lessing, and she froze and studied him intently. One hand reached for her wand while the thumb of the other continued refining the shell of the ear. She had restrained him with a Body Bind, but there was no harm in caution. Arrogance toppled kingdoms. She had seen as much with her own eyes, watched murderers and pedophiles pave the way to Hell with one mistake. If he so much as twitched, she'd make him scream until his vocal cords ruptured.

He snorted and smacked his lips, but that was all, and after a few minutes, she let go of the wand and reached for the deep hood that bunched at her nape. She pulled it over her head and luxuriated in the concealing darkness that hid her face. The scarlet balaclava had cost a pretty Knut at Madam Malkin's, but it was an indulgence well worth the cost.

Knut. She had been back in the wizarding world for little more than six weeks, and already the old language was returning, pushing up from beneath the assiduously packed layers of Muggle speech like a triumphant weed once thought vanquished. Hallways were becoming corridors, and serving carts were trolleys. The Queen's English was stealthily reclaiming her American tongue, and she wondered how long it would be before she asked Don to take out the rubbish. She snorted at the thought. He already thought her mad for preferring hot tea to coffee or soda. A request to take out
The rubbish might well cause a fatal aneurysm.

That’s one thing you can thank Lessing for, hissed a leering, sibilant voice that reminded her of hourglass sand that had learned to talk. Without him and his bloody Sunday boom, you never would have set foot on Scottish soil again, never would have tasted the ambrosia of magic on your tongue.

Her eyes narrowed, and she removed her hand from the smooth head of the mud-man, lest her fingers spasm and crush the work of precious days. She would be grateful to Lessing for nothing. She had spent the last nine years burying her past and the person she had been, and with the press of a button, he had resurrected the uneasily-dreaming dead and brought all her old sins and shameful passions to light. He was a damnable Muggle Necromancer, and Necromancy carried a sentence of death. She was only giving him his just desserts.

So, no, there would be no gratitude from her lips. There were, however, a litany of accusations to lay at his feet, and she intended to pile them up, brick by brick, until they sealed his fate. She had catalogued them with loving exactitude since the explosion, and they were as familiar to her now as the mud beneath her fingers.

There was the solemn retinue that had descended upon her doorstep that Sunday afternoon. Mac and Danny and Captain Gerrard and a uniform she never knew and never cared to know. They were pallbearers with no coffin, ashen and silent and taut with worry as they escorted her down the hall, out the door, and into the waiting SUV. She still remembered the shrill howl of the siren as Captain Gerrard had cut a red and blue swath through the city traffic, and the bone whiteness of Mac's fingers on the steering wheel. She remembered Danny's pinched face and the musky reek of his cologne and the rasp of his jacket against her frozen skin as he lifted her out of the passenger seat.

There was the stink of the hospital, Hell clothed in Pine Sol and rubbing alcohol. It was an old friend, come to smother her in broad daylight. There was the softly undulating smoothness of linoleum under her wheels, and monsters with green-masked faces that told her she could not go to her prince, who lay dying in a bower of white.

There was the hopeless, endless hour spent outside his pre-op room with her hands pressed to the glass and her heart full of memories that she held like totems against the encroaching shadow. He couldn't leave her; they weren't finished yet, not finished building and dreaming and doing. There were children to bear and places to see and jokes to hear that no mouth had yet thought to tell. He was her prince, and that wasn't how the fairy tale was supposed to end.

They'd fed him an ocean of drugs through the plastic tubes that had clung to his arms like leeches, and his eyes, when they'd opened for a brief, terrible instant, had rolled mindlessly in their sockets. He'd turned his head on the pillow, as though he were looking for her, and her soul had wailed. She'd pressed herself to the glass with a desperate expulsion of breath, as though she were willing herself to pass through it, and here in the conscienceless confines of a werewolf's den, she could admit that she had been. Apparition had throbbled in her stomach like a contraction, and she'd been a breath from passing through the glass in a feat of osmotic magic. Only the doctor's voice, warning her that her presence would be lethal, had held her in check. She'd whispered a hoarse I love you to the indifferent pane of glass as the OR nurses had rolled him into surgery and tried to console herself with the belief that marriage forged a bond that spoke the sacred language of silence.

There was the airless, fraught tension of the waiting room, where she, his colleagues, and his parents had twisted old magazines in their restless hands and choked on words they had left unsaid.
Mother Flack had cried endlessly into her disintegrating tissues and moved her fingers like she were holding an unseen rosary and dropping the small, scraping beads betwixt her shaking fingers. Rebecca had very little truck with God since the requisite catechism required for conversion to Roman Catholicism; she'd preferred to ignore the demands of a deity who was, at best, a well-intended fool, and at worst, a narcissistic, cruel son of a bitch. But sitting in the waiting room with nothing but People's Ten Best-Dressed of 1998 to comfort her, she had envied the old woman the distraction. For his part, Papa Flack had been made of stone as he sat beside his wife with his arthritis-knotted hands fisted on his thighs, dressed impractically in his dress blues.

Other cops had come, too, cops whose brass buttons hadn't tarnished, and whose beat uniforms still carried the grit of the street. They'd filed in to offer their well-wishes and genuflect before the specter of their own mortality. They'd crouched in front of her to touch the brims of their hats and speak in soft, consoling voices. She hadn't recognized most of them, and it hadn't mattered. They'd been blue cogs that had smelled just enough like Don to hurt, and not enough to comfort. They'd rotated in and out of the room in pairs, blurred faces beneath clear, blue caps, had set up an ancillary beat around the hospital, one not found on any duty roster.

She had recognized a few, though. Like Scagnetti, who sidled in with creases in his suit pants and perspiration in his close-cropped hair. He'd lumbered over and hunkered awkwardly in front of her chair, a winded bull breathing through the agony of a matador's picador. For one ridiculous moment as he'd squatted in front of her, she'd been reminded of Grawp, with his muddy, vacant eyes and slack, stupid face, and she'd had to cram her hard, fleshless knuckles into her mouth to keep from cackling. He'd smelled like vinyl upholstery and nicotine, but his enormous, leathery, bear-paw hand had been light upon her rounded, aching shoulder. His voice had been gravelly when he'd spoken.

"'S gonna be fine, Mrs. Flack. You'll see. Don's a tough kid, and he ain't goin' out without a helluva fight." He'd nodded his square head in brusque affirmation, as though the matter had been settled and there was no more discussion to be had.

New York in his mouth, just like Don, and it had prompted a moan. Scagnetti had slunk away, sure that he'd stuck his foot into his thick-lipped mouth, and others had come after him. O'Bannion had come, sweet, rookie O'Bannion, who had hair like a Weasley and the freckles to match, and who had appointed himself Don's second. He had a sister with Spina Bifida, and he was familiar with the customs of the Chair People. He'd come to fret over her and bring her too many cups of water, and when she'd been too tired to hold herself upright, she'd slumped against his shoulder and let unshed tears scald her eyes.

There was the smothering indignity of watching Mac Taylor be the first one to see him after he came out of surgery, using his badge and credentials to shunt her aside. She had hated him for that, still hated him for it, and there would be a reckoning someday. Not as severe as this one, of course. Mac at least had the excuse of doing his job, but hate was hate, and it couldn't be mastered. It could only be satisfied.

There were the eight days he had traveled upon his own River Lethe without her, when she had clutched his hand and pressed kisses to the knuckles. There was a desperation so great that she had swallowed her pride and gone on bended knee before a God she despised to plead for his life, for the simple, overlooked grace of time. The smell of hymnals and wood polish in her nose and the orchestrated gravity of the cross mounted upon the wall, backlit to inspire reverent awe. All she had ever felt was a sad, mutinous anger. The gritty, bitter, burnt-umber taste of No-Doz on her tongue.
The first hours after his awakening, and that gummy, fumbling, dry-mouthed kiss. It had been beautiful for what it promised-more time in which to hold him-but wrenching in the weakness it had revealed. His kisses had always been decisive and possessive, but he'd barely had the strength to lift his head from the pillow, and he'd bobbed helplessly as he'd sought her lips. She'd had to guide his hand to the back of her head, and his fingers had grasped weakly at her nape.

"'Sss'okay now, doll," he'd whispered, slurred and thick and dazed with heavy doses of painkiller. "'S gonna be okay now..." Lying on a bed with his guts held together by medical stitching, his first thought had been for her.

Sss'okay now, doll. So much like the last coherent words of the stupid, idealistic Auror who died in a trench with guts gone septic. Your equilibrium faltered, and you wept, buried your head in the crook of his neck and sobbed. He mumbled words of comfort and tried to pull you to him, but the bedrail was in the way, and then a nurse hustled in and chivvied you away. He tried to give her the finger, but he was too stoned and could only flap ineffectually at her. You laughed at that, and it settled him. He closed his eyes and drifted into healing sleep, but that was all right. You knew he was going to make it. You pillowed your head on your folded arms and surrendered to sleep for the first time in eight days.

Then there was the rehab and his anguish reflected in her bones. He had always been there when she'd needed him, had eased her through the humiliation and pain of the involuntary spasms that occasionally wracked her and twisted her muscles on their shoddy framework, but she couldn't do the same for him. She could only sit and watch as nausea turned him inside out and tortured his mending abdominal muscles. Don Flack, who had been kicked repeatedly in the face by fleeing suspects and grinned, had wept from the pain, and she could do nothing but watch him endure. She had respected him too much too offer useless platitudes, and her silence in the face of his suffering had prompted his mother to call her a heartless bitch.

But you did do something, her grandfather reminded her. You broke magical law and murmured basic Healing spells to ease his pain and help him sleep when the morphine refused to touch it. You leaned in under the pretense of kissing his forehead or smoothing his hair and whispered the incantation against his waxy cheek. His body relaxed, and his breathing deepened, and you thanked the Fates that the brief burst of magic hadn't shorted out his monitors. It was your unheralded gift to him, and the act that kept you from being nothing more than a living set piece in this terrible drama.

Sometimes, she'd wondered if Mother Flack were right, if she had forgotten her compassion. Sometimes, Don had turned away from her, curled in on himself and closed his eyes to hide from the indignity of having a nasogastric tube up his nose and a diaper beneath his buttocks, and she was sure that he resented her presence, her wordless, comfortless witness to his vulnerability. But when she'd tried to leave, he would invariably reach for her hand and say, "Stay," in a ragged, exhausted voice.

And stay she had, immutable and immovable as the bedrock of the sea.

And so were numbered the seven sins of David Lessing. It was ironic, she mused as she etched eyebrow detail into the face of the mud man, that seven was both the number of Divinity and the enumeration of the deadliest depravity. The Church fathers had certainly possessed a black, devil's humor for all their claims of piety. Lessing had been perfect in his depravity, and she had made for him a perfect penance.

He came to while she was retouching the nose, and she ceased her tinkering to watch him come to the realization of his captivity. It came by degrees as each of his senses registered his surroundings.
He was calm at first, logy with the remnants of deep unconsciousness, but as awareness set in, so did his fear. She watched his frozen muscles fight the unbreakable bonds of the Body Bind. His eyes widened, his nostrils flared, and he cast his head from side to side, as though searching for escape. The cords in his neck stood out as he tried to arch off the couch and pry his rigid arms from his sides. He grunted in alarm when his limbs refused to obey his commands. He whined deep in his throat, and the sound reverberated between her legs like a lascivious flutter of tongue. This was going to be exquisite.

"H-hello?" he stammered, and twisted his head as far as it would go in either direction. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

She held her tongue and waited, and his fragile composure shattered.

"Help!" he screamed. "Help! Somebody, please, help me!"

"There's no one to help you here, either," she said, and resumed her work on the nose.

He jerked his head in the direction of her voice and struggled futilely to rise from the couch. "Where are you?" he demanded.

She did not answer him right away. Instead, she dipped her chapped, dirty fingers into the frigid water and dripped it into the blank eyes of the face. She pursed her lips in consideration and made a minute adjustment. She clucked in approval.

"I said where are you," he howled, and banged his head on the lumpy cushions.

"I'm not inclined to bow and scrape to your every whim," she answered drily.

"Where am I?"

Another long pause while she moistened the mud. "Accursed ground. Or so the townspeople say. They won't hear you, and even if they do, they won't come near. It's just the two of us."

"You're crazy."

"Well, then," she countered cheerfully, "I suppose that means that everything I do here will be excused, won't it?"

"What do you mean? What do you want with me?" Panicky.

_No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die_, she thought suddenly, and tittered. It was from an old Bond movie she had watched with Don shortly after his return to active duty, curled against his sturdy body that had felt softer than it should have in too many places. She had laughed then, too, because it had been possessed of a gleeful, villainous honesty. She had, in fact, laughed until she'd cried, until Don had begun to spare her wary, sidelong glances. Later that night, she'd awakened from nightmares in which Lessing had stood over Don's convulsing, bleeding body and crowed, _I want you to die_, while dust and ash had settled over them both in an insubstantial shroud. She'd returned to awareness with vomit in her mouth and burning the lining of her nose, and then she'd cowered on the cold, tile floor of the bathroom and gargled with Listerine for twenty minutes so Don wouldn't smell terror on her breath the next morning.

"What do you want with me?" he repeated.

"I told you: I'm not inclined to care what you wish to know. It's my party, and I'll speak if I want to." She put her wand on her lap and scrubbed her muddy palms on the stone floor.
"They'll notice I'm missing," Lessing babbled. "At the hospital. They do hourly room checks."

"No, they won't, and even if they do, you'll be back soon enough."

"Kidnapping is a federal offense. You'll go to jail."

"No. I won't." Flat. "Do you know what a golem is, Mr. Lessing?"

"Golem?"

"Golem," she repeated patiently. "I wasn't familiar with them, either, until I stumbled across a text in the Alexandrian library. There are all sorts of levels and classifications. According to some texts, a chest of drawers can be a golem if you infuse it with animus. But you, Mr. Lessing-..." She picked up her wand and wagged it roguishly at him. "-You are special, indeed." She pointed the wand at her chest. "Automous Wingardium leviosa!"

She Levitated herself into her chair, stowed her wand inside her robes, and rolled to a nearby workbench. She picked up a large, granite mortar and a finely-honed knife. She balanced them on her lap, careful to point the blade outward, and rolled to the couch. Lessing stared at her, cheeks flushed and eyes rolling wildly in their sockets.

"A golem is an inanimate object animated by the will of its creator. It has no mind, no soul of its own. Only God can grant a soul, and even the holiest of mortals can never hope to mimic the feat. A golem is a parody of life, the work of apprentice gods, if you want to be arrogant. It can be a rock with feet, or it can be made in the image of Man. A considerable amount of skill is required to master the latter, of course, and I still can't claim that I've managed it." She cast a critical eye over her mud man. From a distance, it looked far lumpier than she would have liked. "I guess we'll find out." She reached out picked up one frozen arm. Lessing grunted.

"Pull all you like. You won't move unless I allow it." A cool precision had crept into her speech. "Cruelty carries a British accent, she thought absently. No wonder Lucius Malfoy sounded the way he did."

"It was the Jews who discovered the secret," she said. She fell into the same brisk, lightly formal tone she used in her lectures. "Not surprising since the Jews were God's chosen. No one knows when, though some theorize it happened during their enslavement by the Egyptians as a means to escape the brutal treatment of their overseers." She pursed her lips as she inspected the flesh of his arm for a vein. "Whenever it happened, it didn't take them long to perfect it. Traditional wisdom holds that the art could only be performed by holy men blessed with the favor of Yahweh. I'm afraid I disprove that theory."

At Lessing's expression of abject incomprehension, she said, "Nothing holy about me. At all." She held out his arm and positioned it over the mortar balanced on her knees. "You know, I've always wondered if Jesus weren't a golem. It would be par for the course, really. Two thousand years of organized religion built upon a mound of dirt. Gives a whole new meaning to Saint Peter vowing to build his church upon a rock doesn't it?" A wry, bitter laugh. It would certain explain a lot."

Lessing said nothing.

"As I said, you are very special, Mr. Lessing, and so is the golem. It's going to take your place in that posh little shithole that you call home, serve the sentence imposed upon you by the State of New York. And in the meantime, you and I are going to have a very long talk." She positioned the blade over his skin, which puckered into hard knots of gooseflesh.
"You're crazy," he said, and the cords in his neck stood out as he tried to will his limbs into motion.

"Mmm. I believe we've covered that."

Lessing switched tacks. "It's never going to work," he gibbered, shrill and brittle.

She chuckled, mud bubbling through tinderbox straw. "Fortunately, Mr. Lessing, your faith is not required. Just mine, and I have plenty."

"Please. Please, don't. Please…"

She leaned forward until she could smell his fear, jungly and tart in her nostrils. "Goodness and mercy do not follow me," she murmured mournfully, and patted his hectic cheek. She left her fingers there in long, muddy weals like broken crosses.

She made a long, parallel cut, and blood sluiced into the mortar in a dark freshet, warm and sharp with copper. The smell was rich, and it eased the cramp that had been massed in the center of her chest since that Sunday morning in May.

_Sunday, bloody Sunday_, she thought, and smiled. It was genuine and beatific in the grimy darkness, and she hummed as she set the mortar aside and reached for a compress with which to staunch the wound. It wouldn't do for Lessing to die. Not yet, at least.
Shadows in Daylight

Sometimes, when the light hit her face at just the right angle, he’d remember how beautiful she’d been on their wedding day. Not just at the altar, when he’d raised her veil and claimed her trembling lips with his own, but later, back here in this apartment with her gown pushed off her shoulders and her breasts exposed to the light and his eager mouth and hands. She had been lovely.

Ain’t that a word? his father mused. You know what it means, but if somebody asked you to describe it, you’d have no words, only that picture of Rebecca in your mind. Loveliness is the most subjective idea in the universe. For some, it’s the sunset on a Hawaiian beach, red and fertile and strangely ancient. For others, it’s a rose, and for the fat cats at One Police Plaza, it’s wakin’ up to discover that their pants still fit. But for you, it’s the sight of Rebecca with her gown pushed off her shoulders and her lips plump from your kisses.

Getting her home was all you could think about during the reception. The weddin’ was for you and her, but the reception was for us—your mother, mostly. She’d been dreamin’ of your weddin’ since the day you were born and plannin’ it since you hit puberty. She’d been robbed of the chance to play dress-up with her daughter thanks to you, and so you were the good son and let her have that much.

Even I gotta admit she went a little gaga. She swooped down upon a nervous, harried Rebecca and nit-picked her tentative ideas. The intimate settin’ Rebecca had hoped for suddenly became a hotel ballroom, and the list of invitees swelled from maybe fifty to five hundred. Your ma picked the table linens and the glassware and the music, and she woulda picked the menu if Rebecca hadn’t set her back on it. If Rebecca sealed and addressed envelopes, your ma would follow behind her and do it all over again.

It drove your girl crazy, and more than once, you came home to find her grittin’ her teeth and clenchin’ her fists in furious frustration. Bless her, but she never said mum about it because she sensed that it was important to you, and hell, maybe it was her way of makin’ a peace offerin’ to the woman who’d always hoped you’d come to your senses before you came to the altar. It didn’t work on that count, but her willin’ness to try in the face of your ma’s stubbornness cemented your adoration.

She used to joke that Grace was never her middle name, but she had it in spades. She did her best to make things as easy for you as she could, and she never batted an eyelash when you asked her to leave an open space in the bridal party, the space that would’ve belonged to Diana had you not taken her to that damned house. She just squeezed your hand and told you that if you wanted your sister to be there, that was fine by her. She said the same thing when you asked the caterer to prepare one more entrée than was needed. She didn’t complain about the waste, not like your ma, who tried to take the plate as leftovers.

She bore more insults than she ever knew of. Your ma stayed with you on the mornin’ of the weddin’ rather than help Rebecca with her gown. She left that to Stella and Aiden and fussed over your dress blues. She straightened your starched collar and spit-polished a speck of imaginary dust from your brass buttons. While she did these natural, ordinary things, she tried to talk you outta getting married.

You look so handsome, she murmured fondly, and brushed the shoulders of your jacket. You’ll make a wonderful groom. I just wish it was for someone else. A wistful sigh.

Ma, we’ve been over this. Plaintive, embarrassed, and Messer, who was servin’ as a groomsman,
got real interested in a brass planter full'a cheap, plastic flowers, and Moran excused himself to get ready to walk Rebecca down the aisle. I went to go take a fuckin' leak and a swig of whiskey from the hip flask stashed inside my blues.

I'm sure she's a perfectly lovely girl, Don, but that's no reason to settle.

Lovely. There was that word again, and you wondered if your ma knew what it meant. You didn't have the image of Rebecca slippin' out of her gown in the dim, bedroom light yet. That was almost ten hours down the road, but you had another. Rebecca's face as she watched a Derek Jeter homerun blaze through the sky above Yankee Stadium like a comet.

I'm not settlin', Ma. I love her.

She snorted. You love saving people. There's a difference. Don't confuse the two.

You'd tried to hold your temper in check 'cause she was your mother and you'd never raised your voice to her, but that remark prompted a brief flare of anger.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? you demanded.

Her face softened, and she cupped your cheek. I'm just not sure that she's capable of providing the type of companionship that a young man like you needs.

Whoa, okay there, Messer said from behind your ma. He passed one hand over his face and stretched his lower lip, and the other hand ran through his hair. I'm, uh, I'm just gonna head on out there and make sure that everybody who needs a good seat got one, all right? I'll see you in a few, there, Don, all right? He clapped his hands together, checked his watch, and scuttled out of the room before you could answer him.

It took you a minute to process what she was implyin', and when it clicked, you understood why fearless Danny Messer had tucked tail and run. You gaped at her, torn between the knee-jerk impulse to defend your girl and the filial instinct to keep your sex life and your mother as separate as possible. You'd been baptized in the Church, but we'd never been devout. Still, the idea of admissin' to your ma that you'd had premarital sex made you squirm like a kid and blush to the roots of your hair.

You settled for the neutral reply of, It'll be fine, ma, and adjusted your uniform cap for the twentieth time.

What about children? she insisted. Are you sure she's even capable? What if-?

Ma, that's enough. That's none'a your business. I'm not even sure we want 'em.

We or her? she snapped, and then her shoulders slumped. I just want you to be happy, she whispered, and rested her head on your chest.

She suddenly looked old and small, and a lump formed in your throat. She was wrong and bein' needlessly cruel, but she was your ma, and she'd loved you long after I quit. You never wanted to disappoint her, never wanted her to look at you the way she did the night Diana died and you came home with guilt in your breakin' heart and freezin' piss inside your clothes. She'd been crushed, and you've never forgotten the betrayal that'd flickered across her face when you came home and Diana didn't.

You'd spent every day since tryin' to make it up to her, to be a son good enough to fill two pairs of shoes, and now she was askin' you the one thing you couldn't give. She was askin' you to choose
between her and your girl, to break the heart of the loveliness waitin' for you at the altar to keep her twice-shattered heart together.

I love you, ma, you said quietly, and enfolded her in your arms. But I love my girl, and I'm not marryin' anybody else. 'M sorry. I never wanted to disappoint you.

She looked up sharply at that and straightened so that she could look you right in the eye. You have never disappointed me, Don, and you never could. From the day you were born, you were special. I'm just a silly old woman who doesn't want to admit that you're not the tiny baby they laid on my chest just yesterday. There were tears in her eyes, but no anguish. Just wistful resignation. She patted your shoulder. Go on. Get married. Make her happy. Be happy.

You're really okay with this? Elated.

As okay as any mother gets about losing her baby to a young girl. She adjusted your glove.

You ain't losin' nothin', you promised her. You're just gainin' a terrific daughter-in-law, you'll see. You kissed her forehead.

She chivvied you toward the door that led to the altar. Go on, go on now. Don't keep her waiting. It isn't polite, and I raised you better than that.

You blushed and ducked your head. Yeah. Yeah, you did. I love you, ma.

She closed her eyes like she was capturin' the moment forever, and then she smiled. I know you do. Now get out there and become a husband.

So you did. An hour later, you were Rebecca's husband, escortin' her back down the aisle toward the front steps of the cathedral. She was radiant and happy and laughin' as folks in the congregation and the photographer snapped pictures. You caught a glimpse of your ma as you came up the aisle, and she was smilin' through tears. I love you, ma, you mouthed, and she waved.

Then it was on to the reception, that monstrous gala neither you nor Rebecca had wanted. A sea of vaguely familiar faces getting hammered on the family dime. You still don't know how everything was paid for, and you're afraid to ask. You sat on the dais with your new bride and ate prime rib with rosemary and mint glaze and held her hand underneath the table, and when the time came, you got up and did one last act of kindness for your mother.

You danced with her and called her Mommy one last time, and her face lit up. Things have deteriorated between her and Rebecca since then, and there's been unfairness and ugliness from both sides. Sometimes, you consider cuttin' your ma outta the picture until she makes peace with the fact that Rebecca isn't goin' anywhere, but then you remember that conversation in the church dressin' room, when she had the guts to let go. You swallow your frustration and work the balancin' act between the two.

But we were talkin' 'bout loveliness, and how you counted down the hours until the social niceties were fulfilled and you could take her home. You eventually did, in the limo your ma had insisted on, and you felt conspicuous and too flashy as it pulled up to the curb to let you out. You got Rebecca outta the car as quick as you could, tipped the driver a twenty, and bustled her outta the cold.

It had started to snow, and there was a light dustin' of it on your jacket by the time you got inside. She brushed it off with gentle fingers, and then she reached up with both hands and removed your cap. She held it on her lap for a minute, and then she set it on the bed with delicate reverence. She
smiled at you, shy and soft.

What now, Detective? As if there was any question.

The matin' dance. Feather-light caresses and kisses that got deeper and more purposeful the longer they went. She fumbled with your buttons, and it took a long time because the bastard condition that haunted her wouldn't relent even then. It took her twenty minutes to undo three, and her hands were shakin' with need and mountin' frustration. You helped her out, but not before you slipped her dress off her shoulders and glimpsed your vision of loveliness.

You helped her get you outta your clothes. Even the black dress socks. And then you stood in front of her and just let her see you. Your stomach was unscarred then, and you were ten pounds lighter, and the way she let her gaze linger over you made you feel like a god. It also made you horny as fuck, and you couldn't resist touchin'. Why not? She was yours now. The priest had said so. Even more importantly, she had said it in front of God an' everybody.

So you cupped her breast and made her whine and rolled her peaked nipple between your fingers and made her pant and moan. Lust made her a fuckin' goddess, and it didn't take you long to get her outta her dress. It took an effort not to tear it, though. You touched and tasted and teased, and even though you'd done it a thousand times before, it was somehow sweeter that night. Maybe it was 'cause you knew it really was forever, or maybe the Church had been right about somethin', after all.

You offered to use a rubber that night, but she plucked the packet from your hands and tossed it to the floor.

No, she murmured against your mouth as your fingers dipped between her legs. Now we take our chances. Besides, I've heard bareback is more fun.

It was more fun, and she gasped and shuddered at that first unencumbered contact.

Oh, my God, she managed, and you laughed.

You took her slow and hard and often that night and throughout the next day, and by the time you lurched outta bed late the next afternoon, you were both a little spraddle-legged. There were many times durin' that marathon session when she was beautiful, sweaty and taut with comin' her brains out, mouth open and eyes rollin' while her hands opened and closed spasmodically in the sheets or around your shoulders. But from that night on, loveliness has been defined for you by the way she first looked when you slipped the dress off her shoulders.

You hope it'll be replaced by another image someday, that maybe you'll get to define it by the gradual, persistent roundin' of her belly with your unborn child. Or maybe by the sight of your kid lyin' on her belly, screamin' his displeasure to the delivery room lights. Maybe it'll be somethin' as mundane as watchin' her change a diaper. You know it will be replaced, though, because that Lessing bastard couldn't get the job done.

Loveliness was what Lessing had stolen from her with his bomb. He had drained the light from her face and made her small and brittle inside her clothes. He hadn't noticed it until he'd come home from the hospital. Until then, he'd been too high on morphine. But then he'd gotten home and seen her-really seen her-and his heart had broken. She'd been too pale and too quiet, and he'd been so wracked with pain that he couldn't help her. So, she'd been left to fend for herself while he recovered.

Then her hand had come down in the wrong spot, and everything had gone to hell. She'd
withdrawn completely, and rather than shake her out of her cocoon, he'd buried himself in rehab and fixed his eyes on the prize, a return to the job that had nearly claimed him. He'd told himself that she'd wanted it that way, that she'd perk up once things went back to normal.

Then he'd come home one night to find her listening to Credence Clearwater Revival on the boombox and sitting in a pile of broken dishes with blood on her hands, and he'd finally gotten it through his thick skull that she was not okay. He'd gathered her up as best he could and coaxed her into crying it out. The relief in her sobs when she realized she had his attention had burned like lye against his skin, and he'd closed his eyes against a wave of shame.

He'd started looking after her then, doing like he should have done in the first place. He'd called her from the bullpen every day to tell her that he loved her. Sometimes, he'd crept into the locker room or the parking garage and sung stupid little ditties into her voicemail. He'd come home and cooked her dinner, recipes from his Aunt Lucia that were guaranteed to stick to her ribs and fatten her up. Meatballs and stroganoff and lasagna. Piroges and thick stews and soups. And then he'd hovered over the kitchen table while she ate every last spoonful. When she'd finished, he'd carried her into bed and watched her sleep, and when the nightmares sent her thrashing to the floor in a panting, sobbing heap, he'd been there with a glass of water and the reassurance that he was still there.

It had been a slow, careful process, this reassembling of his shattered china doll, but he thought they'd turned the corner at last. She'd perked up about six weeks ago, regained some of her former swagger. She smiled more easily, and her laughter rang throughout the apartment more and more often. Last night, he'd caught her humming and dancing in the kitchen, and he'd joined in without daring to ask what had inspired the mood. It was enough that she was happy.

Their lovemaking had returned to normal, too. The first few times after the bombing, she had been desperate and ragged and clawing, her body locked around his, not in a sweet, seductive twine, but in a rigid, possessive clench. Her moans had carried a note of anguished need that had frightened him, and her eyes had been tightly shut, as though she were afraid to open them and find she'd been fucking a bittersweet memory.

But it was all right now. Her body had finally begun to relax when he took her to bed. She was soft and warm and pliant underneath his hands when he touched her, and his caresses drew only pleasure from her lips these days. And the best part? She looked him in the eyes when he moved inside her, lips curled into a fond smile or parted in slack-jawed want. Her eyes occasionally flickered with nascent panic as dark memories threatened, but it could be dispelled with a kiss or a deft, languid roll of his hips. She had returned with him to the present and left the past where it belonged.

She had been pretty lately, but tonight she was radiant, propped against the sofa with a steaming bowl of chili on her lap. She brought a spoonful to her lips as she studied the Monopoly board in front of her.

"Rebecca, this ain't chess," he prompted, amused. "You either go or you don't." He took a sip of beer from the bottle in his hand.

She put the spoonful of chili in her mouth and swallowed. "Even so, there's no need to be hasty."

He snorted. "Hasty, my ass. You just don't wanna move 'cause you know you're gonna land on Park Place, and you don't wanna pay up."

She eyed her dwindling piles of multicolored money and scowled. She put down her spoon with a disgruntled plop and reached for the silver shoe that marked her place on the board.
He couldn't resist needling her. "So, I thought you said you bein' a mathematical genius gave you a tactical advantage."

She harrumphed at him as her piece landed on one of his properties and gathered up the fee, pinching the thin bills between her shaking fingers. "Theoretically, it should," she sniffed defensively. "Practice seems a bit different. I can calculate the statistical probabilities of certain rolls all night, but what I should have done was plot the probabilities of you landing on a given space and the likelihood and appeal of putting a property there." She jabbed a stiff finger in the direction of the green plastic house that squatted smugly on the square.

"In other words, you're a sore loser." He took a long pull of beer.

"I am not," she countered in wounded indignation. "I just…don't like losing. Besides, I haven't lost anything yet. I still have money." She thrust the gathered bills at him.

"Sweetheart, you're lookin' at the Monopoly champing." He plucked the proffered money from her outthrust hand and tossed it atop his growing pile.

She ate while he sorted his ill-gotten gains into the appropriate stacks. "OCD," she muttered around a hearty mouthful.

"It's called organization, and you might wanna try it some time."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded, but her eyes were twinkling. She knew it was only gentle play.

"It means I've seen your desk in the office. It's a wonder you can find a damn thing in there." He picked up the dice and shook them in his palm.

"There's nothing wrong with my desk. I just have my own filing system. It's not my fault if you've got an uncreative mind," she retorted loftily.

"I don't have a creative mind, huh?" He eyed her over the glass mouth of his beer bottle. "I don't hear you complainin' about my uncreative mind when it comes to other things."

"Oh? Like what?" She was trying for nonchalance, but the faint blush in her cheeks betrayed her.

"Like what? You know exactly what I'm talkin' about."

Her lips twitched in a stifled grin. "I think so. Have you ever considered the possibility that you've overestimated your talents?"

"Naw. Why? You complainin'?"

"Mmm," was her only answer, but she reached out and squeezed his hand. Just play, babe. That's all. "Now, hurry up and roll."

He laughed. "Look who's bein' hasty now," he said, but he rolled with a flick of his wrist.

God, but it was good to play with her again, to talk and have the words slip easily from his mouth, unfrightened by all the things too painful to say, those raw, weeping wounds that had brought too many conversations to a screeching halt. After the bombing, they had developed a joint speech impediment, starting a sentence only to stop it in mid-stream because it led back to the lip of the forbidden abyss of When He Got Hurt. Only recently had the music returned to their mouths, and he could happily have sung all night.
"Damn, baby, but this is good chili," she commented, and gave a contented belch. "One of your aunt's recipes?"

It was his father's, actually, one of the few his old man had. The man was king of the slapdash sandwich eaten in three enormous bites over the kitchen sink, but chili was one food the man could cook. That, and the best mashed potatoes in New York. He'd remembered the recipe as he was sorting through Aunt Lucia's recipes and had decided to make it, though he wasn't sure why.

_The fuck you ain't_, said Gavin, but there was no anger in it. _You made it 'cause it was comfort food, the best comfort food, and you wanted your girl to be comforted, to feel loved and safe. Just like you did whenever you ate it growin' up. Ma always gave you her chicken soup when you were sick, and it was good, but in the back of your mind, you always wished it was your old man's chili._

_He almost always cooked it on a Thursday. Wednesdays and Thursdays were his days off when he was still on beat, and chili was really a two-day affair. The second half of Wednesday he spent chopping tomatoes and measurin' spices, standin' at the counter in his uniform pants, a knife in one hand, beer close to the other, and juicy tomatoes on a cuttin' board in front of him. He'd chop and dice and curse at the newscasters on TV, and if you wandered into the kitchen to roll your dump truck on the linoleum, he'd call you over, ruffle your hair, and offer you a piece of tomato, pinched between his rough, grown-up fingers. That tomato tasted sweet as candy, and you hovered around his legs, hoping for more until he shooed you away._

_He was up and cookin' by nine A.M., and by noon, the whole house was filled with the mouth-waterin' aroma of simmerin' chili. You'd run down the stairs in your socked feet and clamber onto your father's lap, narrowly missin' his balls as he sat readin' the newspaper in his easy chair._

_Mornin', Donnie, he'd grunt, and ruffle your hair._

_Is the chili ready, Daddy? you'd ask, bright-eyed and hopeful, and he'd laugh, a deep-throated rumble that vibrated against your back._

_Not yet, kiddo, but when it is, you'll be the first to know._

_Promise?_  

_A police officer never lies, Donnie, he'd say solemnly, and brush hair outta your face._

_OK, Daddy. Trustin', never knowin' how full'a shit he was on that score. You'd sit with him a while, pretend to be interested in the black-and-white words without any pictures, and after you'd pestered him into readin' you the Garfield comic, you'd slide off his lap and run up the stairs to peek through the bars of Diana's crib to see if she was awake. Sometimes, you'd poke her awake and play innocent when your ma came in to see why she was screamin'._  

_Diana came to join the chili fest as soon as she could wobble upright. She'd toddle into the kitchen with her bottle in one drool-covered hand and her diaper crinklin' with every step. She'd sway beside your father like the world's smallest and most earnest drunk and grunt at him until she got what you got, a slice of tomato. Then she'd plop right down on the kitchen floor, drop her bottle, and eat it with uncoordinated relish. Then you'd drag her away to wash her hands and amuse yourself by herdin' her around the livin' room for a couple'a hours._

_Every once in a while, you'd poke your head into the kitchen and ask, Is it ready yet?, and Diana would follow you, cawin' in her strange, baby language. He'd tell you no, and an hour later, you'd ask again. It was a game, and you'd play it until you heard the patience thin from your old man's voice._
You knew it was done when you heard the metal ladle bang on the side of the steel crock pot, and you'd drop whatever you were doin' and race into the kitchen. Diana would come, too, toddlin' to beat the band, and the two of you would stand around your father's legs like yippin' puppies.

C'mere, Donnie, he'd say, and squat on his haunches with a spoonful of chili in his hand. This'll put some hair on your chest.

You'd take the bite and swallow, and then you'd run into the bathroom to see if it really did put hair on your chest. You'd lift up your shirt and stare intently into the mirror over the sink in the hopes of seein' coarse, black hairs sproutin' there. You never did, and you always left disappointed. When the hairs finally made their appearance shortly before your thirteenth birthday, you knew why; modern biology had snuffed the notion of your Pop's hot chili puttin' hair on your chest. But in the back of your mind, you wondered anyway, mused that maybe it just needed a cumulative effect.

He never gave Diana the chili, not when she was so little, and that made you feel special. It was somethin' just between the two of you. He gave her her first spoonful when she was four, and you still remember askin', Did you gots hair on your chest, Diana? Your father nearly choked to death on his beer.

You were thrilled when she spit it out. More time for you to be special. Her brain came down with a permanent case of common sense when she was seven, though, and you squabbled over who got the first bowl and the first spoonful after that. The worst ass-whippin' you ever took as a kid, you got because you elbowed Diana out of the way in the rush to be first to the pot. Not only did you not get any chili, but you got a sore ass and a night spent scrubbin' the fire escape with a toothbrush while Diana sat right by the window with her bowl so you could see every bite.

Chili was Diana's favorite, yet another thing you had in common, and you both looked forward to fall and winter because they meant pot after pot of it. You had it two or three times a month during those seasons until Diana died, and then you can't remember your old man ever makin' another pot. Maybe he did, for all you know. The fuckin' continental drift that exists between you now started then, and you tried to be in that house as seldom as possible, and even when you were, the door to your room was shut, mostly so you wouldn't see Diana's room across the hall, sealed as tightly as her crypt.

You thought it would be hard to make that chili again after all these years, that maybe memories would drift to the surface of the pot like scum when you stirred. And they did, but not bad ones. Good ones, sweet ones that made your chest ache with old happiness. You and Diana wrestlin' over the last bowl, and you goin' easy 'cause even then you knew that hurtin' girls was somethin' only bad people did. Christmas Day, buildin' snowmen and then comin' inside to eat brimmin' cupfuls to chase the cold outta your bones.

You still weren't sure you could eat it, but you could. Each spoonful brought another recollection, and you ate until your stomach bulged, dipped crackers into it and fed bites to Rebecca every so often. Not that she needed much help. She's polished off two bowls, or maybe three.

She was still looking at him in unblinking expectation.

"Family recipe, yeah," he answered at last.

An hour later, she was down to her last twenty and was waving it at him salaciously.

"Hand it over," he said, and beckoned.

"Are you sure we can't work out a deal, Officer?" she purred, and batted her eyelashes.
"You offerin' me a bribe?" he said gravely. "That's a felony, you know. 'Sides, that twenty ain't much incentive."

"Who said the twenty was all I had? I'm sure I could come up with other assets." She cast a desultory gaze in the direction of her cleavage.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Unless you're not interested, of course." Brisk.

"I'm pretty sure we can work somethin' out."

He crawled over the board, scattering plastic houses and money as he went, and swept her into a kiss. She tasted of cumen and oregano and tumeric, and he laughed softly into her mouth, suddenly grateful that he was still around to enjoy this, to absorb the way her dainty, blonde eyelashes fluttered in rhythm to his stroking tongue. This was normal, and so fucking good.

She was making the most delightful noises in the back of her throat, and her hands came up to fumble with the buttons of his shirt.

"Bed," she whimpered, and he was in complete agreement. He disengaged himself long enough to stand up and bring her with him, and when she was safe in the cradle of his arms, he kissed her again. She fisted her hand in the fabric of his shirt, and he was so fixated on the fire in her lips that he nearly walked them into the door. He got them into the bedroom and fell onto the bed with her.

He reluctantly broke the kiss. "You okay?"

She laughed and tugged him to her. "Yes. You're just heavy, dammit."

"M sorry. I'd better take a look." He pushed up her nightgown and began to mouth her soft belly. He was intoxicated by the soft, shuddering pants of bewildered pleasure. It was one of the rare gifts of her balky nervous system that no matter how often he mouthed or tongued or caressed, she always reacted like it was the first time she had ever experienced something so marvelous. He mouthed the cup of her belly and was rewarded with a jerky surge of her hips. "I don't see anything, but better to be safe than sorry," he announced, and dipped his tongue into her navel.

She moaned, and one hand came down to cup the back of his head. "To the victor go the spoils," she murmured unsteadily.

"Damn right. I should break out the old Monopoly board more often.

A thick, strangled caw of laughter." I was always better at Risk."

There was a hard incongruity to the pronouncement that made his heart stutter in his chest, but when he looked up, her eyes were distant and glazed with lust, turned inward, the better to revel in the sensations between her legs. She squirmed underneath him, and as he dipped lower, he could smell her, rich and simmering and wet. He flickered his tongue against her damp, clinging panties, and when she moaned and bucked beneath him, he promptly decided it didn't matter. The long, hot summer was over, and for tonight, there were no ghosts.
Mac Taylor stood outside the metal door to Lessing's cell and fought the beginning of a headache. Not a migraine, thank God, but a bastard, nonetheless, and only discipline kept him from closing his eyes and kneading his throbbing temples with his fingertips. The head physician was beside him on one side, and on the other, a security guard shuffled from foot to foot, thumbs hooked into his scuffed, unpolished gunbelt.

"I don't know how this could've happened," the doctor was saying nervously, and he alternated between running his podgy, indelicate fingers through his thinning hair and riffling through the papers on his clipboard without looking at them. It was clear from his mottled complexion and woebegone expression that he thought his professional goose thoroughly cooked. After all, a confirmed mass murderer had almost slipped his tether on the good doctor's watch.

"Why don't you tell us what happened, Dr. Halsey," Stella suggested coolly.

The doctor reddened further, and his thick neck receded into the thick, white collar of his coat, a turtle seeking the comforting protection of his shell. "I already explained everything to the officers who were here earlier," he whined.

"Well, we need you to explain it again," Stella said, and Mac knew Dr. Halsey was treading on dangerous ground.

So did Dr. Halsey. His shoulders slumped, and he took refuge in the endlessly shifting forms on his clipboard. "At the two A.M. bedcheck, Mr. Lessing was present and accounted for. This was verified by the log sheet at the front desk," Halsey muttered to the pink form beneath his thumb. "At the three A.M. check, it was discovered that he was not in his bed. A thorough search of the hospital was conducted. Room by room, as per protocol," he added hastily, as if he thought they suspected him of lying. "There was no sign of him, so we contacted the police."

Halsey spared him a furtive, bruised glance and then went on. "Five minutes after the first patrol unit arrived, Mr. Lessing was discovered wandering in front of the hospital by Mr. Greene." Halsey gestured to the security guard, who officiously hitched up his pants as if he were being called forth to battle.

Greene was only too eager to take up the tale. He lumbered forward with a bow-legged, John Wayne swagger. "That's right," he agreed, and nodded vigorously. "I was doin' my rounds like usual and found him staggerin' 'round by them fancy ashtrays made of rocks, you know?" A faint mist of spittle and the sharp, sweet scent of spearmint gum wafted from his mouth.

Mac did know. He'd noted the ashtrays on his way inside. There was nothing fancy about them. They were squat stubs of concrete jutting from the uneven asphalt, overlaid with cheap landscaping pebbles and filled with even cheaper sand and smashed cigarette butts. He forewent the analysis of medical architecture in favor of, "When was this?"

Greene made a great show of thinking. "Four-thirty. He was just lurchin' along, a regular space case, you know? Only he was butt-ass naked. And just between you and me, he ain't got the kind'a equipment to be carryin' that off. Know what I mean?"

"Thank you, Mr. Greene," Dr. Halsey said warily, and Stella raised an eyebrow in mystified contemplation.
"Sure thing," Greene said, and gave a jaunty salute. He chewed his gum with gusto, and as Mac caught glimpses of the rubbery hunk between flashes of yellowing teeth, he was inexplicably reminded of a hunk of brain tissue.

*Or like a hunk of Flack's intestine,* supplied a helpful, gleeful voice, and Mac's hand was suddenly heavy with the slick loop of spurting artery that had coated his fingers with a young detective's life.

He blinked to dispel the unwanted image, but the phantom weight remained, and he surreptitiously wiped his palm on the starched crease of his pants.

"That will be all for now, Mr. Greene." Halsey let the precious clipboard drop to his side and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, sure, sure," Greene agreed chummily, but he lingered, took loping, circular footsteps that led him nowhere.

"Now, if you please, Mr. Greene. Before more 'space cadets' escape."

Greene visibly deflated. He favored Halsey with a mutinous glare and slouched away, hands stuffed into pockets of his pants. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered to no one in particular. "Don't get your goddamned panties in a bunch. I'm on it."

"A sterling job of it you've done so far," the doctor retorted drily.

Greene muttered something that bore a suspicious resemblance to *Go fuck yourself* and trudged around the corner and out of sight.

Mac turned to Halsey, who was leaning against the wall with his hands clasped loosely in front of him. "Lessing was nude when you found him?"

"Yes. Which was strange, because when I checked on him myself at just after midnight, he was in his pajamas. An undershirt and flannel pants. Standard hospital issue, you understand."

"You checked on him yourself? Is that a standard practice, doctor?"

Dr. Halsey bristled. He straightened and adjusted his limp tie with a vicious jerk. "I make it a point to visit all high-risk offenders, yes."

"High-risk?" Stella, bright-eyed and alert, poised for attack. "According to the forensic psychiatrists who examined him, he was deemed a low risk for a repeat offense. Are you telling us that's not true?"

Dr. Halsey pressed himself to the wall as if he thought to escape Stella's unflinching scrutiny by blending with the bland, white plaster. "Well, no," he admitted. "In fact, he's proven quite docile. He's responding well to his treatment and has shown no sign of aggression. Most of the time, he lies on his bed and looks at pictures of his wife and daughter. There, you see?" He pointed to a square of vibrant color on the otherwise drab wall, thick fingertip pressed to the glass of the small observation window. "He's been asking me about setting up visitation with them at some point."

"Oh, yeah," Stella said savagely. "Never mind the six families who'll never see their husband or wife again. Her eyes were flashing, and her lean body was tensed with the urge to spring at the quailing, ineffectual man in front of her.

Halsey drew himself up, a whippet before a tiger. "I don't judge my patients, Miss Bonasera," he replied imperiously. "I merely treat them."
"That's Detective Bonasera to you," she snapped, and Mac could hear the barely-restrained, you \textit{asshole} behind it.

"Stella," he soothed, and she reluctantly subsided.

Her anger wasn't just for the victims killed in that Sunday morning blast, but for Flack, who had spent the majority of the summer lying flat on his back and suckling morphine from a plastic teat. Flack had run interference for her during the IAB investigation of the Frankie Mala shooting, and Stella hadn't forgotten. As far as she was concerned, Don Flack was good people, and Stella Bonasera would go to the wall and over it for those she considered friends.

And if she can't go over it, she'll tunnel under it, and if all else fails, she'll go through it. She isn't afraid to get bloody when the situation calls for it. You weren't sure what to expect when she strode into your office ten years ago and announced that she was ready for a job in the lab, and that was that. You never considered yourself a vainglorious man, but you'd grown accustomed to a respect that bordered on shy deference. It was, Hey, Mac, what should I do? But not Stella. With her, it was, Unless you've got a better idea, buddy, this is what I'm going to do, and just you try to stop me. It was refreshing and unsettling all at once, her confidence, and over the years, you've come to count it among her greatest assets.

She's beautiful, too. You had Claire eleven years ago, and so the idea of you and Stella was never an option. Still isn't. Claire is gone, returned to the dust on a grey September morning, but you're still a mess, still holding yourself together by stubbornness and Marine know-how. Not by shoelaces; you needed those for Flack. You're more screwed up now than you were when you got off the plane from Chicago fifteen years ago, and Stella deserves better than that. She's already survived her brush with madness, thanks to the departed and largely unlamented Frankie Mala.

You'll never forget what you saw when Flack kicked in the door to her apartment. Overturned furniture in the hall and beyond that, Frankie Mala sprawled in a pool of blood on the bedroom carpet. And Stella, hidden from view at first by the bed. She was facedown, and the sundress she wore was bunched indiscreetly over her thighs. She looked small and fragile, a Barbie doll left by a careless child. It was so unlike the tough, no-nonsense Stella you knew that part of you refused to accept it even as your logical mind was processing the scene. Stella kicked ass and took names. She did not lie bonelessly on the floor, her cheek swollen with the shadow of Frankie Mala's knuckles blooming on one cheek and a cut weeping blood beneath one eye.

Flack didn't touch her. He was too busy making sure the monster was dead and securing the scene, doing everything a good detective should, in other words. Whether he was motivated by a desire to keep the investigation above-board or by self-preservation, you can't say and don't care to guess. Maybe it was both. Whatever or whichever it was, it was a wise decision. If he'd tried to touch her, you'd have rounded on him with fangs bared. Stella was your partner, your responsibility, and you weren't surrendering her to anyone else.

Except that you did eventually. Flack went with her to the hospital while you stayed to process the scene, and they forged a bond over paper gowns and bad coffee. So it didn't surprise you when she pitched a tent at his bedside when the world upended and left a gaping hole in his gut. She looked out for her own, and she was there as often as Flack's young wife. Sometimes they bookended him, anchored him to the world with the gentle yet insistent grip of their hands. Rebecca Flack's trembled, but Stella's were steady as bedrock. She had made up her mind that she wasn't going to lose any more good people, and Stella was used to getting her way.

"One thing I don't understand, Dr. Halsey," she was saying. "If you've found Lessing, why are we here?"
"Because something has clearly happened to him," Halsey explained, and stroked his bedraggled tie. "Prior to his escape, Mr. Lessing was docile but alert. Thanks to a vigorous and consistently-applied regimen of medication, he was learning to differentiate between reality and his psychotic breaks. He was able to acknowledge that the act for which he was incarcerated was wrong, and not an act of patriotism."

From the corner of his eye, Mac saw Stella bite the inside of her cheek to smother a scathing retort.

"Now he's non-responsive, almost catatonic."

"Is it possible he suffered some sort of psychotic break?" Mac asked.

"Of course," Halsey conceded. "In fact, it's even likely given his history of mental disorder. But I want to be certain. Especially since he was covered in this when we found him." He held out his hands, palms up, as if in supplication. They were covered in a fine layer of dark brown dirt.

Mac set down his field kit, squatted beside it, and opened it. He pulled out a pair of latex gloves and pulled them on with an efficient, crisp snap. "I'm going to need a sample of that." He picked up a swab.

"Of course." Dr. Halsey brought his upturned palms together and tilted them downward.

Mac waited for Stella to snap a photo before he rolled the swab over the palm with practiced precision. He dropped the sample into the collection envelope that Stella offered him and sealed it.

"You say he was covered in it?"

Halsey nodded. "From head to toe. I was going to order a shower."

"Don't," Mac said sharply. Then, more quietly. "We'll need to process him for evidence."

"Of course." It had become the doctor's mantra in the face of the topsy-turvy world in which he suddenly and rudely found himself. Then he blinked, nonplussed. "Evidence of what?"

"I don't know yet. That's what we're here to find out."

"Of course," Halsey said again, and Mac wondered if the phrase would etch itself into the man's vocal cords, incubate in their wet, vibrating folds like a virus until the cold scalpel of a future medical examiner set it free to resonate throughout the morgue.

_Cause of Death: Arteriosclerosis brought on by prolonged and acute stress._

_Of course. Of course. Of course.of course.of course.of course.of course.of course.of course._ in an endless, mournful loop.

"May we go into the room now?"

"Of course," came the reply, and Mac was dimly amused to feel his own lips quirk in unconscious mimicry.

Dr. Halsey fumbled in the pocket of his coat and produced a set of keys. He paused in the act of fitting one of them into the lock and favored him and Stella with a speculative, uneasy gaze.

"Would you like me to call and orderly just in case he comes out of it? It's unlikely, but it happens, and I can't predict what he'll do."

"That won't be necessary."
"Suit yourself." On your own head be it. Mac was suddenly reminded of Igor, the mad lab assistant of the even madder Dr. Frankenstein who shambled to and from in scraping subservience, all the while seeing the world with his own perverse, insane wisdom.

The door unlocked and swung open on soundless hinges. Mac went inside and wrinkled his nose at the smell, close body and long occupation. There was bleach, too, but it was overpowered by the more primal stink of a forgotten life. The door closed behind them with an ominous clang, and Stella gave an uneasy laugh.

On his cot, Lessing sat unblinking, hands lying limply on his pasty lap. He was hardly the imposing presence Mac had encountered in May, filled with virulent patriotism and dangerous mania. That Lessing had been possessed of a queer, sad charisma, one that with counseling might have been turned to a better purpose. This Lessing was lifeless in spite of the steady rise and fall of his thin chest. His eyes were distant and clouded, and saliva dangled from the corner of his lip in a glistening, silvery runner.

Mac crouched in front of Lessing and met that empty gaze with his own. "Mr. Lessing, I'm Detective Mac Taylor with the NYPD. We've met before. Do you remember?"

Nothing. Not a logy blink or grunt of acknowledgement.

"Do you remember what happened to you this evening? Where did you go? Were you alone? Mr. Lessing?"

Nothing.

Of course, said Dr. Halsey. Of course.

"There's no sign of forced entry," Stella called from her position beside the door. She opened her kit and reached for the fingerprint powder and lifting tape.

"There wouldn't be if this was an inside job," he murmured. He was still preoccupied by Lessing and his unsettling glass eyes. He reached into his kit for his penlight and shone the beam into Lessing's right eye.

"You thinking it was an escape gone wrong?"

He didn't answer her. He was too busy watching Lessing's eye in anticipation of a response.

The pupil contracted. Just like it should.

Of course, he told himself. Why shouldn't it? He switched off the penlight.

"Mac?" Stella prodded, and he jumped as though shaken from a dream.

"It's too early to tell, but it's a possibility. There's no sign of aneurysm or embolism and no external signs of head trauma that could account for his catatonic state."

Is that really what you were looking for? asked a leering voice inside his head. Is that all?

Of course it was. Of course.

"Dr. Halsey did say he'd probably suffered a psychotic break," Stella reminded him as she dusted the interior doorhandle. "And I gotta tell you, Mac; if it was an inside job, we're going to have a hell of a time proving it. There's nothing incriminating about an orderly's prints on a patient's cell,
and I'm betting there's dozens."

"Hopefully, that won't be all we have to go on. Have the security tapes from the past twenty-four hours been collected yet?"

"Hawkes is on it, and Scagnetti is interviewing the orderlies who were on duty."

He opened his mouth to ask why it was Scagnetti and not Flack doing the questioning, then shut it again. Of course it wouldn't be Flack. Given that seven months ago, the man in front of him had blown a hole in the detective's gut and wagered the balance of his life on a dirty shoelace, his involvement would be a colossal conflict of interest.

Not to mention that Lessing isn't the only one who isn't the same. He tries to hide it, puts on his game face and blusters and swaggers his way through shifts, but Flack isn't who he was before the lights went out and he was buried in an avalanche of dust and rubble. The physical scars have faded—he's no longer white as chalk and leaning against the lab walls to catch his breath and smother the long-toothed beast who sank its teeth into his tender, mending guts, and he doesn't look too small and hollowed inside his suits. It's his eyes that give him away, his dull, wary eyes and the ruthless dampening of his ferocious joie de vivre. You might have thought it was sometimes foolhardy, but you admired and envied it all the same because looking at him, you could almost remember when catching the bad guys made you happy. Not just numbed to the emptiness where your better half used to live, but genuinely happy. Eight years on the job, and he wasn't jaded to the simple pleasure of justice.

But after the bombing, there were no more jokes, no more footchases where he bounded along the pavements and rutted asphalt like it was a competition. There was only stony, sallow silence and the exhausted plod of an old warhorse. He put in his hours, bolstered by cup after cup of gritty, acidic coffee you're pretty sure his doctor warned him not to drink, and shuffled down the steps and home to his wife and his private, unspeakable pain. Sometimes, you'd watch him, and you'd have to swallow a cold, choking lump of guilt as you realized that you'd only saved part of him, the part that lived and breathed. The rest had been left behind in the debris of that collapsed building. Maybe he'd find it, and maybe he wouldn't. You didn't know. What you did know for certain was that you couldn't help him either way.

You couldn't blame him. Men changed irrevocably when confronted with their own mortality. Until that watershed moment, you get through life by telling yourself that death is for other people, not you. It's a comforting illusion that allows you to do incredibly stupid things and call it heroism. And then one day, it's ripped away, a security blanket torn from a stunned child's clutching fingers. A landmine detonates close enough to rupture your eardrums or singe the hair of your jarhead haircut, or a bullet passes through your buddy's brain and the sleeve of your uniform shirt, and the realization that death isn't just for everybody else fills your mouth with sour adrenaline and tugs your balls into the scant shelter of your belly. Once the illusion is broken, it can never be perfectly reassembled. There are always cracks in the looking glass.

You saw it yourself in Beirut, when the air smelled like dates and desert sand. Most of your platoon mates treated the assignment as a vacation even though the President said it was war. Oh, they conducted their weapons checks and cleaned their M-16s like good Marines, and nobody ever missed the call to duty, but underneath the façade of alert, well-trained soldiers was a group of young men still entranced by their own virility and still convinced that if death waited for no man, it would make an exception for them. You believed it, too. You can admit that in the safety of your own head.

And then the shooting started, sporadic, local skirmishes, mostly. Usually, there would be no
fatalities to report. You were armed with machine guns, and the opposition was armed with sticks, rocks, and ancient rifles bartered from the Russians on the promise of future glory. What other outcome could there be? But occasionally, a stray round would find unprotected flesh, and the red blood on yellow sand broke the spell as harshly as the meaty slap of a bullet piercing flesh. Those not wounded would pick themselves up and look around, dazed, children who had suddenly found themselves in a dark and terrible wood with no fairy godmother and no kindly dwarves to protect them from the monsters who lurked behind the trees and beneath the bridges and bided their time for a chance to snatch them from the light and gobble their bones in the shadows. Where grown, military-hardened men had stood were little boys with eyes as wide as dinner plates.

You were miraculously untouched by the knowledge of mortality until the barracks bombing, and then that knowledge was seared into you like a blast pattern. You stumbled through the dust, smoke, and howling sand and found Pfc. Whitney dying in the golden dirt with his guts laid wide. You and mortality came to intimate terms then, and Whitney also put paid to any notions you might've had about being Superman. You couldn't save him, couldn't will him to survival with your cherished Marine bravado. You could only bear witness to his useless, bloody death.

You didn't realize you were hit until a medic noticed the blood on your shirt. You thought it was Whitney's last benediction, but then he cut the shirt away, and you saw the metal lodged just beneath the skin of your chest like a bullet. He pulled out the shrapnel with a pair of tweezers, and the pain came, hot and feverish and throbbing.

Have you stitched up in no time, the medic said matter-of-factly. Any other time, it would've been cheerful, but he was too stunned by the magnitude of loss to muster cheer.

If he hadn't been so pre-occupied, he probably would've noticed your growing horror. The cocoon was shattered, and there was no escaping the reality that you might've died in your bunk just like the other soldiers who had gone to bed dreaming of Farrah Fawcett and Christie Brinkley and woken up on the other side of the River Jordan with Amazing Grace sounding in their ears. The lifelong rebellion of Mac Taylor almost ended at twenty. The medic stitched up your wound and went to deal with the scores of serious casualties, and you went to the latrine and shivered beneath a free-standing shower, grateful for the water that dripped into your eyes and blurred the image of Whitney's guts quivering in the red dawn light.

You learned to live with the scar. You even succeeded in forgetting about it until Claire reawakened it with her brushing fingertips. Then you couldn't forget it because it remembered it was a part of you. You became aware again of the contrasting textures of unblemished skin and puckered, thickened scar tissue. She drew her lips and hands over it and made you shudder, and she asked you how you'd come by it.

You told her, of course; Claire was the one person in the world to whom you could or would talk about the past. And how convenient was that, considering that those confessions returned to you one bitter September morning in a fine mist of ash? What you couldn't endure so comfortably was the sour prescience of your own demise and the sneaking suspicion that you'd dodged it once already, that everything that had come after Beirut in 1983 was so much stolen time.

Stan Whitney was there to remind you, you see, in the darkness behind your closed eyelids. Before that morning in 1983, he'd been a Wisconsin farmboy, stocky as you please, with brown hair and eyes etched with permanent laugh lines. He'd smoked too much and talked incessantly of his girlfriend. One morning, he was collecting sand in a pouch to send home to her, and the next, he was holding his guts in with his hands and trying to tell you he couldn't breathe for all the blood in his mouth and throat.
He never came to you as he'd been in life. He was always as you remembered him in those last, terrible minutes, bloody and gutted and bleaching to white on the sand. You expected him in dreams, the pale phantasm of your conscience come to remind you that he mourned his lost life. But he also manifested himself while you were awake. You saw him in the corners of the scenes to which you were called as a uniform, and in the faces of the victims. Stan Whitney and his interrupted life greeted you from every face, whether they belonged to man, woman, or child. You still saw him after you became a CSI, though by then you could shut him out if you tried.

Claire could chase him away, but only just, and not always. Sometimes, when life was exceptionally sweet on your tongue, you'd look at her as she flipped through the pages of a book, and the familiar guilt would well in the pit of your stomach like acid. You'd think of the scenes you'd been called to that day and wonder if their life hadn't been the price of your continued good fortune. It was irrational, the work of survivor's guilt, but you couldn't shake the thought. Still can't, as a matter of fact. That niggling fear is what drives you long into the night on a case. If you're in some measure responsible for their deaths, then you can at least offer them justice in recompense.

You've seen that same knowledge of mortality in Flack's face. He looks older now, and not just by the seven months logged by the clock. It's the weight of hard-bitten wisdom, you suppose. You watch him and wonder if his wife has to soothe him back to sleep when the nightmares and flashbacks come for him in the middle of the night, or if he hides the night terrors from her the way you hid them from Claire, creeping into the bathroom and crouching in the shower until the nausea and the tremors pass.

You're not sure, and you don't ask, not now, with the wall of suspicion between you, thick and impenetrable as concrete. You suspect he tries, though, because Flack is all about swagger and image and not being a pussy. Least of all in the eyes of the woman he loves. You're willing to wager your salary that he slips from underneath the covers and washes the high, sickly sweetness of puke from his mouth in the bathroom sink.

You'd bet twice your salary that Rebecca Flack sees it anyway. You suspect she sleeps lightly even when she dreams, and his flights probably don't get very far. She never left his side for the eight days of his coma, and though you know it's physiologically impossible, you're not sure she even slept. She was a wan sentinel with a sniper's eyes, sometimes slumped and sometimes ramrod-straight in her chair, and always watchful.

You didn't see him much after he emerged from his coma. With him awake, it was harder for you to superimpose Pfc. Whitney's face onto his features, and with no means to exorcise your demons, you weren't sure why you were there. But you went for a few duty visits, and they were enough to convince you that Flack had held on for her. Her and the badge that was his birthright. He spoke constantly of the latter, and he was always watching her, reaching for her, petting her. Once, as you were walking towards his room with a few sports magazines you'd snagged from the pharmacy, you overheard him having a heated discussion with his therapist. He wanted to go home, he said. He had a wife to take care of, and he couldn't do that lying in some hospital bed that stank of sweat. The therapist pointed out that he couldn't do that anywhere until his abdominal wall healed. Flack spent another ten days in the hospital and likely sulked and stewed for every one of them.

You thought being home in his own bed would be good for him, but he grew more despondent. You never visited—it wasn't your place—but Danny and Stella did, and according to them, silence blanketed his apartment like a pall. Flack was morose and oddly contrite, and Rebecca withdrew completely when they showed up and hovered like a wraith in the corners of her own home.
And then one day, the pall lifted. He started to regain his vitality and the serrated edge of his tongue. His blue eyes flashed with wry humor and steely contempt, and he resumed the chase with gusto. He still grimaced or grunted when he turned the wrong way, but the burden of doubt had fallen from his shoulders, and he accepted that he was still a damn good cop.

But you fixed that, didn't you? Two months back in the saddle, and you ambush him in the street and treat him like a snot-nosed rookie without a dick in his pants. You all but accuse him of masterminding a heroin ring, never mind that you know he couldn’t have because he’d spent that summer in a legal heroin haze. You demanded his memo book and asked him to be complicit in the sacrifice of one of his fellow detectives. When he protested, you didn't give a damn because you were in pursuit of justice, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Knowing what you know now-after you broke your own rules of non-involvement to clear Sheldon Hawkes-you can't imagine how galling he must've found your methods, your glib superiority. Six months before, you were pledging to see him through even though it wasn't your promise to make, and now you were questioning his integrity and his instinct as a police officer. You paraded Truby past his desk in cuffs as proof that you played no favorites, and in that moment, he hated you.

Hate mellowed to shutter-eyed contempt with time, but that's the best you can hope for. He's never going to trust you again. You knew that much when you let Jesse escape over a chainlink fence because the heart you keep hidden beneath your badge told you he was innocent. His anger bubbled over then, and even when you'd gotten the last word, his jaw twitched the way it does when he thinks a suspect is full of shit. He never said a word to you on the drive to his precinct, just stared out the windshield. And when he got out, he didn't tap the passenger side door in gratitude. He just slammed it and went inside without looking back.

You thought it was just the result of ruffled feathers, a collegial spat that would blow over, but not long after, you saw him on the street with his wife. They were browsing at a fruit and vegetable stand, sniffing and tapping their way through the produce. Flack had a tomato in one broad palm and was squeezing it gently. His other hand was rubbing Rebecca's bony shoulder with relaxed affection.

It's a tomato, babe, not a tit, she was saying. No need to cop a feel.

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. Hey, my Aunt Lucia told me this was the best way to test 'em.

Ah. Then I bow to her vastly superior knowledge.

You won't be sorry, Flack told her proudly. He placed the tomato into the basket she held on the crook of one arm and was reaching for another when he spotted you. His face, which had been relaxed and suffused with pleasure, closed as efficiently as a slamming door. Hey, Mac, he said tonelessly, and Rebecca stiffened.

Anything good? you ventured.

Flack gave you a noncommittal shrug. Some good, some bad, just like everywhere else in the city. Behind his colorful array of crates, the vendor scowled.

If Flack was aloof, Rebecca was cold. There was no warmth in her face, only stony inscrutability, and she turned from you without a greeting. She picked up a tomato, tested the heft of it in her unsteady palm, and placed it inside the basket.

I think we've got what we need, don't you, love? she asked, and only on the last word was there
any tenderness.

Yeah, I think so, Flack agreed, and rummaged in his back pocket for his wallet. He flipped it open, pulled out a few bills, and handed them to the vendor, who took them with a nod of thanks. Keep the change.

The vendor handed Rebecca a wrinkled, plastic bag filled with the tomatoes. She took it with a quiet Thank you and threaded her fingers through Flack's.

We gotta get goin, Mac, he said.

Mr. Taylor, Rebecca said by way of goodbye. Not Detective, but Mr., as though you were unworthy to carry the same rank as her husband. She looked over her shoulder as Flack pulled her into the crowd, and the mouth that had once offered you tremulous, tearstained thanks curved in a disdainful, mocking smirk. Hypocrite, her eyes said before she turned her attention to Flack, who was talking into her ear. Then the city swallowed them up and left you with only the haunting afterimage of that smirk, sharp and cutting as a whetted blade, and those hard eyes filled with terrible knowing.

You tried to broach the subject with him a few days later when he turned up in the lab breakroom to rummage in the refrigerator, but he dismissed your overture and offered no explanation. That bridge is burned, and there will be no rebuilding it.

Hypocrite. That charge has been bandied about so often of late that you're beginning to wonder if it's true. Rebecca Flack with her wordless charge, and then Hawkes with his soft-spoken dignity after your tirade in front of the lab techs. Before either of them, there was Danny, on whose face the word has been writ large more than once. He's had the stones to actually say it, to award it to you like a rancid prize. When you fired Aiden, he wore the unspoken word on his face like a scar, and sometimes, you think Stella has inherited from him. Her face is harder since Frankie Mala tempered it with his fists. In fact, it looks a lot like Rebecca's face, and that's not a comforting thought to consider, is it?

But if you're going to be honest with yourself like a good Marine should, that's not really what you're most afraid of. No. You're afraid of failing them like you failed Pfc. Whitney all those years ago on the sand in Beirut. They've all slipped through your fingers somehow. Claire, who sifted to earth in a cloud of weeping ash. Aiden, who believed that you'd catch D.J. Pratt before he hurt another woman. Danny, who was only saved from disgrace because his estranged brother wore a wire and paid for it with most of his brains. Stella, who had begun to believe in Prince Charming, only to find a dragon in her living room. Flack, who answered your summons one Sunday morning and almost never saw another, and who now flees from you as though you're a nightmare he doesn't want to remember. And Sheldon, who was nearly ensnared by the clever manipulation of the science you hold so dear. One by one, you promised to protect them, and one by one, you've let them down.

He saw Claire in his mind's eye even as he prepared the swab that would collect a dirt sample from Lessing. Her features had blurred since 9/11; one morning, he'd woken up and realized that while he could remember that her eyes were hazel, he no longer knew what they looked like. He'd tried to recreate them for hours on the canvas of his mind and couldn't, and he'd sat, panicked and sweating, on the edge of his bed with his sheets puddled around his waist to hide his shame. They never had come into focus, never during his waking hours, and he'd begun to count it as a small mercy.

Then Reed Conrad Garrett had appeared outside his apartment, and Claire Conrad Taylor had returned to brilliant focus. Not only could he recall her eyes, which her son had inherited, but he
remembered her hair and the softness of her skin, and the way she smelled, cinnamon and roasted apples. Everything he had learned not to miss, in other words, and the feet of his impenetrable armor had turned to clay.

_Not clay. Sand._

But now was not the time to be thinking of Reed Garrett or his lost mother. Of any of this, really. He steadied his hand and drew the swab over Lessing's forearm. He held it up to the light and studied it. Minute brown flecks dotted the surface, and he scowled. He looked at Lessing's forearm. Clean. He drew his gloved hand over the clammy flesh, and it came away covered in a fine layer of dirt. He took out his penlight and scanned Lessing from head to waist. The fine dirt blanketed him in a shroud from sole to crown.

"Stella."

Stella appeared over his shoulder. "What's up, Mac?"

He nodded at Lessing. "He's covered in dirt." He held up his hand for her inspection.

"Hunh." She repeated the experiment and peered at her hand. "It's weird, Mac. It's like it's embedded in his pores."

"The question is, why would Lessing break out of a psychiatric hospital just to roll in the dirt?"

"Another question is, what're we going to tell Flack?"

He thought of Flack then, cool and shuttered, and of his wife, with her leering mouth and unspoken accusations. _Hypocrite._

"I'm not sure there's anything to tell him, Stella. For all we know, Lessing just suffered a psychotic break and wandered out. We'll know more when we analyze the security tapes, and this dirt-." He held up the evidence baggie. ",-will tell us where he went.

Lessing blinked at him, and he tried one more time. "Mr. Lessing, do you know what happened to you?"

For an instant, he saw a familiar expression on Lessing's face(hypocrite), and then there was nothing. He picked up his kit, and he and Stella left the room. Outside the door, an orderly was waiting to lock the door behind them, and the turning of the key in the lock reminded him of a chuckle.
Dirty Domestic Affairs

She washed Lessing by hand, all except for his prick, which she steadfastly refused to touch. She didn't want to look at it, either, and to that end, she had cast a Distortion Charm over it. It was now an indistinct blur whenever her eyes happened upon it. The water was cold, frigid, and his skin rose in angry, chapped gooseflesh as she drew the wet cloth over it. Her hands ached in sympathy, and her joints throbbed with the need for warmth. They would be frozen claws when she was finished, but she was not worried. Lessing would warm them up again soon enough.

Forward in the chair, and the seat farted daintily beneath her. The cloth reached his inner thigh and no higher. She would have to move to reach the hip. That was fine by her. She was in no hurry. Lessing shivered beneath the stroke, and his flesh retreated from it as if it knew what awaited it. She sat back, and the chair groaned indelicately. Another dip into the basin of frozen water, another deliberate stroke.

She could have cleaned him with a Scouring Charm; she had, in fact, considered it, loath as she was to touch him with the slightest hint of tenderness, but in the end, she had picked up the washcloth and done it by hand to appease her needling conscience.

Of all the sins you have and will commit in pursuit of this vengeance, hypocrisy will not be one of them. How can it be when that is the sin for which you have bound him to die? Vengeance can only be claimed when the motive is pure. Anything else is madness. But even that isn't true, is it? No doubt Lessing thought his motive was pure as he sat in his basement and created the bomb that ripped your love open. God and country ran through his mind in a holy refrain. He wasn't a murderer destroying innocent lives, but a patriot drawing blood in defense of his earth.

And isn't that what this is, my girl? The spilling of blood in the name of a greater good? If the law will not give you justice, then you will make your own, fashion in by might of wand and sheer force of will. You have wrested everything else from reluctant hands, so why not this?

Only Don was a gift freely given, offered without price. His love for you is guileless and bottomless and unspeakably sweet, and that makes this all the dirtier. What you do here in this room, sheltered from prying eyes by these moldering, damp walls, has made you a liar, tainted the most sacred of acts between you. While you sit here, wiping the pasty thighs of a lunatic, he's in the bed you share, dreaming of a brighter future or a happy past. You should be there with him, nestled in his arms and listening to his heartbeat in the dark.

You left with the taste of him still on your mouth, slipped from beneath the sheets with a last, lingering kiss on his clavicle. You had worked your magic well, and his eyelids did no more than flutter. The coverlet had slipped from his chest and pooled around his waist, and he was achingly vulnerable, smaller and more fragile than the swaggering, macho detective he played during waking hours. The scar was a livid mark against the paleness of his skin, and it made your heart twist even as your mouth flooded with the taste of gall. You sat in your chair for a while and watched him, torn between the dim gleam of his badge and the angry mouth of the scar as it sank its teeth into the flesh of his hip and belly.

You should have stayed with him, climbed back into bed and turned aside your anger, but you couldn't. It was too virulent and festered inside your warped bones like leukemia. Each time you were tempted to let it go, it spoke to you in the language you knew best and enticed you to its service with the vivid memories of your love pissing into a bag while his mind wandered the fields of purgatory. It was bright yellow as it dribbled into its plastic bladder, and for many, helpless, absurd hours, you'd stared at it and thought it looked like Big Bird's feathers, unreal and gaudy.
You know this memory isn't quite as it should be, that urine is the color of lemons and amber, but it doesn't really matter. What matters are the feelings it conjures—the suppurating rage without end, the yawning emptiness, and the ravenous, bitterly consumptive need for retribution.

If that isn't enough, it reminds you of that arraignment hearing, when you sat in the courtroom and watched the lawyers barter and dicker and try to assign a price to human lives. Lessing sat in his chair like an obedient puppet, eyes dull with a varnish of psychiatric drugs, and when his lawyer called him to speak on his behalf, he rose, clasped his shackled hands in front of him like a schoolboy reciting a book report, and spouted his pretty platitudes.

He apologized to the families of the lost, and to the family of the fallen police officer, and you wanted to lurch from your seat and scream at him, bury your fangs in his scrawny throat. He is more than a police officer, you wanted to shout, more than a meaningless title in your worthless prepared statement. His name is Don Flack, and he is my husband, and he was the first man to ever ask me to dance, to even accept that I could or might want to. He is my love, my tribe. Mine, and you tried to take him from me just because you could.

But you couldn't. Your palsied feet would never hold you, and the bailiffs and the stentorian bang of the gavel would silence you before the war cry was finished. If they cited you for contempt, you wouldn't be able to return to your vigil, and so you gritted your teeth, clamped your trembling fingers around the creaking armrests of your chair, and used that moment to replenish the deep well of your hatred. The water there is black as pitch and holds no reflection, and when you drink of it, it tastes like blood and alkaline.

He was so damn smug, oblivious to the magnitude of the words he spoke. Muggle wisdom holds that words have no power, but you know better. Even before you discovered magic, you knew they were powerful, indeed, capable of crushing dreams and breaking spirits. Freak and retard and missed abortion burned themselves into your skin and nested in your bones, and by the time your parents dropped you off at D.A.I.M.S. with a suitcase and a so long, they'd formed a leathery armor around your heart.

The wizards, now, they knew all about the power of words, and they had learned to harness them, to bend them to their will. They could be used as weapons or as panaceas to bleeding hearts. They could reduce a field to smoking ruins or blanket it in flowers bright as a child's rainbow. They understood the inherent danger of words and used them with care. Some they refused to use at all, lest their terrible power rebound on them a thousand-fold. Like Voldemort. Even Hagrid, ten feet tall and afraid of neither man nor beast, could not pass it from his lips, and Mr. Weasley, a man who ought to know better, flinched as though struck whenever the name was spoken in his company. Only Harry, who had reason to fear it, spoke it without quailing. Well, Hermione, could, too, damn her, but then, she always was an overachiever.

Avada Kedavra was another word they would not say, though their reluctance was pardoned by the knowledge that to do so carried an automatic death sentence. It was the forbidden fruit of magic, and very few had ever eaten of it. You did, though. Of course you did. You were a survivalist above all else, and when push came to shove on that godforsaken, blood-rotted moor, you were not about to forsake a tool because old men with uneasy consciences said you should.

You bathed the world in Slytherin green twice on that battlefield, and if pressed you would have done it twice more and twice more and twice more after that. Unlike most who tasted of the forbidden fruit, you were neither repulsed nor driven mad by it. There were no pangs of horrified conscience, no moments of doubt. Just the surety that you would live and they would die, and you were sorry for neither.
So, you were well-acquainted with the power of words, the destructive might of Avada Kedavra and the healing tenderness of an I love you in the dark, and to hear him speak your love's name as though it were of no more consequence than a notion in a writer's fancy infuriated you. A hatred so pure it was almost orgasmic flooded your veins in a warm, heroin rush. You tried to quash it, tamp it down and leave his comeuppance to the justice in which Don so stoutly believed. You went back to the hospital and did your best to let it lie.

And it did. For nearly a month. And then the D.A. called to tell you that they were considering a plea agreement that would send the monster to a psychiatric hospital for the rest of his life. He told you this as if you'd won a goddamned sweepstakes, as if it were enough that Lessing would never pass you on the street. You bit the inside of your cheek to keep from cackling into the receiver.

The other families were already considering the offer, he assured you, and were likely to accept.

Of course they are, you thought as you swayed in your chair with the phone clutched in one sweaty hand. The suffering of the dead is easier to forget than that of the living.

You must have said it aloud, because there was an awkward, guilty pause on the other end of the line. Then he was hemming and hawing and telling you to discuss things with your husband. He would call again in a day or two to see what you'd decided. Just then came the sound of Don heaving his guts in the bathroom, harsh and ugly and ratcheting. You knew then what your answer would be, but you paid lip service to the D.A. and hung up before he was finished saying goodbye.

You went into the bedroom and sat in the doorway of the bathroom, where Don knelt in front of the toilet with arms braced on either side of the bowl. He retched again, and his back strained with the effort. Yellow bile splashed into the toilet, and he rested his forehead against the cool ring of the seat.

You wanted to go to him, to smooth the sweat-dampened hair from his burning forehead and press soothing kisses to his nape, but he had told you weeks before what he thought of your bumbling attentions and clumsy affection. He didn't want them, and so you stayed your ground and loved him from afar.

Do you need anything? you asked as he spat bile.

He shook his head.

I'm going to leave a glass of water on the nightstand.

You rolled into the kitchen and got his glass of water, and as you returned to the bedroom with it clamped firmly between your knees, you gave up on his justice. You unearthed the plan that had taken root in your mind the day of that first hearing, and you were not at all surprised to see that your subconscious had been working at the loom and treadle all while, fashioning the means of Lessing's demise. That he would spend his life tended and cared for while you and Don rattled the bars of your bone cages and thrashed in the grips of nightmares of which neither of you could speak was a monstrosity too cruel to contemplate.

By the time you made it back to the bedroom, Don had regained his feet and was rinsing his mouth in the sink.

Here's your water, you announced, and held it up before putting it on the nightstand. You turned to go.

Hey, doll? Wait.
You pivoted the chair and looked at him. Yes?

You wanna come have a nap with me? He nodded in the direction of the bed. Quiet, hopeful.

You wanted to hold him more than anything in the world, to soothe and comfort him the way he comforted you when the spasms came and reduced you to a helpless, shrieking crab on the floor. But you remembered all too well the last time you tried to get close to him, the way he wretched when your stupid hand planted in the wrong place.

You've done enough damage, he had said, and broken your heart.

You stiffened at the memory. I think it's best if I keep my distance, don't you? I wouldn't want to jostle you again and set back your rehab. I know how much that means to you.

His face registered confusion and raw hurt. You knew you had struck a hard blow, but you didn't really care. One week later, and the wound left by those words still smarted and bled and shifted like shards of glass inside your heart.

His beautiful, expressive eyes filled with misery, and he ran his fingers through his hair. Are you sure, doll? There's plenty of room.

Your slurry will be ready when you wake up.

He followed you to the door of the bedroom, and just before you crossed the threshold, you felt his fingers brush your hair. He watched you for a minute as you rolled toward your office, and then he closed the door. You managed to get inside your office and close the door before you burst into hysterical, guilty tears. Huddled behind your desk with runners of snot dripping onto your blotter was where you first saw the Shrieking Shack in your mind's eye. It was all you could think about once it had settled into your head, and you were still pondering its grim beauty while you made his pineapple and mango slurry.

You told him about the D.A.'s offer, of course. The next morning over another slurry and toast softened in milk. You were not so blind as to think that the decision rested solely with you. After all, it was his body that had been torn apart. You set his slurry and his plate of softened toast in front of him, and after a few sips of tea strong enough to grow hair, you told him the news.

He picked unenthusiastically at his toast. I want the bastard to hang by his fuckin' balls, but I don't think that's gonna happen, he admitted after a long silence punctuated only by the lonesome, unappetizing squelch of his soggy toast. I just want this to be over, for us not to have to think about it anymore. He reached across the table and took your hand. What do you want, doll?

It's not enough, you said bitterly. Nothing is ever going to be enough.

He squeezed your hand and brought it up so that he could kiss the knuckles. Okay, he said simply. No deal.

But that was the deal. You were the lone holdouts, and in the end the D.A., like so many, took the path of least resistance. At the sentencing hearing in early September, Don took the stand and delivered a dissenting opinion of such startling eloquence that you wondered if he had been possessed when he wrote it. He spoke of the nightmares, and of coming home to find you sitting in the shattered remnants of your dinnerware. It was an elegy of sorts, and it was as much an indictment against himself as it was against the sad, little man at the defense table.

His testimony was a wake-up call and made you realize that he had not forgotten you in his race to rejoin the urban steeplechase. He had been watching and hurting and reaching for you, but you
were so ensnared in your own darkness that you couldn't or wouldn't see his proffered hand. You met him outside the hospital four days later with your heart in your mouth, and like he always has, he led you into the light.

That was the beginning of your reconciliation and your reawakening, a return to awareness forged by hands and lips and hard conversations gentled with endless patience. You could sleep again and taste food and smell the flowers he brought to remind you that there was brightness in the world. You could see his naked body in the moonlight and not be drawn to the livid, red scar that so neatly bisected your life. You could even allow yourself to dream of tomorrows with red-cheeked infants in sagging diapers. You remembered the sun.

Yet your spirit never settled completely. The blood in your veins cried out for vengeance richer than that provided with paper and ink, and so you are here, and let us make no mistake, my beloved girl, you mean to see this to the end. The pull is too hard, and your rage is too hot for either reason or love to talk you down. It has already made a liar of you, and now it will make you a murderess, and there is no war or holy cause to shoulder the blame. It is the simple, blind, greedy need to hurt he who has hurt you. It is as selfish and fraught with madness as Lessing's bomb on a peaceful Sunday morning. If you go through with this, you'll be as big a hypocrite as he is. More so, because you know it and don't care.

You can still stop, even now. You can exact a kinder, less ruthless revenge if you must. You can twist his bones inside his skin with a liberal application of Cruciatux. You can feel the sizzle of God's fury in your veins and slake your bloodlust. He will scream and gibber and plead for mercy while his joints dislocate with the wet, grinding pop of gristle, and you can continue the punishment until his outside matches your inside. When enough is enough and the monster is silenced, you can shred what remains of his mind with a Memory Charm and return him to his cell. You can go home to Don, and Lessing can rot in his ossuary.

For a moment, she was tempted. She saw Don in her mind's eye. Her sweet love who thought she was loving him to create a family, and who never suspected the ulterior motive that lurked beneath her awkwardly-rocking hips and ardent kisses. How could he when he had no motive himself? He came to her because he loved her, and he wanted her to be happy. He was blissfully unaware of the darkness he caressed so willingly, and his innocence broke her heart.

But every time mercy and prudence crept into her heart on timid feet, she saw the scar and felt the cool, baring press of double-sided glass against her palms. She saw his mindlessly rolling eyes and lolling head as he lay in pre-op alone, and the darkness returned in a ravening, roiling tide that swept reason aside with a swatting, dismissive hand.

Oh, my love, she thought sadly. You deserve so much better.

"He was the first man to ever ask me to dance," she told Lessing softly, and picked up the cloth again. "We'd gone to dinner and come back to his place. I don't think he'd planned to, but The Temptations came on the radio, and who could resist The Temptations?" She rolled alongside the crude, stone table to which she had Bound him until she reached his hip, a pale, hairy spar of bone. She slipped her wand from the sleeve of her robe, pointed at the basin she had left behind, and murmured, "Accio basin!"

The bowl floated through the air and settled onto her lap like a well-loved pet. Her lips curved in a fleeting smile at her macabre sense of whimsy. Even when blood had fallen like rain and ash had swirled around the castle ramparts like snow, she had possessed a twisted knack for finding humor in the midst of madness. When Ginny Weasley had met her end at the hands of Draco Malfoy, her throat cut by a Severing Charm, she had lain in the trench a few yards away and cackled, raw, dirty
knuckles crammed into her mouth to stifle the sound.

All that time spent teaching us to fear Dark Curses like the Killing Curse and Corpus Mortem, and Ginny Weasley meets the dirt on the heels of the same spell her mother uses to open the post, she had thought, and then, Pop! Just like a Pez dispenser. It had been horrible and undeniably true, and she had swallowed her guilt and self-loathing with mouthfuls of mud.

She dipped the cloth into the bowl of water, wrung it out with somnambulistic precision, and began to wash Lessing's hip. "I don't think anything had ever made me feel so lovely. Not even the lacy, itchy stockings I wore underneath my wedding gown."

Telling the story brought the memory back, and she forgot her cold, cramping hands in favor of the night Don had made her feel like a queen with a simple invitation to sway to the music coming from his clunky boombox. She had relaxed, secure in the gentle hands that had cupped her hips and in the enveloping, spicy scent of his cologne. She had rested her head on his chest as they moved in a strangely graceful wobble in the middle of the living room, and had listened to the steady thump of his heartbeat. He had seemed invincible then, her white knight in a Yankees t-shirt, and love had bloomed in her gut like nightshade.

Lessing, who had been watching her in wary silence, licked his lips. "Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

She uttered a short bark of laughter. "I told you screaming was useless. I should have known you'd have to test that theory. As to who I am, we'll get to that. We're getting to it now, actually, and you might have figured that out if you weren't so spectacularly self-absorbed." She gave his hip a last swipe with the cloth and dropped it into the bowl. Water splashed onto the backs of her hands like tears. "Oh, but that's one character flaw I intend to correct forthwith. Oh, my, yes." She Banished the bowl with a careless flap of her hand.

"I don't-,

"No doubt your keepers in the land of Topsy Turvy patted your head and told you that what happened wasn't your fault," she said as though she hadn't heard. "We both know that's bullshit, and that will stop immediately. There is only room for the truth here. You blew up that building because you could, and because you got off on the idea of brainless city officials kissing your ass for exposing their weakness. You killed six people on your little crusade and almost stole the light from my world, and all you got for it was a dosed cookie and a standing reservation at the Short-Sheet Hyatt."

Comprehension finally flickered in his eyes. "You lost someone in the bombing."

She studied the tip of her wand. "Yes, but I was lucky. I found him again."

"You have to understand-,

"I'm not interested in your reasons," she spat. "I only care about what you did."

She had planned on exacting her recompense with an array of Dark curses, each more perverse and forbidden than the last, but a new idea had taken root at the base of her brain. A better one. She kept seeing Ginny Weasley wilting gracefully to the mud, laid low by a household Charm she had heard a thousand times before. She thought of the Hogwarts house elves who had worked in the kitchens, and of the Charm that they had used to peel potatoes. She smiled.

"You can't do this," Lessing pleaded.
"And why not?"

"Because I was motivated by-,

"A higher calling?" she snarled, and her rage boiled over. She pressed her wand to his ribs. "Do you think you're the only one who's ever been willing to die for a cause, you son of a bitch? Do you? I've got a cause, too, and his standard rides on the third finger of my left hand." She was shouting now, and she leaned forward in her chair until she was inches from his sweat-beaded chin. "Tell me something, Lessing. If you were so fucking convinced of the rightness of your cause, why didn't you blow yourself up instead?" Her face burned with fury, and she was dimly aware that she was crying. She gulped cold air into her lungs, and her thin chest heaved. "Why?" she demanded, and drove the wandtip into his ribs. When there was no answer, she flopped back in her seat with a disgusted, furious sob and wiped snot from the end of her nose with the back of her hand. "Fucking coward."

She didn't speak again until her hands had stopped shaking, and when she did, her voice was eerily calm. "You know, ever since I brought you here, the voice of my dead grandfather has been in my head, telling me I'm a hypocrite, that if I do this, I'm no better than you."

"He's right." Lessing swallowed with an audible click.

A noncommittal shrug. "Maybe." She snorted. "Probably. But the difference between you and me is that I'm willing to shoulder the responsibility." She raised her wand and pointed it at him with a steady, dry hand. "My name is Rebecca Flack, and on May 9th, 2006, you nearly killed my husband, Detective Don Flack, Jr. But I'm not doing this for him. I'm doing this for myself, because I want to, and because I owe you an hour of pain for every minute he was away. I'm going to hurt you, and I'm going to enjoy it, and when I'm done, I'm going to go home and sleep without nightmares for the first time in seven months."

"You can't."

"I'm righting a wrong, Mr. Lessing. That's all. Isn't that what you were doing?"

She took a deep breath, focused her will, and thought of Ginny Weasley and of house elves peeling potatoes in the Hogwarts kitchens. Shortly thereafter, Thomas Lessing began to scream.
A Hard Day's Work

She'd planned on going home after she'd finished with Lessing for the night, but even after two showers and a soak in a tub whose waters had turned pink, the stench of blood and shit had still been strong in her nostrils, and so she had Apparated to Diagon Alley and taken refuge at The Leaky Cauldron. Not a room, no; she would sleep in no bed but her husband's. Just a table and a goblet of sweet, mulled wine.

He had screamed. Oh, how he had screamed when the Charm had begun its work and scraped flesh from tender muscle. He would have twisted away from the agony if he could, but Flitwick, bless his genial, thorough heart, had taught her well, and the Binding Spell had held him fast. Muscles had rippled beneath the skin in an effort to arch him from the table and close his rigid fingers into spasmodic fists. Only his head had been allowed the liberty of movement, and it had turned to and fro on the straining cords of his neck.

He'd talked when he could, pleaded with her to stop, to offer him the mercy he had never extended to Don. Sweet words, promises of remorse and acts of contrition. He'd go to the judge who'd sentenced him, he'd told her, go and demand to be sent to federal prison if she would only stop tearing skin from flesh in patient, methodical strips. He'd even offered to take the death penalty so long as the penalty came on the gentle bite of a needle. His life for a moment's peace.

She hadn't stopped. She couldn't. The dance was begun, its terrible, hypnotic music sunk deeply into her frozen veins, and it wouldn't let her go until the last of the music inside her heart had faded into silence. To stop was to expose herself to its treachery, to court the fleshless caress of bone against her cheek and feel rotten, eager breath against her ear. So she had laughed and sobbed by turns, and Lessing's skin had fallen to the floor, sloughed along with her innocence.

She had talked, too. It was surprising, the things you could tell a man when you knew he wouldn't live to repeat them. She had told him about her and Don's serendipitous meeting on 34th Street, and about the way the world had brightened and deepened with their first kiss. She had told him about dancing in the living room to the old boombox while she breathed in the scent of his cologne and learned the rhythm of his heartbeat. She had even confessed to him the fierce, unrivaled pleasure of surrendering her maidenhead in his bachelor's bed one sticky, August night. She had raged against the dying of her light, and each stripe that she'd laid with her venomous tongue had been punctuated with the wet, resistant pull of tearing flesh.

*It was easy to torture him, wasn't it, Miss Stanhope?* purred the voice of Lucius Malfoy inside her head, and she smirked in reluctant admiration even as her skin crawled. The elder Malfoy had possessed the forked tongue of an asp, it was true, but he had also nursed a well-oiled and perversely refreshing honesty.

*You almost became his handmaiden instead of lady-in-waiting to the Serpent King, and sometimes in the months before you met your prince on a patch of dirty, cold sidewalk on 34th, you wondered how different things might have been had you cast your lot with him,* her grandfather pointed out. *Intellectually, you knew it would have been suicide, that once your purpose had been served, he would have cast you aside like so much chaff threshed from Pure wheat. Your impure blood would have left him with no other choice. But such cold truth did not preclude you from playing a lazy game of Mirror Maybe as you lay in bed and cursed the inhospitable Muggle world to which you had returned after the War. If anything, it encouraged you. You stared at the ceiling of your*
apartment or the blind, silver mirror of the moon and unthreaded the fabric of your life; you refashioned familiar scenes from your life into new and exotic possibilities, ones lost to you forever from paths not taken.

You spent the summer after your fifth year as a frequent guest of Malfoy Manor. If Hogwarts was the castle from a fairy tale, then Malfoy Manor was palace of crystal and ice. Everywhere you turned, you were greeted by crystal and marble. The floors were buffed to painful brilliance, kept pristine by house elves who polished it on hands and knees and were kept to the task until thin fingers and knobbly knees cracked and bled. Then they were made to lap up the blood under the pitiless watch of Narcissa Malfoy, the fabled ice queen who was as cruel as she was beautiful. The whiteness was broken only by the flares of gold from sconces and ornate braziers and the vibrant colors of the tapestries that decorated the walls of the sitting rooms and Lucius' study. They looked like bloodstains from a distance.

The manor was a monument to wealth, but its beauty was cold and bloodless, much like the people for whom it had been wrought. Everything was placed in accordance with the rules of taste. There were no personal touches, no hints of a home within the walls. The rooms were endless expanses of nothingness decorated in priceless art and rich brocades. The dining room in which you took meals was a vault fit for a royal court, and yet, no more than four ever ate at its long table with a dozen chairs like the markers of unfilled graves.

It wasn’t the manor that tempted you; it was Lucius. Behind the haughty veneer was a man of startling frankness. Even his lies, so carefully constructed to draw you in, held the whisper of truth. In the privacy of his study or on the winding paths of his spectacular gardens, he spoke at length about the affairs of wizards and Muggles alike. Like his old friend, the Serpent King, he refused to treat you like a broken child and would tolerate no laziness or evasion in your answers to his frequent questions. He pointed out the hypocrisy of the side of Light, and you could not deny it. You would see it for yourself a year and a half later, when they locked you and fourteen of your fellow cripples inside Gryffindor Tower “for your own safety”. You would have died like cattle in a killing chute if you hadn't destroyed the wards and fled to the moor to die as soldiers.

You learned the dark joy of cruelty at his hand. One summer afternoon under his watchful, grey eyes, you practiced the Cruciatus Curse on hapless garden gnomes who writhed and convulsed under your wand. He watched without comment, and when you had done a particularly admirable job of reducing one of the creatures to so much twitching tissue, he clapped, a polite pattering of three fingers against his smooth palm. A golf clap, as the Muggles called it.

You've always remembered that clap, as well the ensuing Well done, Miss Stanhope. You demonstrate an envious aptitude for the art of discipline. Discipline, as if it were a spanking and not the vicious agony of obliterating a nervous system. They echoed in your head later that afternoon while you were unceremoniously puking your guilt into the elegant, porcelain washbasin held beneath your flushed face by a decrepit, trembling house elf. You craved his approval even though you knew who he was, and you were disgusted by your need for it. You swore to yourself that you would never invoke that Curse again, and for days afterward, you were haunted by the screams of the garden gnome, who had died without knowing why. But you did use the Curse again, just like Lucius undoubtedly knew you would. And that time, you were not sorry for it. In fact, you reveled in it.

He did not begrudge you your love of killing, and you might have cast your lot with him despite the inevitable end to which it would have brought you. After all, the doctrine he espoused was no different than the catechism of the Serpent King. The only thing that divided them was the side of the line on which they stood, and once, not so long ago, there had been no line at all. Both understood that killing was necessary to ensure survival, and both took pleasure in the task, but
Mr. Malfoy made no apology for it.

Malfoy’s only mistake was his dishonesty in his treatment of you. While he purported to hold you above the dirty Mudbloods he so loathed, he touched you only with the protection of leather or dragonhide gloves, and while he invited you to enjoy the bounty of his table, he always made sure there were at least three chairs between you and his family. If he had told you the truth in that as he had in all other things, if he had admitted that he thought you no better than the filth he thought to crush, you would have gone with him and turned the ground red before the favored Curse of his House removed your stain from his pristine hands. You would have embraced suicidal madness with a smile.

But he lied, and for that, you rejected him. Well, that and his derision for the Serpent King, who you held first and best, and who you had served long and well. So it was that you ended up on opposite sides of the War. And one day when he came for his reckoning, to dispatch you as he had done so many others, he tasted treachery in kind. You were weak and wounded and too spent to fight anymore, and he was possessed of an unholy, inexhaustible energy. He had but to raise his wand, but vanity moved him to speak, and while he waxed rhapsodic about his impending victory, the Serpent King sank his fangs into his throat and repaid a life debt.

You would have stayed with him forever had he not sunk his fangs into your unsuspecting heart in turn, but he did, damn him unto world's end, and you exiled yourself to a world with neither the Serpent King nor magic. Was it worth it, you asked yourself as you lay in bed and kneaded the ache of a miles-long roll over uneven pavement from your arms. If you had chosen the other path, you might still have lived in the magical world, might have dodged Malfoy's curses and carved a life for yourself. Maybe you would have become an Arithmancer and spelled the fortunes of lovers and Ministry officials, or maybe you would have taken a post at Durmstrang and unspooled the numbers in the heart of Budapest, listening to the wolves howl outside the windows. If worse came to worst, you might have retreated to the frozen tundra of Siberia and become another Baba Yaga with a fence made of bone and a house that ever spun in the silence of the forest.

Don came along in February of 2001, and you had your answer. Yes, it was worth it to have walked the path you had chosen. His love was worth the fires of Hell. He restored magic to your life, albeit in a permutation you never expected. He never offered you a palace of crystal and ice. What he gave you was a home, a place cluttered with pillows and newspapers and takeout boxes that was nevertheless a clean, well-lighted place where you could be as strong or weak as you needed to be. There was no need for secrets or pretensions. It was for the love of him that you forsook the magical world, and it is for the love of him that you have returned to bathe your hands in blood. It is an irony the late Mr. Malfoy would have appreciated.

As I was saying before the unwarranted intrusion by this addle-pated rustic, Lucius sniffed imperiously, it's easier to torture a man than it is an animal or a garden gnome whose only crime was to sprint too close to my hedgerows in bandy-legged glee. A man carries indictments and sins, the Mark of Cain, as swotty vicars like to say. A garden gnome behaves as it does because it has no other choice, but a man behaves as he does simply because he can, because it gives him pleasure to kill his rival and stand over the twitching corpse with blood on his hands and hard evidence of his victory between his legs. Man's arrogance smothered your pity like a clamping fist, and you can torture a man and watch his guts hemorrhage from his nose without a twinge of remorse.

You learned that the day you chose your side for good and all and hexed Professor Vector in the back in the middle of a Hogwarts corridor. There was no moment of contemplation before or a period of reaction after. It was a reflexive action, muscle memory and undiluted hatred. You watched him shriek and thrash in the throes of Cruciatus, and there was no guilt. Vector was an abstraction, an aggregate of symbols and nothing more. You would have killed him but for your
beloved Serpent King, who stayed your hand with a command that brooked no disobedience.

You acquiesced; of course you did, but for the briefest moment, you hated him for making you stop. The rush of power was an epiphany. Dumbledore and Moody and the other do-gooders had sworn that to cast the Unforgivables was to lose a part of your soul, but in that instant, you knew they were lying. To cast an Unforgivable was to understand the workings of the gods. It was life unfettered. You would not feel its like again until your filthy Muggle took your maidenhead and taught you the heady perversions of the flesh.

She was surprised to find that she missed Lucius. He had been a worthy and beautiful adversary, every bit the tempting satan that his name implied, and she would have liked to hear what he thought of her present course and the road to perdition upon which she had set herself, to listen to him paint the world with the elegant audacity of his forked, Slytherin tongue. But Lucius was dead, and all her old connections were gone, severed by time and distance and her silence in the face of the owls that had come for a while and then stopped. She drowned her sharp pang of disappointment in a sip of wine.

Not entirely dead, it seemed, because the voice of Lucius whispered inside her skull, the seductive rasp of silk on brocade. That feeling returned in force while you were torturing the unfortunate Mr. Lessing. That sticky, purposeful heat that pooled between your legs like the promise of completion. You were so wet that your scrawny thighs were slick, and your cunt throbbed with the need for release. Lucius sounded pained, and she suspected that it was an affront to his Pureblooded sensibilities to discuss the sexual proclivities of a mangled Muggleborn. She smiled around the battered rim of her goblet and tasted sweetness on her teeth.

Do keep your mind on the subject at hand, Miss Stanhope, he chided sharply, and she saw him in her mind's eye, tall and erect and gazing coldly down at her with his grey eyes. His robes were black and impeccably crisp, and one leather-gloved hand was curled around the shaft of his serpent-headed walking stick, a family heirloom that had been passed through ten generations of Malfoy men. He held it at shoulder-height in her imagination, and though he had never done so in life, she wondered if he was going to rap her knuckles with it. The thought prompted a girlish giggle.

The one that came on its heels throttled laughter in her throat. Merlin knows what you would have done had you used an Unforgivable instead.

No, but she did. She would have come her brains out in the chair. The knowledge that a forbidden curse could inspire the same ecstasy as Don's gentle touch sparked a hot, ugly spasm of shame, and bile rose in her throat in a greasy clot.

Oh, come now, Miss Stanhope. There is no need for shame. Pleasure is only a sin because tight-arsed clerics deemed it so. Why shouldn't you enjoy the task of vengeance? Your Muggle deity certainly does, and He makes no apology for it. In truth you've often wondered why He kept the best jobs for Himself-creation and vengeance and destruction-while He left his supposed favored creations with the will to do anything, and the power to do nothing. Your Muggle indoctrination does you no kindness, and you would be better off without it.

You were without it for a while, there in the Shrieking Shack. You were drunk on the ambrosia of retribution. For the first time since your Muggle fell, you could breathe easily and move without the rough, tugging recollection of apprehension in your gut like a blade. Your bones weighed what they should inside your skin, and not an ounce more, and the notion of bearing him a child was not so incredible without the hatred lodged inside your empty womb like a tumor. Ripping the flesh from your quarry's leg from shin to toe was cathartic, and absolutely more cleansing than a useless
You didn't even mind when the hapless Mr. Lessing's bowels betrayed him in a hot, stinking rush and shit streamed down his legs and off the edges of the table to pool on the floor. In fact, you sympathized with the indignity of it and stopped your work long enough to banish the mess. You understood all too well the humiliation of sitting in your own filth and waiting for judgmental, indifferent hands to restore your besmirched dignity at their leisure, and try as you might, you could not sink to that level of inhumanity.

Besides, puddles of shit are of little consequence to someone elbow-deep in blood and gore, someone who has seen allies torn in half by Severing Charms and led fourteen friends to certain death to save just one. After that, shit is an afterthought. You served as handmaiden to the Serpent King for three years, and for the last two of them, you scrubbed shit and sick from the floor with sponge and wooden pail. You stank of his weakness, and by the time the War came with its torrents of shit and blood and entrails unmoored from their bodies, you were inured to it. It was simply another truth to be accepted, and while the firsties and school prefects were heaving indelicately onto their shoes, you were wondering to whom the parts had once belonged.

"You bitch," Lessing had called her when the ripe, rancid smell of shit had blossomed beneath his ass. "You bitch." She'd stripped another measure of skin just to shut him up, but she hadn't really blamed him. She'd thought the same thing of the white-smocked attendants who had left her out of reach of either wheelchair or bedpan and then scolded her when they returned to find her twitching feebly in a stew of her own shit. You bitch. Succinct, and capable of carrying as much hatred as a heart could hold.

So, she didn't begrudge Lessing his impotent venom, but she no longer wanted to think about it, either. Instead, she turned her attention to Professor Snape, the Serpent King. She had seen him for the last time in the castle vestibule, looming over the straggle of departing students and Professor McGonagall, who had been organizing the exodus from the castle with weary, despairing eyes. She had been seventeen and delirious with disillusionment and suppurating hurt, and when his lovely, inscrutable black eyes had passed over her without the merest flicker of interest or recognition, love had curdled into an equally fierce hatred. She had left the castle, dragging her trunk behind her, and rather than join the line for Apparition to Diagon Alley and the room here in The Leaky Cauldron, she had closed her eyes and flown away home.

She wondered what had become of her old mentor since both of his masters had turned to dust. He had despised the pupils in his charge and made no secret of it, and she thought it unlikely that he had remained chained to a post he had never wanted. Then again, she doubted there had been many prospects for a turncoat twice over after the War. Slytherin that he was, maybe he had evaluated his meager choices and decided ignominy was preferable to penury. His skill as a Potions Master was undeniable, and McGonagall, for all her craggy bluster, had a soft spot for the lost and the wayward. Perhaps Headmaster Dumbledore had passed it to her along with his office and his bowl of sherbet lemons. She could imagine him ensconced in his frigid, damp dungeons, striding the corridors and cursing the realization that not even death had ended his obligation to Albus Dumbledore.

She had received an owl from him not long after she had married. It had come with all the others, and she had recognized the distinctive, elegant script at once, along with the green ink he had always favored. She had been tempted to open it, to see what he could possibly have had to say to her so long after his cruel dismissal on the moors, but in the end, it had been burned with all the rest, unopened. It had been far too late for apologies by then, and what was more, she had discovered as she had stood by the stove with the sealed parchment in her cold hand that it no
longer mattered. Wounded loathing had cooled to bland indifference. She had Don now, his
kindness and his steadying hands, and she no longer cared what Severus Snape needed or wanted
from her. She had fed the parchment to the greedy flames in the steel belly of her oven, and then
she had cried in simple, unapologetic relief.

Everything was the same. Everything was different. Faces she did not recognize had conversations
she very well did, and the old wizards sat in the same posture as other old wizards before them,
hunched and wary, ancient snapping turtles whose shells had eroded with the cruelty of years.
Younger wizards, yet unbowed by years and the unyielding cruelty of war sat straight in their
chairs, ankles crossed beneath the tables and eyes alert for enemies or prospective lovers in the
dark, dingy room. There were no doubt plenty of the former and precious few of the latter. The
only other witch in the pub was a heavy-bosomed witch with heavily shadowed eyelids and lipstick
smeared on her lips in vampiric invitation. Young witches of good repute knew better than to come
here, and if they did, it was never alone.

She had spent her summer holidays here as a student, paying for her room with money from the
monthly stipend sent to her Gringotts account by the U.S. Treasury and by performing various odd
jobs. She had washed tankards and dishes and bussed tables in exchange for the room, and on busy
nights, she had lurked behind the bar and watched as the pub filled with raucous wizards eager to
part with their pay. Sometimes women, but mostly men, and more often than not, Ministry officials
who wanted to carouse in relative obscurity. She had seen fights and quick trysts in the cramped
bathrooms, and on one memorable, weltering night, the deposed Cornelius Fudge had vomited on
her feet in the midst of apologizing for a sin she could not remember.

There had been two other girls employed by Tom, the proprietor, pretty barmaids who sashayed to
and fro with tankards in their plump hands, and they had endured catcalls and whistles and the
occasional grope with the good-natured bat of eyelashes. Their patience was rewarded with shiny
Galleons, and now and then, one or the other had disappeared with old Tom into the supply room.
She had rarely waited tables, and on the rare occasions she did, there were no catcalls or golden
coins, just terse grunts and hastily averted gazes. She had never been into the storeroom, either, but
there had always been an extra twenty Galleons in her pay envelope at the end of the week. She
had dropped the coins into the alms box outside St. Mungo's without fail.

Even here in the land of Not, some things will always be the same, she thought bitterly, and drained
her goblet. She hesitated for a moment, then raised her bony finger and signaled for another. If
there were ever a night to break her hard and fast limit of one, it was tonight. She had, after all,
peeled a man's leg like a potato.

She was still nursing the second drink when a familiar figure stumped into the bar. Not Professor
Snape, but Seamus Finnegan, who stamped his thick-booted feet on the wooden planks of the floor
and shook the snow from his heavy traveling cloak. Adulthood had broadened his chest and back,
but his face was unchanged, square and honest and overlain with wry mischief. He was Don before
she had ever known Don Flack existed, and once upon a time, she had dreamed about what it
would be like to live with him in a cottage by the North Sea.

She blushed at the memory and fixed her gaze on the splintered tabletop. It was only when she
heard the familiar, Irish brogue that she realized that her cowl was still bunched at the nape of her
neck. She had spent so long in the dark and cold of the Shrieking Shack that she had taken it down
to experience the warmth of firelight on her face.

"Rebecca?" the voice said incredulously. "Rebecca Stanhope?"

She looked up and was met with a pair of sparkling brown eyes. "Seamus Finnegan," she said by
way of confirmation.

"Well, I'll be buggered," he exclaimed gaily, and then he was barreling into her. "It's been too bloody damn long," he declared as he crushed her in a bear hug. "Merlin's tits, but let me grab a pint and a chair."

His enthusiasm after so long surprised her into sudden tears, but they were careful and fleeting and stolen by the wool of his robes, and he did not notice them.
Mac Taylor had always prided himself on his objectivity, his ability to separate instinct and desire from hard truth. It was an ability that, like it or not, he had inherited from his late father, a Chicago real estate magnate who had plucked the seeds of his fortune from the fruitful loins of his father and multiplied it tenfold by virtue of his savvy and his ruthlessness in business dealings. By the time he had come along in the winter of 1960, his father had established himself astride the Chicago construction world, and on the rare occasion he chose to lift the black veil of forgetfulness from his childhood, he saw himself on the floor of his father's office, hiding Sgt. Rock in the thick forest of the green carpet and listening to his father reshape the city skyline on clouds of cigar smoke.

Most of what he remembered of his father came from those final two, tortured years, when the mellow sweetness of his beloved cigars had soured to the rotten, black masses that had consumed his lungs with tarry, patient fingers and reduced him to a wracked wraith in a starched winding sheet, but his mother and family photo albums had supplied the rest. In addition to his father's pragmatism, he had inherited his eyes and the nasal Midwestern speech pattern. His father had been a meticulous man, impeccably groomed even on lazy Sundays, nary a hair out of place. In pictures, he was lean and erect, and the hand that rested on his childhood shoulder carried short, neat nails that would have met and exceeded military expectations.

According to his mother, he had drunk precisely one glass of port every night, and never more. Business luncheons were a daily occurrence, and three times a week, he and his developer cronies hit the greens for a round of golf. Saturdays were reserved for horseback riding, and until the age of sixteen, Mac had accompanied him and learned the value of horseflesh at the expense of his own. Until the roar of crumbling masonry had overtaken it in 1983 and again in 2001 and 2006, he had awakened in the night to the sharp snap of riding crop on leather spats, and if he looked closely enough while he was putting on his socks in the morning, he could see faint lines in the flesh of his ankles where a lesson had been reinforced on a strip of rawhide.

His father had been a disciplinarian from the first and had made no secret of the lofty ambitions he nurtured for his only son. While his mother had twitted and cooed over his first, wobbling steps, his father had dismissed them as no more momentous than the act of breathing. After all, any son of his was expected to walk, and so of course he had. He would not spoil his boy with praise he had never earned. Each milestone was greeted with the same stony apathy, and by the time he was in kindergarten, Mac had stopped trying to make his father smile, had understood it as an exercise in futility.

He had been another project for his father, another monument to be erected in his honor. He had been sent to exclusive private schools where manners were taught alongside calculus and biology. Long after he had forgotten the specifics of Paul Revere's dramatic gallop through Boston, he still knew how to wear a cravat and which fork to use at dinner. Tweed-wearing schoolmasters who had worn pretension like aftershave had done their best to reshape him in accordance with his father's wishes. The course of his life had been predestinate from the moment his father had laid claim to paternity, or so he had thought, and it had come as quite the surprise when Mac had discovered his free will and erased the blueprint his father had drawn for him.

*Your father saw it as an act of treason when you refused to toe the line he had drawn in his fine, distinctive hand. To his mind, free will was a legacy to be inherited at the reading of the will. Until then, it was your duty as the sole Taylor heir to do as you were told. He had invested his seed and his money in you, and it was the least you could do to repay him with absolute obedience. And was*
it really so much to ask? All he required was that you surrender your dreams in favor of the prefabricated ones that he had made for you. Go to Harvard Business School and become a financial magnate. Arrange deals that would bring reflected glory to his name and land the family in the society pages. There was no room for science or inquiry when there were millions to be made. Dreams were for the stupid and the poor, not for those who controlled the strings of the world. Not for the Taylors, who had been a distinguished family since the Industrial Revolution.

You were supposed to be a chip off the old block. And carve one off for yourself, of course. That was the price of independence in high society: an heir. A son bought freedom from the crushing stranglehold of impossible expectation. Sons were safeguards; if the unthinkable happened and a son turned out to be a disappointment, hopes could always be pinned on the next generation. The day your voice began to change, you father assumed that you would one day be a father in your own right. It was another requirement to be met, just like the straight As and the perfect application of tack to a thoroughbred.

As you grew older, you watched your male cousins chafe and wither under the strain of generational obligation. Exuberant boys transformed into harried, humorless men, white-faced and balding at thirty. Most drank too much and talked too loudly and hid their frustrations behind cosmetic smiles and thousand-dollar suits. They were hurried into careers for which they had no great affinity and marriages whose successes were measured by the bottom lines on bank statements. Children were conceived and borne into the world before there was sufficient love to sustain them, and the whole ugly cycle was repeated in a living example of DNA replication.

Not that the women in the family drew better lots. Those granted entre by blood were cosseted and treated like princesses of delicate chin, but their pampered status was fleeting and easily upended by the arrival of the male heir. They were afterthoughts, and little thought was given to their future beyond a good liberal arts education and the social graces to attract a good match from an acceptable social milieu. As long as they were pretty and fertile, they served their purpose.

Those who were grafted onto the family tree by marriage were sadder still, set pieces hollowed on the inside. They had plastic faces and saltwater breasts, Barbie dolls in a Versace wardrobe. They were too thin inside their cinched and taped gowns, and sometimes when you danced with them at social functions, you detected the faintest whiff of vomit and bourbon on their breaths, the unmistakable smell of youth ripening to middle age. They dieted and facelifted until they were skin stretched taut over brittle bones, and all the sacrifices rarely mattered because the husbands they were struggling to keep were having dalliances and siring bastards with younger women. Most abandoned the Cinderella dream soon enough, learned to turn their heads, and waited for freedom and recompense to come on the closing of a coffin lid.

You hated that life, hated watching dreams die under the crushing heels of fathers who, deprived of their own hopes, could not bear to see happiness in the faces of their sons. You despised attending the funerals of those who could not abide the pressure and had relieved it with a bullet to the temple or through the roof of the mouth. You hated the cloying press of tuxedoes and three-piece suits. You were tired of watching beautiful young girls turn into glassy-eyed socialites who limped through life on the crutches of Valium and Dilaudid.

You were seventeen when you told him that there had been a change of plan. You had not enlisted in the military, not yet, but you wanted to be anywhere else, away from the silent, tasteless dinners and the riding lessons and the endless discussion of college and life after the lambskin. You were filled with the bravado of the young, and you told yourself that no matter how he reacted, you were going to stand your ground.

You told him that day because he was in a good mood. He came home smelling of sweet Havanas
Dad, can I talk to you? I think I've finally decided what I want to do after graduation.

He turned, clearly pleased. Have you? Excellent. I was beginning to wonder. He gestured to the sofa opposite the fireplace and sipped port from the tumbler in his hand. Sit. Tell me all about it.

You sat, lips and teeth heavy as lead. The part of you that loved your father with the blind, unquestioning devotion of a child hesitated, but you knew that if you put off this discussion any longer, it would never happen. You would always find a reason to wait another day and then another, and by the time you thought to speak, there would be no words and you would be ten years chained to an oak desk in Sears Tower. You swallowed your cowardice like a small, hot marble that lodged in your sternum, gripped your knees to hide your trembling hands, and waited for your moment of truth.

Your father plopped onto the sofa with a contented groan, took a long sip of port, and plucked at the pleat of his tailored pants.

Long day? you ventured, stalling for time to rally your courage.

Your father chuckled, weary and phlegmatic. Show me one that isn't. I spent half the goddamned morning in a three-martini lunch with Bill Waterman on the Rheingold deal, and the rest of the day fielding phone calls from soused, high lawyers. Still, I think they're going to accept my latest proposal, thank God.

That's good.

That's very good. Now, we were talking about what you'd decided. Where will you be attending college? University of Chicago? Fordham? Harvard? Colombia? He leaned forward, and the tumbler dangled loosely from his fingers.

The marble in your chest swelled, a malignant tumor out of control, and for a minute, your tongue twitched impotently in your mouth. You forced yourself to think of your older cousin, Marshall, who drove his car into Lake Michigan and drowned in its frozen waters at twenty-two. I'm not going to any of them, Dad. I want to join the military.

The smile hung on your father's face as the seconds ticked inexorably past, suspended there in defiance of the oppressive gravity that suddenly blanketed the room. When your pronouncement finally sank in, his face didn't fall. It closed, and the happy, hopeful light in his eyes guttered and died. I should've know you'd disappoint me, his expression said, and he brought the tumbler of port to his lips and drained it with a single toss of his head.

The military, he repeated contemptuously. What in God's name for? This is your future we're talking about, Mac, not some game you play with your little friends.

But it's not a game, Dad, you insisted valiantly. It's a chance to do something on my own, to prove myself. Besides, with the G.I. Bill, I can get money for college after my enlistment's up.

Your father laughed. Is that what this is about? Money? Relieved. Here was a problem he could
handle. Mac, money is no object. You can choose any school you want, and the money will be there.

No, Dad, it's not just about money, you snapped, exasperated. You hated him when he was like this, so smug, so sure that he could make problems disappear with the opening of a wallet or the flourishing of a checkbook. I just want to do something for me, figure out what I want for a change, who I am.

Who you are? Don't be ridiculous. You're a Taylor-

I'm sick of being a Taylor, you screamed. I want to be me, Mac Taylor. I would rather be him, whoever he is, than spend the rest of my life riding on your coattails. You stopped, astounded into silence by your own audacity, and a gleeful voice at the base of your brain whispered that you sounded like a whiny pussy who still had not grown any hair on his nutsack.

Your father rose from the sofa and went to pour himself another glass of port from the decanter on the wet bar. He poured it, downed half of it at a gulp, and replenished the glass. The liquid was a deep, rich red, and though you did not think of it at the time, later you would wonder if it was not a portent of things to come, of the course your life your life would take once you turned your back on your father's house that summer. But at the time, you only wondered how much of the booze he would drink before the night was out.

He took a steadying, dainty sip and studied you over the rim of his tumbler. When he spoke, his voice was calm, musing, the same tone he used with oily-handed attorneys and city commissioners who were trying to fuck him over. So your grand plan to find yourself is to join the Army?

Yes.

I've got news for you. The Army isn't some cartoon. It's a meat grinder. It'll chew you up and spit you out, and if you come out the other side, you'll think and act just like all the other jarheads on the assembly line. Is that what you want? To be spoonfed your personality and get your opinions from some survivalist handbook?

Not much different from living under your roof, you thought mutinously, but you were smart enough to keep your mouth shut on that particular sentiment.

He took a contemplative swallow. No, Mac, he said. You won't be joining the Army. He drained his third tumblerful and turned his back, and you knew what that meant. There was be no more discussion, and you were dismissed. His decision was final.

Except it wasn't that night. You stared at his back as he stood with his palms pressed to the wet bar, and you came to a sudden, inescapable truth. You were drowning in his shadow just as surely as your cousin, Marshall, had drowned in the frozen waters of Lake Michigan, and if you did not escape now, you never would. You would join Marshall in the family mausoleum, another casualty of the family name.

You set your shoulders. With all due respect, I am.

His shoulders tensed in turn. I thought I'd made myself clear.

You did. Now I'm making myself clear.

I'm not going to let you throw your life away just because you want to play at rebellion. You'll go to college, you'll get a good job, and ten years from now, you'll thank me.
I've already enlisted, you blurted. A lie, but he had no way of knowing that, and anyway, you were desperate to win just one fight with your father.

He slammed his palm on the wet bar with enough force to make the empty tumbler rattle and shed its condensation like bloody tears. Then I'll have the agreement voided.

No, you won't. I've made up my mind, and I'm going, you shouted. It was impossibly loud, the roar of a young lion, but you could not help but notice it lacked the full-throated timbre of your father. No longer a boy, but not yet a man.

His shoulders slumped, but when he turned around, he was smiling, and his eyes were glassy and bright with too much booze. You really want to go this way, Mac? he asked, and flashed you a predatory smile.

A fulcrum shifted inside your stomach, oily and heavy, and you understood that whatever passed between you now was for good and all. Once done, it could not be undone. You licked dry lips. Yes, sir.

He closed the distance between you in deliberate, wobbling strides until you were within kissing range, and for one mad instant, you were sure that was exactly what he was going to do. So close, you smelled the pickled sweetness of the port mingled with cigar smoke on his breath.

Then you're on your own, he said. It was a whisper. No favors, no help, and not one dime from me. Is that understood? I might not be able to talk you out of this fool's errand, but I'll be damned if I'll help you die. Not one dime.

Yes, sir. The words were a rattle inside your mouth, giddy with adrenaline and the stupefying realization that you were free.

He backed away. Go on. He jerked his head in the direction of the closed study door. Go live out your Sgt. Rock fantasies. Don't come crying to me when you come home with your leg blown off.

You left quickly on shaking legs, certain that he would call you back and tell you that he had changed his mind, but the only sound you heard before the heavy, wooden door slammed on your departing back was the slosh and gurgle of your father pouring himself another drink.

The gibe on Sgt. Rock hurt because the best memories of your father came from those hours spent playing soldier underneath his desk. The next day, you went to lend truth to the lie you had told your father and enlisted, and Sgt. Rock was in your coat pocket, your small, plastic point man. You still have that Sgt. Rock action figure buried in a box in the back of your closet. His face was mostly gone the last time you looked in on him, a fatal war wound that should have earned him an honorable discharge from the flimsy, cardboard box, but you can't bring yourself to part with him, and so he stands sentry over Claire's beach ball.

It was a tense three months in your father's house before you left for boot camp. He did not shout or raise his hand, and there was no dramatic declaration that you were no son of his, but it was plain that the landscape between you had changed irrevocably. You left for basic training in Fort Bennig a week after graduation, and the city boy who had grown up with the gritty taste of asphalt on his mouth and tongue suddenly found them full of thick, sweet Georgia clay. The military slapped any illusions you might have had that you were ready for the world right out of your head, but you never regretted your decision because it gave you the one thing you had always craved: a sense of belonging, a feeling that you were where you were meant to be and doing what you were meant to do.
Your father was wrong about one thing, though. You did get money from his coffers. Your mother sent it once a month in the care packages she prepared. It was never much; the largest sum you remember was one hundred dollars, but you suspect it was all she dared slip from the joint account she shared with your father. Your stubborn streak balked at accepting the money, saw it as a concession of weakness, but every time you started to tear the check to pieces, you thought of your mother surreptitiously slipping it into the parcel with a kiss and the fervent wish that it would bring a scrap of happiness to her boy so far from home. You never tore them up, but you never cashed them, either. You just stashed them in the bottom of your footlocker, and when you came home from your last tour of duty in 1985, you found them underneath your socks, lined on the bottom like perfect little soldiers. You burned them in the trash barrel outside your apartment, and they smelled like burning leaves.

You have often wondered about your mother and how she ended up with your grimly practical father. Happenstance, you suppose, or perhaps she was temporarily blinded by the gruff charm he exuded when it suited him. The same thing happened with you and Claire, God rest her soul, and in both cases, you think it would have been better if they had run. Your mother was the idealist to your father's pragmatist, a free spirit you could easily have seen wallowing with the Mud People at Woodstock if she had not been bound to you by apron strings. Your mother's eternal optimism was all that made life in your father's house bearable near the end.

There's always another day after this one, she would say, and that unruffled serenity helped her weather your father's fits of brooding melancholy and distemper.

But she was wrong about that. One day, there would be no next for your father. You found that out courtesy of a phone call from your mother one night in 1990. The shadow of the end had been caught on an X-ray, and your father's days were now a finite set. You hadn't set foot in your father's house since 1977, but she asked you to come, and so you went, shoes polished and pants smartly creased.

Your father would not die for another seven months, but you could smell death on your mother's skin when she opened the door. Gone was the smiling flower-child who would gladly have danced with the Mud People and worn garlands in her hair. She was old and used up and shrunk in the looming presence of death. Her hair was thin and so was her smile, and when she led you into your father's study, her feet made no sound as they moved over the green carpet of Sgt. Rock's jungle. She was a ghost.

Your father, on the other hand, had inherited your mother's optimism. He swore that the best oncologists in Chicago were wrong, that he had more time. The chemotherapy and radiation treatments would make more time, wring it from his diseased, cigar-blackened lungs with poisonous, searing fingers. He would buy time with his checkbook and his willpower. Just like every other inconvenience in his life, money would make his problem disappear.

It didn't work; the only thing that got smaller was the family fortune, fed to the ravening tumors, which gorged and grew fat. The progression was relentless, chronicled with scrupulous indifference by the unblinking eye of the X-ray machine. The shadow on the films deepened and expanded, and once, you thought, ridiculously but not without merit, that it resembled the Blob. After one visit to the oncologist's, the idea became so entrenched in your mind that all you could hear was the incongruously jaunty theme song that accompanied the opening credits. Then all you could do was sit behind the wheel of your mother's Mercedes and giggle at the absurdity, knuckles white and bloodless against the black leather of the steering wheel.

Your mother, of course, did not giggle, touched by the grief you would come to know so well ten years later, when your Claire left you a ray of California sunshine and returned a few hours in a
drizzling mist of scattered ash. Looking back, you cannot imagine what your mother must have thought, watching you howl with laughter in the driver's seat while she faced the prospect of life without the man she had called her other half for thirty-seven years. It must have seemed monstrous, and maybe it was, but it was the only action you could take. Not even the Marines had taught you how to cure cancer.

The tumor was spotted in August. By October, it had consumed one lung and was devouring the other, and the pressure was suffocating him. He asked you to kill him the week before Halloween. He had been relegated to the guest bedroom on the second floor by then, and even with the oxygen to assist his breathing, his moving days were done. He was propped in the bed and surrounded by machines and the nostrums of the dying. The oxygen hissed into his lungs through a nasal canula, and the stilted silence was punctuated by the measured click-drip of the morphine drip.

You sat at his bedside, and the room stank of piss and stale shit that your mother and the hospice workers could not clean fast enough. He was wasted, and whenever he exhaled, it sounded like bubbling tar and smelled of blood and old smoke and rotten phlegm.

Mac, he said, and it was phlegmatic and hot. He coughed, and blood flew from his lips like high-velocity blood spatter.

You reached for a tissue from the box on the nightstand and wiped his lips. Beneath the blood, they were blue, and it was several long, impotent moments of dabbing before you realized why the color would not come off. You hurriedly crumpled the tissue in your fist and stuffed it into your pocket, and after that terrible conversation was over and you were in your own apartment, you found it there. You pulled it out and held it in your palm, and the only thought of which you were capable as you gazed at the smear of blood and your father's decaying lungs was, The mark of sin. You flushed it down the toilet, pulled a half-empty bottle of Smirnoff and drank until the angular, fastidious contours of your apartment blurred around the edges.

But before the stiff hands of the clock marched to that appointed hour, you sat your vigil and wiped the evidence of dying from cracked, papery lips.

Save your strength, Dad, you urged him, and sat back in your chair.

A glottal, sputtering caw that sent up more blood and stippled the linens. A laugh. For when? It seems that if I've got any talking left to do, it's best to do it now. There's nothing I want to tell the undertaker except to kiss my ass.

You could not argue with the sentiment, and it was a shade of the father you had once known. You looked at your feet and said nothing, filled with a regret you could not explain.

I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, Mac, he went on. But I need you to do me a favor. He licked his lips and wheezed.

What is it, Dad?

The doctors say there's no getting better from this. It's too strong and too far gone. They've promised to make me comfortable, but the damn drugs aren't working. Haven't for weeks. I've asked them to up the dosage, but they won't because they're afraid, I'll overdose and die. He laughed again, a gargling chuckle, and blood welled between his teeth. Can you imagine? I'm dying, and they're afraid I might die. Quacks, all of them, he said contemptuously.

I don't-
They said they were bound by the Hippocratic Oath to first do no harm, but they're just afraid to do what's right. But you won't be. That Marine training of yours ought to have done that much at least. You know about duty.

I still don't know-

_He heaved himself onto one spindly elbow, an effort that wrenched a groan of agony from his wattled throat. The fuck you don't, Mac, he rasped._

_His hand shot from beneath the bedsheets and clamped around your forearm with astonishing speed and strength. The flesh of his palm was so thin that you felt the sickly heat of the blood in his veins. It was clammy, feverish, and alien against your skin, and you wanted to recoil. His eyes blazed with manic intensity._

You don't have to do it yourself if you don't have the stomach for it. Just pour the dope into my damn tea, and I'll drink it when the hospice worker shows up. _He collapsed onto his pillows and gasped, a mortally-wounded horse pawing uselessly at bloody ground._

_You knew what he was asking, had known from the moment he opened his mouth, and you also knew that you could not do it. By the time you came home from Beirut, you had been refined and distilled. You knew who you were beneath all the Taylor trappings of a private education and the sharp bite of silver spoons on your tongue. You were devoted to duty and country, and you were a damned fine man, and damned fine men did not kill their fathers, even if they begged for it._

_Even if a small, shameful part of them wanted to._

_You had done your duty killing in Beirut, and you wanted to do no more. Not when you remembered Stan Whitney holding onto his life with both gut-filled hands. Whitney had been nineteen and had not wanted to die. Life had been wrested from him on foreign sand with no one to be sorry he was dead except you. Now here your father sat, on the other side of fifty and refusing to face the consequences of his thirty-year love affair with Castro's crop. It was not fair, and you would not be party to it._

_I'm sorry, but no._

_His eyes widened. Dammit, Mac, this is no time for your stiff-necked moralizing. I want to end it on my terms, to die with what dignity I have left. Three months from now, the damn tumors will have invaded my brain, and I'll be so much breathing meat, gibbering in my own shit. I don't want your mother to remember me like that. I don't want to be remembered like that. For God's sake, do what I ask just this once._

_I can't. I'm sorry._

_You won't, you mean, he grunted, and closed his eyes. Talking had exhausted him._

_I'm sorry, you repeated. Such a stupid, useless phrase._

_You stayed with him for a few more awkward minutes, and when you rose to leave, he seized your forearm again. It feels good, doesn't it? he gasped, and smiled to reveal blood-stained teeth._

_You told yourself those words were the ravings of a man wracked with pain. They were also the last words he ever spoke to you. On subsequent visits, he turned you away, and when you showed up for the deathbed goodbye in late March of 1991, he was too incoherent to recognize anyone. Sometimes, you puzzled over them in your mind when the nights were long and it was better than dreaming of Whitney dying in the sand, but they did not haunt you._
Not until Claire said them in 1998, after a squabble over whether or not to have children. Savage and wounded and full of terrible knowledge. It feels good, doesn't it, Mac? The constant powertrip. Then you did know what your father meant, and you were so stunned by the revelation that you could only sit on the couch in the living room and ponder it between pulls of Beam. Claire apologized the next morning, but the words could not be unsaid, and they have followed you through the years, repeated on the lips of others.

Danny said it after you took him off the promotion grid, and again after you fired Aiden. He is the most volatile of your CSIs, but he's also the most honest, and the accusation, spat like hobnails at your feet, was hard and stinging as a slap. Stella has said it, too, upon occasion, though not as sharply. And Flack says it still in the way he dismisses your friendly overtures in the hallways of the lab.

You have tried to deny it, but with so many chorusing the same refrain, you have begun to wonder if it is not an unwelcome truth. You can admit now that you fled Chicago after your father was in the ground and you had been officially disinhерited by the proviso of his will. There was nothing left for you there, and you wanted to pretend that none of the years spent in his house had happened.

But you could not shake them. You realize now that everything you have done since has been influenced by his shadow. You left Chicago because of it, you became a cop and refused to become a father because of it. You hurt Claire because of it, and oh, isn't that a hot prong of restless conscience? Sometimes, you think she died because of it. If you had not been so set against fatherhood, so terrified that you were Taylor to the core beneath your Marine façade, maybe she would have been at home with Billy or Johnny, and not in the Towers, crunching numbers for a company soon to be vaporized by burning jet fuel.

With all the tragedies left you by your father's legacy, he left you a single gift. You learned objectivity at his knees while you guided Sgt. Rock through the jungles of Underdesk. You learned how to separate wish and whimsy from analytical fact. While your mother could look at a tenement or vacant lot and see a park or a set of boutiques, your father could see the same and a hundred details besides. He could see the termites and the wood rot that would render a property untenable or the ideal locations and prevailing currents of a city that would mark the X of a trendy nightclub or eatery. He could bring himself to raze a quaint, turn-of-the-century brownstone for the sake of his bottom line. That clinical detachment served him well, and it allowed you to kill fellow human beings over imaginary lines drawn in shifting sand. If you want to get technical, you owe your father your job.

However, he had come by it, his objectivity was gone, and he could only take solace in the fact that he knew it. All the evidence on his desk that pertained to Lessing's escape said it was unhappy coincidence. The preliminary reports from the institution's doctors indicated that aside from his sudden catatonia, Lessing was healthy, and the tox screens he had ordered independently had shown no unexpected results-just the expected dosages of anti-psychotics and chemical inhibitors. No Hepatitis, meningitis, or other pathogens that would account for the sharp decline in cognitive function.

Neither the crime scene photos nor the prelims from Trace or DNA had hinted at the presence of unwanted personnel. He had sent Hawkes back the following day to photograph Lessing with an ALS camera to check for latent prints or bruising, any evidence of abuse. Nothing. Just the dirt that dusted his skin even after two showers. Aside from its maddening resistance to water, it contained high levels of nitrates and carbon dioxide, both of which were consistent with cemeteries and mass graves. Stella had done a search of cemeteries that morning, and he had been leafing through the results for the past half an hour.
So far, nothing had turned up. No tenants by the name of Lessing had taken their eternal rest in Mount Pleasant, the closest graveyard to where he had been found. It was possible that his wife's kin were buried, and as lab supervisor, he supposed he could ask Danny to run a check, but he would want to know why, and Mac had no answer to that himself. None that wouldn't make him look like a fantastic hypocrite, at least. He could use the Because I said so excuse, but Danny would react to that as well as any child would, and he couldn't stomach two days of petulant sulking with so little to justify it. It was just…

Your gut. Just your gut. That tool of every seasoned investigator, the one you never overtly acknowledge if you can help it. Evidence is better. Evidence is best. Evidence stands up in court. Guts do not fare as well, not even when presented as glossy, 8x10 photos of a homicide detective's lower intestine. Guts get laughed off the bench and get the defendant a lifetime pass to the loony lodge.

Besides, it all comes back to hypocrisy. You can hardly go off half-cocked, chasing leads on roads to nowhere; not after the countless words you have spent extolling the inviolate virtues of concrete evidence. When Danny was fixated on a member of the crew on the Sand Hog case, you told him to follow the evidence, not his gut. So how could you look him in the eye now and tell him that you want him to undertake hours of tedious record-searching on nothing more than a hunch? You have already made that mistake with Flack and Jesse Spencer. You all but ordered Flack to hold off on an arrest just because you did not want the worst to be true. Not only that, but you deliberately let Jesse elude custody because it didn't feel right. Hypocrite, Flack's eyes said. It feels good, doesn't it? The power trip.

So you have nothing to go on, and yet, you cannot let the matter rest. You cannot accept the bland truth that Thomas Lessing slipped through an unattended door and wandered to temporary freedom. It is too pat, and so unfair. It exposes the truth behind the pretty lie. Flack and his wife's peace of mind-the entirety of their justice-hinges on the mental acumen and the keyring of a hospital attendant preoccupied with the dim pleasures of ogling the Penthouse centerfold and scratching the crack of their ass.

He had been there on the day Lessing's sentence had been handed down, in the gallery with Flack and his wife. He couldn't forget Rebecca's face when the judge had declared that for his crimes, Lessing would spend his life as a ward of the State of New York. No surprise-the D.A. had warned all the victims' families of this outcome-but fury and empty-eyed despair. From the corner of his eye, he had watched the tears stream down her frozen face as her jaw struggled to contain her impotent rage. Flack's arm had curled protectively around her, and his fingers had brushed gently at her tears.

Nor had he forgotten what she had said later, outside the courthouse in the fall sunshine. It's not fair.

She'd said it as Flack held her on a wooden bench not far from the stone steps, huddled against his body and shuddering with the force of suppressed sobs. Nor had he forgotten Flack in that moment, small and deflated and helpless in the face of reflected grief. It's not fair.

It was simplistic and childish and true, and he could not blame her for it. She wasn't the only one harboring the thought. She had just been the only one blunt enough to say it aloud. It was etched into the faces of the other families and friends of the dead who had no arms to console them. He'd had the same thought himself in the months and years since Claire had been stolen. It wasn't fair. It was hard and ugly, and the punishment seldom fit the crime. It hadn't that day, either, and that was why the D.A. hadn't dared to meet the Flacks' gazes as he scurried from the courtroom.
"It's not fair. No, it wasn't, and that was why he was hunched over his desk, poring over the rolls of the necropolis at Mount Pleasant with a magpie's eye, searching for the faintest glimmer of why or how. He was determined to preserve the Flacks' sorry justice for whatever it was worth, and if he found that any of Lessing's wardens had had a hand in his escape, he would go to the D.A with a demand to reconsider the means of his incarceration. He couldn't see him swing, but he could see him properly caged.

He had just pulled the roster of the dead towards himself when Stella strode into his office, folder in hand.

"Hey, Mac," she said. "Got those DNA results from the Tremonti case. Looks like the son is in the clear, but we haven't eliminated the brother yet." She stopped when she realized he wasn't looking at her. "Mac? A little courtesy would be nice."

He blinked and sat back in his chair. "Sorry, Stella. I was just-,

"Are you still working the Lessing case?" She had caught sight of what he was reading. "I thought you said there was probably nothing to it?"

He scrubbed his face with his hands and sighed. "I did, but-,

"You want to be sure," she finished for him, and plopped into the chair on the opposite side of his desk.

He nodded. "I owe it to Flack to be sure."

"Have you told him yet?"

"No. Right now, there's nothing to tell."

"I'm not sure you should even if there is," Stella said quietly. Mac blinked. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged, a helpless, inelegant gesture. "I don't know, Mac," she admitted. "He's been through a hell of a lot, and he's not the only one."

He wondered briefly who she meant. Maybe she was talking about herself and her fun-filled evening with Frankie Mala, or Danny, who was learning to live with a brother who was fading into shadow but refused to die. Maybe she was talking about him. He'd nearly been turned to dust right along with Flack, and maybe she suspected that he wasn't sleeping so well, was awakening from dreams of Stan Whitney to find Flack standing at the foot of the bed with his guts in his hands and dripping onto the carpet with a thick, mournful plip-plop. Maybe she meant all of them. Maybe none. He didn't ask.

"It's not fair."

"I'll be careful, Stella."

She offered him a tired smile. "I know." She rose with a grimace. She moved more slowly since Frankie had bruised her with his careless, cruel hands, and not for the first time, Mac thought Mala had escaped too lightly in death.

"I'm going to see what I can dig up on Mr. Tremonti's brother."
"Keep me posted."

Another smile, heartbreaking and beautiful for the weariness in it. "You know I will."

When she was gone and the glass door of his office had closed on the heavy clack of her heels, he picked up the roster from Mount Pleasant with the intention of stuffing it into his desk drawer.

And then he froze, mesmerized by the name he had glimpsed through an errant slip of page. He stared at it for a long time, and then, mouth dry and bitter, he picked up the phone.
Mac almost hoped it was Rebecca who opened the door when he knocked on it, but it was Flack, and he was unsurprised when his arrival was greeted with no enthusiasm. Flack stood in the doorway, forearm braced on the jamb, and stared at him with bland indifference.

"Your thirty messages not bein' returned wasn't enough of a hint? I'm off the clock today, Mac, and I'm keepin' it that way," he said by way of greeting.

"It's not about the job."

"Naw?" A truculent, feigned surprise. "Then to what do I owe the honor?"

Mac didn't answer, torn between irritation at Flack's rudeness and a vague, nettling embarrassment. Now that he was in Flack's hallway, standing in the hinterlands of his private life, the name he'd glimpsed on the cemetery roster no longer held such portent. For all he knew, the Flack buried there had been a relative salted to the earth before Don was even born, an aunt or a grandmother or a cousin. There was no guarantee that they were related at all, and if they were, it proved nothing.

"May I come in?" he asked diffidently.

Flack shifted in the doorway, and it was a measure of how badly things had deteriorated between them since Truby that he didn't back up to let him in right away. Instead, he straightened to his full height and studied him with half-lidded, speculative eyes. Finally, he retreated and nudged the door open with his fingertips.

Mac had set foot inside the Flack apartment only once, on the day he and Danny and Captain Gerrard had come to tell Rebecca that her husband had been injured in the line. She had told Danny that she couldn't feel the floor, and he had stood in the middle of the living room and watched her leave pieces of herself behind her as she lurched into the bedroom for her coat. He could still remember Danny, jumpy and frantic and wide-eyed with anguish, and Captain Gerrard, swallowing his worry and guilt with an audible click. He thought that if he wanted to, he could pinpoint the spot where his dusty, gritty soles had sunk into the carpet in a modern imitation of the pox mark upon the door.

"Keep your voice down," Flack said as Mac shut the door.

Mac opened his mouth to ask why and shut it again when it struck him that the apartment was completely silent. No TV, no radio, not even the crackle of the police scanner. Just the contented, belching hiss of the radiator. The shades were drawn and pinned shut, and the only light came from a battery-operated taplight on the kitchen counter. Darkness blanketed the apartment. It reminded him of a deathroom.

*Just like your father's room near the end. Your mother closed the curtains so she would not have to see what her husband had become in his last days. It was bad enough just to hear him, the glottal, rattling wheeze of lungs gone to mud and tar. When he died, none of those ringed around the bed to watch his passing made a sound, afraid that the slightest noise would pull him back from the precipice on which he teetered. It was only after, when the last, rattling breath had exited his wasted body and the hospice nurse had leaned over and calmly switched off the cardiac monitor, that your mother had begun to cry, a mournful, lost keen that had gradually built into hard, wracking wails.*
It is just like that. Except that no one has died here.

Maybe not in the strictest sense, no. But there was no denying that the Flack that was in front of him now was not the same one he had pulled from the smoldering wreckage of a building one Sunday morning. The Flack that had gone into the building with him had been exuberant and spry; the one that had come out was cautious, no longer young beneath the skin. The Flack before would gladly have bought him a round at Sullivan’s and talked of anything but the empty spaces and ragged seams of badly-healed wounds. The Flack now, when he spoke at all, spoke of nothing else.

That has nothing to do with that May morning and everything to do with an early afternoon in November when you accosted him on the street and implied that his hands were dirty with black-tar heroin. You knew it was bullshit, that he would sooner die than dishonor his badge, but you could not stop yourself, could not allow yourself the luxury of faith. You could not risk the accusation of playing favorites, and so you went after him hard, just like you did with Danny in the Minhas case. You had to bruise him to protect him.

He did not understand, of course, any more than Danny had when you took him off the promotion grid. You could see that in his eyes when you paraded Truby past his desk in bracelets. Hurt, confusion, and an ugly, raw betrayal. You had saved his life only to crush a precious kernel of innocence that had made him who he was. It was ugly and dirty and perverse, and it was hard to look at him when you left. You looked at the door ahead of you and told yourself that one day, he would understand. It was only when you were halfway out the door and up the stairs to central booking that you realized you sounded just like your father, and it was a jarring punch to the gut.

Maybe that was why you let Jesse Spencer go. Hurting Danny and Flack to save them was too much like the twisted logic of abusive parents who had broken their children's bones and burned their fingers on the stove to protect them from the evils of the world and drive the demons out. If you could protect Jesse, give him a chance to escape his vicious, bullying stepfather, then you could atone for all the fractures you had left on Flack and Danny, and for Aiden, who you had not just broken, but shattered and buried.

"Power failure?" he asked.

"No." Flack did not elaborate as he stalked into the kitchen. He stopped at a pot on the stove, and when he lifted the lid, Mac smelled the rich, salty aroma of simmering chicken broth. Flack picked up a wooden spoon and stirred. "Soup'll be ready in a minute, doll, and I want you to try to eat for me." He banged the spoon on the pot, set it on the counter, and replaced the lid.

An inarticulate grunt from the living room, and when Mac turned his head, he saw the indistinct hump of Rebecca huddled beneath a mound of blankets on the couch. Her unoccupied wheelchair was parked beside it, desolate and reminiscent of an open casket.

"She feeling all right?"

"She's fine." Flack had left the pot and was filling a glass with water from the sink. He opened the topmost cabinet and produced a bottle of Advil. He tapped two tablets into his palm, replaced the bottle, and closed the cabinet. Then he brushed past him into the living room, where he crouched beside the couch.

"You want some water, doll?" He put the glass to her lips before she could answer, and Mac watched her head bobble wearily on her neck as she struggled to take a drink. Flack offered her the tablets. "I brought you some Advil. If you want, I got some Vicodin left over from rehab."

He knew he should shut up, but the words were out before he could stop them. "Distribution of
prescription narcotics is a felony."

Flack spoke without looking at him. He was too busy slipping the pills into Rebecca's mouth. "I don't give a fuck," he said flatly. Then, more sharply and thick with condescension, "Whaddaya gonna do, Mac? Bust me? End my career 'cause I'm takin' care of my wife?" He brought the glass to her lips again with a soft, unintelligible murmur of encouragement.

Mac watched Rebecca struggle to swallow the water and said nothing. He was unaccustomed to this Flack, this tenderness. On the streets, Flack was a wise-cracking hardass not above rubbing a fleeing suspect's face in the pavement when he brought them down. He was a coarse, toughened kid groomed by police discipline and the school of hard knocks, but the hands that could engulf a crackhead's bicep in a vise grip were tracing delicate, fond patterns over fragile cheekbones and fussing over rumpled blankets. He bent and drew his lips over the bridge of her nose.

"The soup'll do you some good, and then you can go back to sleep," he murmured.

The Rebecca sprawled bonelessly on the couch was not the same Rebecca he'd seen in the Trinity Hospital corridors. That Rebecca had been exhausted and grief-ravaged but unbowed, possessed of a wild-eyed dignity over the long hours of waiting. This one was withered and used up, a papier-mache doll who had come apart at the joints. Her eyes were bruised and sunken, and her cheeks were shadowed hollows. She was even smaller than he remembered her, as though the effort of bearing up and being the good police officer's wife had compressed her.

It had happened to Claire, too, that compression, in the months before her death, and sometimes he tortured himself with the thought that in the moments before her death, Claire had realized what had happened and been glad of it, been glad that she wouldn't have to pretend that she didn't spend every moment that he was on the clock in a state of low-grade terror. Maybe her release from life hadn't come on a ball of burning jet fuel but through an act of explosive decompression.

_He's been through a lot this year, and he's not the only one._

_It's not fair._

"Is she all right?" Mac asked. "Maybe you should take her to the hospital."

Flack stiffened. "Maybe you should fuckin' mind your own damn business," he retorted dully. "What do you want, Mac?"

There was no delicate way to approach the matter, and so he squared his shoulders and said, "Did you know a Diana Elizabeth Flack?"

Flack, who had been in the process of rising from his bended knee, froze, one hand planted on the coffee table and the other on the rounded, squashed edge of the couch cushions. He turned his head, blinked lazily at him, and said in a cold, queerly conversational tone, "What the hell does she have to do with anything?"

Rebecca, who had begun to doze under Don's ministrations, snapped to full wakefulness at the sudden shift in her husband's demeanor, and her gaze fixed on him with bright, feverish intensity.

Mac fought the urge avert his eyes from either of them. Being an occasional bastard was part of his job description; being a coward was not. "Don, I just need to know who she is. The name came up over the course of an investigation."

Flack offered him a twisted, humorless smile. "Now I know you're fuckin' with me," he said quietly. "And you can get the fuck out of my apartment."
"Don, I'm not-,

"My sister's been dead since 1993, you fuckin' prick," he snarled. "I was sixteen years old when they put her in the ground, so don't you fuckin' dare come into my house with my sick wife and tell me that she came up. What is it, Mac? Is this your idea of a joke, or are you just pissed 'cause you couldn't pin me as the leader of a dirty-cop drug cartel?"

*Be careful, Mac,* Stella cautioned inside his head.

"Don," he said helplessly, momentarily unmanned by his fury. He was still processing the revelation that he had had a sister. In all the years he and Flack had worked together, it had never been mentioned.

*Of course not. It is a family secret, and you know how deeply those run—all the way down to the blood and bone. You know how it is because you do not tell anyone about where you come from, not even Stella, who has been your partner for twelve years. No one knows about the suicides and the disinheritance and the summers wearing spats and riding thoroughbreds, and you would like to keep it that way. And they certainly know nothing of the father you could not bring yourself to kill.*

"Get out of here, Mac. Right now." Flack's eyes blazed, and his hands had curled into fists.

"Three nights ago, Thomas Lessing escaped from his cell and was found wandering in front of the psychiatric hospital a few hours later. When we processed him, we found dirt from the cemetery where your sister was buried all over him."

Flack blinked at him in mute comprehension. It was Rebecca who understood first. Suddenly, the blankets that covered her were a tangled, thrashing mess as she struggled to sit up.

"That son of a bitch got loose?" she shrieked, and Mac heard the reedy intake of breath.

Flack's head snapped in her direction, and hands that had been taut and thrumming with the need to inflict hurt cupped her bony shoulders. "Take it easy, doll," he urged, and pressed her back into the pillows. "Ssshhh. Just…relax."

But she did not relax. She began to cry, a strengthless, gasping moan, and her hands came up to grip his shoulders. "I told you. I told you," she choked. "I told you that it wasn't…that, that he…"

A frantic gulp of air.

Flack circled her bony wrists with his hands and leaned forward until they were nose to nose. "Rebecca, stop. Stop, doll. Please." Soft, pleading. "It's gonna be all right. If they processed him, that means they got him back into his cage. He's not gonna hurt you. Or me. *Stop.*"

She ceased thrashing and stilled, and her small chest heaved with exertion. Flack dipped his lips to the quivering hollow of her throat.

"That's it. That's my girl," he crooned, and Mac was reminded of Saturdays spent in sweltering stables, soothing spooked horses with mindless cadence of the human voice. "Deep breaths."

He let go of her hands, and they came down to stroke his hair in a gesture of mutual comfort and reassurance. He closed his eyes. "Me an' Taylor here are gonna step outside, and when I come back, we're gonna have some dinner, all right? If you can get through the soup, there's butterscotch puddin' in it for you."

"Okay."
Me an Taylor. Irrefutable proof that the bridge between him and Flack was beyond repair. Any hope of that had disintegrated the instant he had stepped over the threshold as the harbinger of bad news for the second time in less than a year.

Flack kissed her and rose from his knees. "Mac." He brusquely jerked his head in the direction of the front door, and Mac knew better than to argue. He inclined his head in wordless goodbye to Rebecca and followed him into the hall.

He had gone three steps outside the apartment when Flack seized him by the lapels of his coat and pinned him against the wall opposite the door. His first instinct was to counteract the weight and throw him off, but he willed himself to relax. It would look bad if uniforms were called to break up a fistfight between senior detectives, and while pride told him he would come out on top in a physical altercation, he was acutely aware of the deceptive strength beneath that lean frame.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Mac?" Flack hissed, and shook him for emphasis. "Comin' here and scarin' the fuck outta my wife? Christ, I just got her settled down. Asshole." He gave him one last disgusted shake and retreated, nostrils flaring and fingers flexing aimlessly. "Fuck," he snarled bitterly, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I understand how-," Mac began patiently.

Flack rounded on him. "Do you? The dreams? The nightmares? Sittin' for hours on the couch without talkin' 'cause you don't know what to say? I can deal with what it does to me, Mac, 'cause that's the risk I signed up for when I took on the badge, but not her, Mac. Not fuckin' her."

"You askin' who's buried there 'cause you think I sprung Lessing just to kick his sorry ass and put him back?" A bitter laugh. "I got news for you. If I'da gotten my hands on him, I'da done a lot more than rough him up. I'da splattered his brains all over Central goddamn park. I don't give a shit about Lessing or what happens to him now. What I give a shit about is in there on the couch." He jabbed a finger in the direction of the front door.

"The job says I gotta work with you, and I'll fuckin' do my job, but do me a favor and forget my personal number. Forget how to get here. I'm through explainin' myself and apologizin' for nothin'. Just 'cause you saved my life doesn't mean you get to play God with it. Go away or go fuck yourself. I don't care which."

He turned and went back into the apartment. Mac expected him to slam the door in an audible exclamation point to the argument, but he didn't. He closed it with a final snick that was somehow worse.

*It feels good, doesn't it, Mac? The powertrip,* Claire said inside his head, and he could offer no reproof. He considered knocking again, offering reasons and apologies, but he suspected Flack had heard enough of both, and so, for once, he left well enough alone and walked away.

On the other side of the door, Flack let his throbbing forehead rest against the cool wood. His heart was still a fluttering knot in his throat, and he smothered the urge to punch the wall. The resultant bang would startled Rebecca, and he'd spend another hour talking her frazzled muscles out of another spastic seizure.

God, but the last one had been bad, the worst he'd ever seen. She'd screamed and cried and writhed on the floor for almost thirty minutes, and all he could do was cradle her and promise her it would be all right while her body contorted itself into angles and positions God never intended. She'd vomited on his shirt and pissed on his bare leg, and then she'd turned her face in shame. Her bowels had failed five minutes later, and he'd sat in the mess while her fingers clawed in his shirt
and tugged at the fabric in a frantic bid to escape the agony of a nervous system that had slipped its tether. He'd done the only thing he could for her, which was to cup the back of her head and press her nose into the hollow of his throat so she could smell him over the rancid stink of puke and piss and shit.

"It's okay, doll," he'd crooned as he'd rocked and the wet carpet had squelched underneath his ass. "Just breathe. I'm right here."

She hadn't tried to talk until it was over and the wracking spasms had subsided into the shuddering tremors of exhausted muscles in search of their shattered equilibrium. She'd apologized through chattering teeth, voice slurred with confusion and feverish shame.

"M sorry, babe," she'd croaked, and her fingers had twitched on the carpet, had telegraphed faint signals to her logy brain.

As if she had anything to apologize for. He would never accept her seizures-acceptance to him meant making peace, and that he would never do-but he had learned to cope with them. He had bought a steam vac to clean the carpet and kept extra laundry detergent in the linen closet, and when they came, he unplugged the phones, turned out the lights, and shut the world out so it could not watch her indignity. He had learned what she could eat afterward and what she could not, and he held her against him for reassurance while she slept.

She had never lied to him about the seizures. She had told him about them as soon as they had gotten serious. She had been quiet, embarrassed, but she had spared him no detail, and she'd had the balls to look him in the eye when she did it. He could tell it had pained her, though, because the knuckles of her interlaced fingers had been white and bloodless on her lap.

She had given him a graceful out if he had wanted it, a way to walk away from her and what was blossoming between them without looking like a complete asshole, but he hadn't wanted it, and he had told her so with a kiss over the cheap, laminate diner table. Her honesty in the face of possible rejection had been refreshing after years of pretty women who played mind games and left him with nothing to show for them but another layer of cynicism. He'd had no idea what he was in for then, but when she had laughed at his tie dipping into his lukewarm coffee, he hadn't cared.

He had seen a seizure for the first time a few weeks after she had pissed herself in the precinct bathroom. That time it had been a mild one, and she had talked him through it until the cramps locked her diaphragm, and then she had mouthed helplessly at him, eyes wide and bulging as her feet kicked arrhythmically on the wooden floor of her apartment. She had vomited and pissed then, too, and later, when he was on his hands and knees, mopping up the latter with a towel, she had cried.

He had seen the first monstrous one a week before the wedding. He should have seen it coming; his mother had been relentless for months, micromanaging and nitpicking, and Rebecca had been growing smaller and paler and more rounded in the shoulders. But he had been blinded by happiness and the prospect of a lifetime with his girl, and he hadn't noticed until she had slumped from her chair in a fluttering scatter of placecards for table settings at the reception and begun to writhe. The placecards had reminded him of snow as he had rocked and crooned her through the spasms, and he had thought ridiculously of Snow White, and of kissing her back to herself. He hadn't, of course, though there had been plenty of soothing kisses afterwards, and never mind the sour aftertaste of vomit beneath the minty coolness of toothpaste and mouthwash. He had kissed her to sleep instead, and in the morning, she had been sore and contrite but herself.

He should have seen it coming today, too, and if he were honest with himself, he had been waiting for it to happen since June, when he had snapped at her to leave him alone, had broken her heart
with his blindly-gnashing teeth. He had spent the next few days in a constant state of high alert, watching for the signs from the corners of his eyes. Unconscious grimaces, rubbing of biceps, forearms or calves, frequent rolling of her shoulders and neck in an effort to reduce tension and forestall the inevitable, distraction, and constant shifting in her seat. But nothing had come. Maybe she had willed them away like she willed her feet onto the floor every morning, and when June had faded into the sweltering heat of August and the sweet reconciliation of September, he had allowed himself to relax.

Then this morning, it had taken her twenty minutes longer than usual to get out of bed, and she had dropped her toothbrush twice. He should have known, should have chivvied her back to bed and given her a massage to relax coiling muscles, but he had been distracted by thoughts of the backlog of DD-5s waiting for him at the precinct. He had actually been considering a run to the precinct when she had simply screamed at him from the toilet to come right now. By the time he had gotten there, she had been facedown on the tile floor, blood from her nose bright and wet against the clean, white squares. It was the grace of God that she hadn't broken it. He'd just gotten her cleaned up and snugged into the couch when Mac had arrived.

Mac. Fucking prick. He'd respected him once upon a time, but he'd been stupid, then, convinced he and Mac were on the same thin, blue line. He'd thought the respect was mutual, but he'd been wrong. Mac respected three things—the flag, the Corps, and the badge—and he saw himself reflected in all of them. The people around him had no face but his own, and he expected the whole fucking world to toe his line.

He wished he could say the epiphany had come as a result of the bombing. The blast that had torn a hole in his gut had also done a thorough job of clearing out the bullshit, but the truth was, the bombing had nothing to do with it. Just the opposite, in fact. Mac had saved his life, used his own fingers to clamp his spurting abdominal artery. He'd given him the gift of time, returned him to his girl, and for that, he would've gladly followed him to the ends of the earth.

And then that morning in the middle of a busy street, and a harsh lesson learned.

You'd just finished up the prelim on a double-tap in the West End and were grabbin' coffee and a dog in front of the precinct. You didn't think anythin' of him comin' up to you. He was always strollin' up to ask how things were goin' on a case. You thought he was comin' up to ask if there were any new leads on the alley murder and were just about to tell him you were comin' up dry when he asked about an old drug bust.

You remembered that bust, all right. The damn heroin was a happy accident. You'd just gone in there to grab a guy wanted in a gang-style shoot-up of a bodega, but when you got there, your guest of honor was gone and his buddy was dead as shit, with a dirty needle stickin' outta his arm, and there were fifty kilos of black-tar in a box underneath the TV stand. At least, you thought it was fifty, because that's what your boys told you, and you trusted them with your life. You never bothered to double-check because they were as good as their word.

A drug bust that big was good for all your careers, so you and the boys went out that night for beers and shootin' the shit, and you distinctly recall congratulatin' Truby on the promotion that was probably comin' his way. Then you went home with beer and happiness on your mouth and fucked Rebecca hard and sloppy and earnest in your bed. A good end to an honest day's work.

You couldn't figure why he'd be sniffin' around that, of all things, and true to Mac fashion, he never bothered to tell you. He just demanded your memo book in the middle of the street like you were a common hood. And my, wasn't that a slap in the face? The same guy who'd saved your life and sworn up, down, and sideways to see you through the bombin' was tellin' you your word wasn't
good enough. He was practically accusin' you of ochestratin' a drug ring.

It was a fuckin' knife in your newly-mended gut. You wanted to grab him and shake him, get right up in his face and scream that in case he'd forgotten, you hadn't had time to mastermind any goddamn drug ring because two days after that bust, you had a date with Mac's fingers in a blown-to-shit apartment building. You were too busy fightin' to breathe and go on livin' to be coordinatin' drug buys. Even after that, you were too busy pukin' and cryin' through the pain of rehab to give two shits about devil dust in dimebags. The only things on your mind that summer were getting your job back and coaxin' your gunshy girl back into your arms after the oustandin' efforts of your vicious mouth to drive her out.

You stalled for time to gather your equilibrium and figure out what the hell was goin' on. You weren't about to let Mac screw a good cop's career just so he could preserve his precious lab's winning percentage and sweep another case file off his desk, and you couldn't believe that a guy you'd gone to war with would sell out to the money of the street. Truby'd had a gun pointed at the back of your head countless times when you were kickin' in doors and servin' warrants, and he could'a blown your brains out any time he wanted.

So you sniffed around for the evidence that'd clear your man and get Mac off his ass. Except that ain't what you found. Accordin' to the dirtbag the bust had put away, there were fifty-three kilos, not fifty, and he had no reason to lie. Those three kilos wouldn't make a damn bit of difference to his stretch. You tried to tell yourself that he was full of shit, jerkin' your chain to get back at the cops who'd put him away, but you'd see too many liars to believe that. Your little caged canary was singin' an honest song.

You couldn't get your head around it, how you could be so wrong. How you could manage to miss the monster right in front of you. You'd shared arrests and beers with him and never noticed a damn thing. Ever since you were a kid, you've prided yourself on your knack for readin' people and spottin' trouble. You used to be able to tell when Diana was about to start screamin' before the first whimper, and you could point out strange men to your old man when they started hangin' round the schoolyard. You saw the treasure hidden in Rebecca's sharp, funny angles, and you jumped on it and made her yours before anybody else could sweep her out from under you.

It drove you crazy, made you wonder if you weren't a sham, a subpar cop with shitty instincts who'd only gotten his shield because of who your father was and what he'd accomplished. The possibility burned in your gut like dirty shrapnel, and you couldn't fuckin' stand it, so you stopped by the liquor store on the way home with the memo book in your pocket like a pressing stone. You sat on the couch and drank yourself blind, and when Rebecca asked what was wrong, you wouldn't tell her. You couldn't admit to her that you were even stupider than she'd settled for. Instead, you fucked your hurt into her in short, angry thrusts. You're ashamed to say that you didn't remember fuckin' her when you woke up the next mornin' with a throbbin' head and a slalomin' gut. Not until she was slidin' outta bed to take a shower and you saw traces of yourself on her thigh. The blank space where that moment shoulda been scared the fuck outta you. You'd tied one on before, sure, but you'd never been so shit-faced that you couldn't remember havin' sex. The shower was already runnin' when you scrambled in to heave your guts in the toilet, and the steam helped clear your head.

You crept into the shower with her once the pukin' stopped, scared to death that you'd done somethin' you couldn't take back in those hours you couldn't remember. But there were no bruises or scratches, no signs that sex had turned to something darker, and she didn't flinch when you reached out with a tentative hand to touch her shoulder. In fact, she leaned into you and looked into the spray, water beadin' and splashin' on her nose and chin.
Well, hello, sweetie, she said softly, mindful of your achin' head. Boy, do you look like shit.

You'd a laughed if you hadn't been worried about pukin' in her upturned face. You just turned your own face into the hot spray and let it wash over you in tandem with a monumental relief. Whatever had passed between you the night before, she'd wanted it to happen. She gave you the lion's share of the hot water even though she'd been there first, and then she got out with the promise of making you her special hangover tea.

You couldn't help askin' her anyway. You had to be sure. You stood at the kitchen counter with half a mug of hangover tea in your belly and the dull crush of the headache already beginnin' to lift. The tea tasted of mint and ginger, and between sips, she rolled up and drizzled honey into your mug. The steam warmed your nose and cleared your sinuses.

Hey, doll? Diffident. How did you ask your girl if your love had hurt her? Was everythin' okay last night? When we-did I-was it okay for you?

She blinked at you over the rim of her own mug. She took a thoughtful, measured sip and cupped it in both hands before she answered. It wasn't your best performance, but then again, you were plowed. At least you got it in the right hole, and besides, you looked like you needed it.

You had needed it. You knew that even if you couldn't remember anything else. You swallowed the last of your tea and set your empty mug in the sink. 'M sorry, you said without knowin' why.

She slowly turned the mug in her hands and gazed at you in fond consternation. Nothing to apologize for, babe. Nobody bats a thousand. Another slow, wobbly turn of the cup. You want to talk about it?

You shook your head, and she let it go with a kiss and a cup of coffee. She's always been good about lettin' you be. You suspect it's 'cause she's spent so much of her life with her secrets and her body exposed to anyone who wanted a look. Anyway, by the time you left the apartment half an hour later, the tea'd done the trick and the hammerspike of too much Beam was gone. You never did tell her why you'd come home that night with the devil in your belly, but three days after your blackout date, you made up for your lackluster performance by takin' it soft and slow and easy, lettin' her guide your lips and hands to where they'd do the most good. You worked until she cried uncle, and you made sure you were stone sober for all of it.

The memory of her was still on your mouth when Mac marched into the precinct like some goddamned holy crusader. You were shootin' the shit with Scagnetti over the Rangers game when you caught sight of him over Scagnetti's shoulder. You knew what he wanted, and so did Scagnetti, judgin' by the way he sidled off like he'd loaded his pants. Everybody knew. Gossip circulates like air around the stationhouse, and they were all watchin', waitin' to see which side you were gonna take: the streets or the lab suits who took all the fuckin' credit for your grunt work.

You knew they were watchin', and you knew there was only one choice you could make. Like it or not, Truby was dirty; all the evidence said he'd pissed on the badge you'd almost died for. He was a piece of shit, and you had to bring him down, but that didn't make it any easier. Mac only saw the case in front of him, but all you could think of was all the cases behind you, all the perps that were gonna be sprung because of this. Murderers and cop-killers, rapists and child molesters. You kept seein' the wide, frightened eyes of a seven-year-old girl who'd once asked you to promise her that the man who'd raped her would never get her again. You promised her, and she believed you because you were the nice, strong policeman who'd carried her out of the closet into which she'd been stuffed. That had been one of Truby's collars, and you knew it'd been clean, just like you knew it wouldn't matter. Every pile of puke Truby'd ever flushed into the New York penal system was gonna come spillin' outta the sewer again. Your only hope was that that particular asshole lost
interest in little girls once they developed breasts. Or maybe, God willin’, some enterprisin’ con had hacked off his dick with a homemade shiv.

Mac was such a smug fuckin’ bastard when he took your memo book, gave you some arrogant, dick-beatin’ lecture about legacies and sacrifice and respectin’ the badge. As if you needed a fuckin’ primer on that subject. You'd been rocked to sleep under the shadow of the shield, and it was second only to the Bible in terms of household reverence. You'd fuckin' teethed on your old man's badge wallet, and there Mac stood, big as Billy-be-frigged, with the nerve, the fuckin’ gall to lecture you on what it meant to be a cop.

He was even worse when he came back two days later with a pair of bracelets for Truby and paraded him past your desk like it was a morality play for your benefit. You were so disgusted that you couldn't even look at him. You were afraid that if you did, you'd punch him square in his swannin’, superior face. Fuckin' asshole. You supposed that his pageantry was his way of showin' that he didn't play favorites, but it was also careless in that it left no doubt who'd delivered the smokin' gun. If Truby ever got off on a technicality, he'd know who to blame. And he knew about Rebecca. All your boys did. Hell, everybody in the stationhouse did.

Surrenderin’ your memo book might’ve been the only decision you coulda made, but that didn’t make it all right with the rest of the boys. A lot of them labeled you a lousy snitch, more dickless suit than cop. There were whispers in the locker rooms and the showers, and even Scagnetti, who you'd gotten along with since Adam, wasn't so hot to be seen with you anymore. The invitations to grab a beer after shift dried up, and nobody wanted your money for the hockey and baseball bettin' pools. A few guys even wondered what your old man would say if he knew his only boy was attached to Mac Taylor's dick.

You pretended not to give a shit, swaggered through your shifts with teeth and balls out, but it hurt. These were guys you'd run with since you were twenty-one, and before that, you'd been a sticky-faced kid peekin’ over the sides of bullpen desks. They should've known you were no snitch, and if they couldn't figure that out, they shoulda at least understood that your father raised no rats or pussies.

They might've blackballed you, but most of them still treated Rebecca with respect on the rare occasion she turned up at the stationhouse. It's understood in cop circles that bein' a cop's wife takes just as big as set of balls as takin' on a badge. Maybe more, since they're required to make all of the same sacrifices without benefit of the same reverence. They cook the dinners and bear the children and change the dirty diapers while their husbands are off playin' hero, and they wear the shadow of death beside their weddin' rings.

So, Rebecca was spared. Scagnetti might not have been speakin' to you, but he always gave his pants a respectful hitch whenever she rolled by, and Fletcher, the fat desk sergeant who perked up for no one, includin' the fuckin' mayor, doffed his hat, and when some snot-nosed rookie bumped her chair and asked her how it felt to blow a limp-dick, ass-kissin' snitch, O'Bannion, another rookie whose sister had spina bifida, attempted to part his hair with his police-issue nightstick. Rebecca stayed away from the precinct after that to spare you further trouble. She asked you what the hell was goin’ on when you got home that night, and she deserved an answer, but you could only grant that you did what you had to do. And like that mornin’ in the kitchen when you asked if love had wounded her, she let it go.

She still doesn't know what happened. She just knows that the landscape has shifted, and that Mac is no longer a part of your pantheon of good people. She’s followed your lead on him step for step, and you're grateful for her loyalty because these days, you suspect it's the only kind you got left.
Now Mac comes in here, wavin' your greatest failure in your face, expectin' you to let him see the secret face you've worn beneath your skin for all these years. Your baby sister is your business, and you've never told anyone about her, not even Danny, and the poky little bastard his been sniffin' around the Flack Family Mysteries for years. He probably thinks you grew up with the goddamn Brady Bunch. Little does he know that your family is just as fucked up as his ever was, startin' with you.

He lurched into the kitchen on stiff legs, and his hands were shaking so badly that he almost dropped the cup he had picked up for Rebecca's soup. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, flexed and closed his trembling fingers, and willed himself to relax.

"Rebecca?" he called as he ladled the soup into the ceramic mug.

"Yeah?" Slurred and muzzy.

He went into the living room, and after a few minutes of careful rearrangement, he'd settled behind her on the couch. He gently tugged until her head was just below his chin, and then he picked up the mug.

"C'mere, doll. Eat a little of this for me."

"'M tired," she protested feebly, and tried to turn onto his chest.

"I know, but c'mon. It'll warm you up, and 'sides, I've been Martha Stewart over it all day."

That earned him a weak chuckle, and she raised her head. His heart ached as he watched the drunken wobble of her neck and the desperate, spasmodic working of her throat as she took sloppy, gulping sips. After a few swallows, she let her head flop onto his chest, and he used the edge of a blanket to wipe excess soup from her chin.

"Good," she murmured sleepily.

"Told you." He kissed the top of her head. "You warm enough?" He fussed with the blankets, tucked them more firmly around her.

"Mmm. I am now." She curled into him. "You stay with me?"

"As long as you want me to."

"Forever," she said, and raised her head for another sip.

"Absolutely."

"Don' go away. Don' leave me. Don' wanna hear the music in my head. Bagpipes."

She fell asleep on his chest, and it occurred him as he watched her breathe that she was the only thing he truly understood anymore. What she wanted from him was brutal in its simplicity. She wanted him to promise her that he would never die in the line, never leave her alone in the world. She wanted him to cheat death. It was ridiculous and impossible and beautiful. He couldn't give it to her, but it meant the world to him that she thought he could, that his word would be good enough to hold back the darkness. He buried his face in her hair and prayed the heaving of his chest wouldn't wake her.
Seamus Finnegan watched his old friend drink for the second time in a week. It was funny how life worked. After the war, he'd tried to contact her numerous times, but the owls had gone unanswered, and he'd eventually decided to stop wasting the ink and parchment and the effort it took to think of her. There had been too many other things that had needed his attention, like the burial of the dead and the dressing of wounds. He hadn't consciously thought of her in years, and then six nights ago, he'd come into a pub he'd frequented for years and found her slouched at this same table. All these years, and she was still a creature of habit.

She'd looked the same as he remembered her, hunched and wan and angular as a changeling in her chair. Her hair was still sunfire, and her face was still inscrutable as black ice. The same quiet voice and the same stiff-necked resolve. The chair was different, though, a lighter, manual model instead of the hulking, mechanical jalopy that had once terrorized the corridors and toes of Hogwarts. He wondered now what had happened to the growling tank that had roared over the muddy castle greensward and splashed mud and blood onto the hems of his robes.

There were other changes, too. Her robes were red, not the scarlet of Gryffindor, but the ominous promise of spilled blood. She looked, the more he considered it, like Little Red Riding Hood from the Muggle fairy tale, small and frail inside her too-big balaclava.

*My, Grandmother, what big teeth you have,* he thought for no reason, and laughed uneasily.

She offered him a humorless, lupine smile over the rim of her goblet, and saliva and wine glistened on her teeth. Her canine was queerly elongated by the wavering torchlight, and in the gloom, wine became blood. The laughter died abruptly.

There were lines etched into the corners of her eyes and mouth, the marks of age and too few smiles. Her palsied fingers bore two rings, one on each hand. One might have been an engagement ring, but the other was unmistakably a wedding ring, and the diamonds set into its golden circumference winked. When he'd asked about the man who had given it to her, she'd smiled and said only that he was a Muggle. Polite enough, but that had been serrated glass beneath her silk tongue, and he had known better than to pursue the topic.

*The lines might be new to her face, but you sensed them beneath her skin long before they made their appearance on her face,* pointed out a jolly, practical voice that bore a disconcerting resemblance to Neville Longbottom. *We all did. She was a spirit born into darkness and wary of the light. Even before the War jaded the rest of us, cured our hearts to old leather inside our chests, she was hard as obsidian and just as black beneath her pale skin. I used to joke that she was a golem made of stone, but you told me she was a changeling. I used to think you were having a go at me, thick, fat, slow Neville Longbottom, whose parents' brains had gone to pudding in St. Mungo's, and you let me believe it because it was saner than the creeping suspicion that it was the truth.*

She was hard and sharp, a miracle of will and ossified bile, all jagged edges, warped angles, and gnashing teeth. It's a wonder she's not cut herself to ribbons from the inside out. Strictly speaking if I may, it's a bloody wonder there aren't more grooves around her mouth and deeper crows' feet sunk into the corners of her eyes. Nothing so hard and sharp should've survived as long or fared as well. She should be dead or wizened beyond her age, corroded by the rage and bitterness that radiates from her like heat.

*Then again, how many times could've we said that about her over the years? A pair of right*
Trelawneys we'd've turned out to be if we'd predicted her death aloud. She's damned charmed. She should've died in infancy, but tenacity was her birthright, and she held on long enough to dance with that old toad, Dolores Umbridge. Not just dance, but sodding win. She should never have made it that far because before Harry went down for his long winter’s nap, she plunged off a landing of the Hogwarts staircase into the fickle embrace of thin air. She ought to have shattered her ceramic skull on the unyielding stone, but Severus Snape, a git who would've gladly tapdanced on our bones while sipping tea, saved her life. It was an odd serendipity that she did the same for him later in the term.

In sixth year, she danced with Lucius Malfoy and came away with a draw, which is more than most wizards three times her age ever got. She received tutelage from Snape in defensive spell-casting and dueling and endured Curses and hexes that most of us wouldn’t taste for another year. The lessons were as brutal as the mind that had planned them, and on those nights, she lurched into the Common Room, face white with pain and tears damp on her bony cheeks. Often, there was blood, sticky and coppery and sweet, on the sleeves and hem of her robes where the miserable serpent had struck too deeply.

We pleaded with her to stop. Even Ron, who normally paid her as much mind as a talking Common Room armchair, tried to talk sense into her. But she wouldn't have it. She’d just shake her head and smile, and her exhausted eyes would glitter with a remote madness.

Can’t, she’d say implacably, and pull the blood-dampened robes from her skin. It's a matter of survival. They won't have mercy on my weakness. I have to be ready. If you pressed the matter, she’d just gaze at you with pitying eyes and murmur, I have to, Seamus. The outside to match the inside. You thought it was the babble of lunacy, but you learned what she meant later, and she was right. The outside to match the inside. Equilibrium. Everyone was looking for it, and they took it wherever they could. Fucking and doping and drinking. Before the War, you wondered why so many wizards lost themselves in ale and mead and Firewhiskey and were disgusted by the tottering derelicts who lurched from one pub to another when the brewmaster cut them off, but not anymore. You understand now what they were looking for in the bottoms of their mugs and steins. Equilibrium and all those cherished things life had torn from them-friends, lovers, and kin. They were searching for them, and if they couldn't be found, then at least the liquor would fill the empty spaces. For a little while, anyway.

You had your share of empty spaces after the war. Lee Jordan was dead, turned into a living candlewick by Bellatrix Lestrange. Your girlfriend lost her mind and joined the Longbottoms in St. Mungo's, and your mum disappeared a year before the final battle. Her shoes, handbag, and wedding band were all she left behind and all that were ever found. She had vanished from the face of the earth, and with so many lost, dispossessed souls, no one looked very hard. Her missing person’s report joined thousands of others at the Aurory and gathered dust, and if you mention her name to the other Aurors, none recognizes it.

You joined the Aurors after the War. A lot of us did in the mistaken belief that we would find answers and solace there, or at least a measure of vengeance. But all you found were more ghosts, disillusioned people sifting through the ashes and finding only dust. Most of them drank too much, either to forget who they had been or to deny who they had become. Tonks stayed on after the War, but in truth, she had gone on the day Remus Lupin died. After Voldemort, the fear and loathing of werewolves had redoubled in intensity, and the prevailing public sentiment had been that the only good werewolf was a dead one, and never mind which side they’d stood on when the battle lines had been drawn.
So, they came for him one drunken night, an angry mob fueled by firewhiskey. It was savage, more savage than anything gentle Remus had ever done in his life. He was almost unrecognizable when you arrived on the moor where they'd left him. It was the first time since the war that you cried, hard and ugly and furious, tears of rage and disgust with the whole human race. Remus Lupin was dead, and truly miserable bastards like Fenrir Greyback went on living and pleading ignorance of their crimes by dint of the Imperius Curse.

Despite the fact that Remus had been a loyal member of the Order or maybe because of it, the Ministry swept his murder under the rug after a perfunctory investigation in which no one was ever charged. You and a few other Aurors spent your free time running down scant leads as a favor to Tonks, but memories had been clouded by drink and guilt, and nothing ever came of it. Lupin was buried in a simple grave, and the only reason he avoided consignment to a potter's field was because Harry paid for the funeral. Tonks, Harry, and a handful of former DA members were the only attendees. A week after he died, it was as if he had never been.

You thought of something Rebecca had told you once, on one of the rare occasions she let the death mask slip. You were side by side in the trench, smelling each other's stale sweat and trying to distinguish enemies from allies and swirling shadows from a clandestine flap of robe. There was mud in your mouth that tasted faintly of blood, or maybe it was blood. One tasted like the other by then. You were staring at the lifeless, clouded eyes of a nameless fourth-year in Ravenclaw robes.

Bloody butchers, you said, and spat into the dirt. You meant the Death Eaters, of course, the masked horde that had swarmed out of the Forbidden Forest one September dawn and made children and pupils into soldiers.

Rebecca lay awkwardly in the trench, a cobra with a broken back, and when she turned her head to look at you, a trick of the moonlight made it seem as if she had no eyes, just black, bottomless pits.

Which ones? she asked laconically. We'd all be butchers if we could. We're all werewolves underneath the skin.

Not me, you swore, and she only laughed and watched the rats scurry over the corpses and search for the choicest bits with their gleaming red and silver eyes. The Devil's fireflies, your nana had called them.

You thought she was full of shite back then, but just like you had with equilibrium, you realized that she was right again. Necessary brutality and unpardonable atrocity were separated by the thinnest of lines, and the slightest breeze could carry you from one side to the other. Sometimes, the only difference is a game of semantics, but mostly, there isn't a difference at all.

The Aurory is rife with corruption, and each squad is only as clean as its most black-handed member. You've seen those sworn to uphold the law pervert it to their own ends—bribery, theft, graft, and blackmail—and what's worse, you've never spoken a word against it for fear that the man who calls you mate today will snap your neck tomorrow. It's easier to feign blindness, and besides, you're tired of fighting everyone else's battles. Sometimes you wonder how Harry Potter never went barking mad under the stress of being the whole world's fucking savior when all he had to show for it was a cheap medal and a solitary existence lived beneath the scryglass of public scrutiny.

We're all werewolves underneath the skin, she said, and truer words were never spoken. You suspect that the people who smashed Remus Lupin's bones thought they were smashing a mirror, a secret, shameful part of themselves they didn't want to see reflected in the glass. Maybe by killing him, they silenced the wolf that crouched within their hearts.
She was right about so many things she oughtn't to have known so early and so well. She was older than her years, ancient as the stooped and shuffling crones that peddled their wares in Knockturn Alley or rested their aching feet in The Hog's Head. Changeling, you thought, and were ashamed of yourself, but then the light would catch her eyes, and you'd swear they danced with fairy fire.

And there was the death mask. It wasn't a literal mask of wood, bone, or ivory, but it was as real as the skin on her face. It was the face beneath, her true face. She could hide it from most of the pupils and teachers, but not from us, and not from Snape, who did his best to hone and sculpt it, make it the face she wore all the time. We spent too much time with her, too many hours in both darkness and light, and once you knew what to look for, you could never unsee it.

She didn't like the death mask. She was ashamed of it. She wanted to be as ignorantly happy as we were, and she tried. You still remember how happy she was that day in Care of Magical Creatures, when the Borgergups slipped the paddock and led you on a merry steeplechase across the grounds. She was laughing, and the laughter brightened her face and showed you the fifteen-year-old girl she could have been in kinder circumstances. Her hair was the sunburst tail of a falling star, and as she jounced and flew over the uneven ground, shrieking her mindless joy to the skies, she was the child of Helios. She was at your heels throughout the chase, and in that moment, you knew that she would've called you brother if you'd asked her to. She would have died for you, for any of the giggling, bounding students wheeling over the castle green, because she felt like one of you.

She still would've died for either of us, even at the end, when the pitiless, fleshless death mask had become permanently affixed to her face, but the others chipped away at that sense of solidarity until it sundered. Malfoy was the worst, the berk, but the Children of Light were hardly blameless. Something happened in the summer before sixth year, and it soured the last of the hopeful sweetness in her bones. When she came back, the mask had overwhelmed her completely, and the twins, with whom she'd once been close, grew distant. You never knew what they had done, but the furtive, insolent guilt in their eyes whenever they looked at her told you they'd done something. You knew asking them would be a waste of time, and so you asked her.

Their masks slipped, was all she said, and she went back to her Arithmancy homework with grim determination.

She might've hated the mask, and you might've feared it, but there was no denying that it allowed her to thrive during the hell that was seventh year. She'd been cut off from the light so completely by the time the darkness fell in earnest that there was no need for adjustment, no moment of stuporous incomprehension. She carried on as she always had because for her, nothing had changed. It was life as usual magnified a thousand-fold. While everyone about her was losing their heads and parroting the latest dire rumors and Ministry propaganda with shrill, useless hysteria, she was simply waiting, protected by the impenetrable shell she'd spent a lifetime building from the hard scar tissue of disappointment.

The War was her debutante ball, and everything that you hated about her death mask was what kept you sane when the hexes started flying and the bodies started falling. She was as afraid as anyone else, and she screamed to raise the dead when the explosions were too close, but she never gave in to the panic, not like Colin Creevey, who scrambled blindly from the trench and got his arm blown off before you or Rebecca could pull him back. He bled to death before the Healer arrived with the tourniquet and the Blood-Replenishing Draught.

You couldn't stop staring: Colin's wide, glassy eyes were your first intimate acquaintance with death, and you felt sick and guilty for being alive when he wasn't, as if you'd somehow stolen his life by mere proximity. You turned away and sicken into the mud, but Rebecca never did. She
stared at him, spastic fingers still clamped around his leg where'd she'd tried to reel him in, and on her face wasn't horror or queasy shock, but sad resignation. She cried but didn't bawl, and the next morning when you were still wrangling with the reality of loss, she was sympathetic but dry-eyed. Colin was beyond her help then, and she had already begun to forget him.

She was always like that, no matter who fell. Out of life, out of mind. All that counted was survival, that next breath of dirty, seared air. Her stoicism disgusted you in the beginning. She was your friend, and you would've died for her without hesitation, but you couldn't be assured of the same if the roles were reversed. She might very well have crawled over your cooling corpse and never looked back, never stopped to mourn your passing. It was callous and hateful and inhuman, and you were more convinced than ever that she was a changeling.

By the end of the War, you understood. You didn't like it, mind, but you understood. Because you had become just as hardened. Sights that had torn your heart out and etched themselves into your memory with clawing fingers when the blood was fresh upon the ground registered but dimly or not at all. It wasn't because you no longer cared, but because you had neither horror nor tears to spare, and the only thing worth saving was your life. The lofty ideals for which you had been fighting had long since been trampled into the blood and dust, and no one could find them anymore.

It's been nine years since you've seen the death mask or Rebecca Stanhope, but both were unforgettable and returned now and then to your dreams. You called for her in the night sometimes, and more than one girlfriend left your bed and flat in strop because they thought she was a remembered lover. She wasn't; she was the unapologetic specter of uncomfortable truth, and sometimes, you wished she was there to force the world to grudging honesty and order again.

The death mask was still on her face, as prominent as ever, and yet, her other face, the face of the girl she might have been, was there, too, peeking out from the sharp lines and sunken hollows. Married life with her Yank Muggle had clearly taught her something of kindness and joy. There were laugh lines and smiles creases to go with the frown lines and crows' feet, and her lips were fuller and pinker than before, tinged with the memory of kisses.

Tonight, though, the death mask held sway. She was more hunched than usual, and her eyes were bruised and puffy from lack of sleep. She looked worse than she had earlier in the week, and he wondered if his changeling was hounded by fetches in the night.

"You look like shite," he commented brightly.

Gravelly laughter that spoke of a throat raw from screaming or too little talking. "Rough night. You remember those fits I used to have?"

He did, indeed. She had tried to keep them secret, but privacy was a scarce commodity in boarding schools, even one so large as Hogwarts, and screams had a perverse way of carrying in the Common Room and dormitories. He had witnessed two of the monstrous episodes, frozen in the doorway of the girls' dormitory in his nightshirt while she had writhed and contorted in the grip of unseen demons, and as ridiculous and superstitious as it was, he had crossed himself to ward off the restless bogeys that had plagued her there on the thick, red carpet. The episodes had been more than sufficient to satisfy any morbid curiosity he might have entertained about the inner workings of her life, and his revulsion and horror at the unsanitized truth of it had shamed him. It had been neither fair nor kind, and he'd slunk back to the boys' dormitory and his curtained bed and feigned interest in a footie magazine his mum had owled from home until he was too tired to think. He had fallen asleep and dreamed of seizing footie players, and when Lee Jordan had shaken him awake, he had suffered a moment of blind panic, sure that the demons that had tortured her had found their
way into his limbs.

He pushed the thought away. "The doctors can't do anything?"

She flapped her hand in dismissal and took a sip of wine. "Besides take my money? They've suggested anti-spasmodics and muscle relaxants, but they don't do anything but make me dribble on myself and sleep. It's bad form for a professor to be drooling atop their Powerpoint presentation, and my husband likes it when I use my mouth for more than chewing and sucking." She stopped, abashed. "Sorry. I forget that bluntness isn't always a virtue."

"No harm done," he said, and hid his discomfiture in a prolonged sip of mead.

"Anyway," she went on, "they're rare. One or two a year, maybe fewer. Triggered by stress, usually."

"Having a bad time of it, then?"

He had meant it as an innocent query, but her expression hardened, and her reply was a guarded, "You could say that."

He struggled for something to say and couldn't find it. He was bewildered. The ground had suddenly shifted beneath his feet. It was as though he had stepped from solid earth onto the boggy, sucking soil of a dead marsh. It was, to be fair, hardly a new sensation. Everyone had pockets of unhallowed ground in the hard, flinty soil of their heart, soft, spongy places where secrets were buried and wounds had been hastily papered over. He had apparently found hers, and he was old enough to know there was no graceful exit.

You've got one, too, a sucking hole in your heart that drags down unsuspecting travelers and ensures that their acquaintance with you is short and bitter. You've guarded it for years, and one strike from you is enough to dissuade the hardiest souls from poking around on that patch of earth. Even Rebecca and Lee Jordan learned to tread carefully on it, and they were granted more leeway than anyone else.

It's your mother, who disappeared one day in sixth year and left behind only her shoes, purse, and wedding band, that last a tantalizing promise, like a twopence from a leprechaun's pot of gold. Fool's gold. You knew it for what it was the instant that you fished it from the kitchen rubbish pile where your Dad had dropped it in a fit of despair. It was too light in your palm to be true gold, tin or copper beaten into shape and painted the proper color.

Your da had thrown it on the rubbish pile in a drunken rage a few weeks after she disappeared, sure that she had simply got tired of his Muggle affections and fled back to her own kind. Why not? She had hidden her bedeviled witchery from him until after the wedding, and by then, of course, it had been too late. Good Catholics did not get divorced, and there was nothing for it but to yoke himself to her damnation.

He asked you to come with him, back to the simplicity of the Muggle world, but you wouldn't. Your mum was in the magical world, and besides, your addiction to magic was too strong.

The Devil take you, then. You always were more of your mother than me, he said, but his eyes were lost and dying. He returned to the Muggle world and his milk delivery route, and the last you heard, he was tearing down the pubs in Cork and pickling his liver with cheap lager. You're no son of his.

You put your mum's ring in your pocket and carried it with you for all these years, hoping to return
it someday. Your da thinks she ran away, but not you. She would never have left the flat without her handbag and shoes, and if she were leaving forever, she never would have gone without her little shadow. That's what she called you. It started when you were a wee bloke toddling after her hems, and it stuck, even into the years when you wished it would disappear. You were still her little shadow at fifteen, and you hated it. Now at twenty-six, you'd gladly die to hear her call you that just once more time.

For a while, you were optimistic. You thought that she had just got lost in the blind, flailing terror of A Death Eater raid and suffered a blow to the head or caught the bad end of a Memory Charm. You put notices in The Daily Prophet and scoured the wards of St. Mungo's for amnesiacs pulled from the streets by Aurors or well-meaning passersby. You even asked me if I had seen her, as though she and my parents were having a mad hatters' tea party on the Closed Ward. But she was there, and she wasn't at any of the international hospitals you checked, either, and not even Irish optimism lasts forever. Two years after she went missing, you stopped searching for her among the living and turned instead to the legions of the dead.

You visited crypts and Ministry ossuaries and inspected the bones of the dead in search of familiar traits, like her crooked tooth or the pinkie finger that was permanently kinked by a botched self-healing when she was thirteen. She was never there, thank God and curse the saints, and the ring stayed in your pocket. Still, every time you're called to a body, you brace yourself for the possibility that it might be her, that she had wandered from your life and created a new one in which her little shadow played no part.

You thought she was an Inferi once. An informant had tipped the Aurory to an enclave of hardcore Death Eaters holed up in Derbyshire, and when your squad got to the rundown cottage that looked like Hagrid's hut gone to seed, you found half a dozen Death Eaters and ten Inferi, including Rabastan Lestrange, and my, wasn't he a find? The rest were women, and it didn't take a genius to know what they were being used for. The realization was repulsive, and your younger members sicked into the hedgerows outside when the handbills and Body Binds were secured. Your own gut was a tight, cramping knot of loathing.

One of the women looked so much like your mum that all the air went out of you when you saw her huddled in the corner on a nest of filthy blankets. You floundered to her on boneless legs, the word mam on your lips in a pitiful bleat. You dropped to your knees and lifted her lips to see her teeth and tugged her cold, dirty-clawed hand to the light, your heart lodged in your throat. hard and cutting as ice.

No kink.

You stumbled outside and vomited into the hedgerow, but not for the same reason as the pimple-faced bloke next to you. That was the day you swore to give up the search and get on with your life. There was no point in chasing ghosts. But you have never given it up, not really. There is still that surreptitious tug at the base of your brain, that foolish grain of Gryffindor hope that refuses to die. You feel it every time you're called to a murder. The ring is still in your pocket, a perfect, golden circle that mirrors the hole in your heart.

After a long silence broken only by the indelicate slurp of morose drinking, Rebecca said, "How's the case going?"

"The case" in question was the ongoing investigation into the odd doings at the Shrieking Shack. The ruin had been silent for years, but last week, villagers had come to the Aurory with claims that the ghosts who had once lived there had returned. Shrieks and moans and wailing words had been reported, and the more fanciful duffers swore with their hats over their hearts that they had seen
eerie, green light pouring from the numberless cracks and crevices. And everyone knew that green was the color of death.

The problem was that none of these witness statements could be corroborated because no one wanted to go near the rattling old pile. Common sense said that the noises that had once emanated from the Shack were the product of the wind in the eaves and the loose boards that comprised the walls and floors, but common sense held no sway in the face of deeply-rooted superstitions, and no one wanted to risk stumbling onto an improbable truth in the dark and must of those forgotten rooms.

The Ministry, taxed to the breaking point with the task of ferreting out rogue Death Eaters and their sympathizers, was reluctant to waste the time and manpower on what was likely a wild goose chase. They had told him so when he had petitioned to open a formal enquiry into the matter, and though they had gracially invited him to pursue the incidents on his own time, there would be no help from them, and their purse strings were most firmly and decidedly shut. More precious than ruddy goblins, the Ministry.

"A bloody lot of nothing," he answered bitterly. "Don't suppose you know anything about it?"

She laughed, a harsh fractured bark. "Should I? Asking after cases has become a habit of mine, I'm afraid. Comes with my love's territory."

"What about you? What brings you here again after all these years?"

Her smile faded, and there was a quicksilver glimmer in her eyes that made his mouth go dry. She turned her goblet between her flattened palms. "Exorcising ghosts and washing away sins, I suppose."

"Which ones?" He had meant it to be glib, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized how very serious they were.

When she looked at him, he saw the death mask just beneath her smudged, translucent skin, so clearly delineated that his skin crawled.

_We'd all be butchers if we could. We're all werewolves underneath the skin_, he thought.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked quietly. "Because I think I might tell you if you asked."

"No," he said finally. "Not tonight." He drained his mug in a single convulsive gulp.
Night Sounds

Flack lay on his side in bed and listened to the furtive rustling coming from the closet. Rebecca had gotten up as quietly as she could, but he'd slept lightly even before the bombing, and he'd felt the loss of her even before he'd come to full wakefulness. It was an absence of her against his skin, a lightness in his bones that spoke unequivocally of parting.

A clandestine, clattering twang of shifting hanger, and then silence. Even with his back to her, he knew that she was waiting to see if the noise had given her away. He saw her in his mind's eye, crouched in front of the closet like Gollum before the river, skin pale and too bright and her blonde hair turned to silver in the moonlight. Small and shrunken and vaguely inhuman in the darkness of the room. He lay absolutely still, eyes open the merest fraction, and wondered what she was doing, what she was looking for.

After a moment, the rustling resumed, and he stretched an arm beneath the covers until his fingers grazed her side of the bed. Still warm, which meant she hadn't been up long. Ten minutes, maybe. The warmth left by her body faded even as he touched it. From behind him came the conspiratorial, slithering hiss of fabric. She was pulling down clothes.

His back stiffened, but he resisted the urge to roll over. He curled his fingers in the bedsheets and counted breaths and heartbeats. The latter he counted not from the pulsepoint at his throat, but in the one God had furrowed into his gut with a careless, vengeful finger. One, two, three. They fluttered gently against his skin, and though he knew it was a trick of his hypersensitive mind, he imagined he felt the rush of blood as it surged through his surgically-repaired artery with every heartbeat.

Each one was a miracle, the work of a surgeon's nimble hands and a Divine robber baron who had stolen time for him in an act of mercy. Dr. Singh had told him so the day after he'd emerged from his deathless, lightless dreams to see Rebecca holding vigil over him with the tear-stained fragility of a fallen angel. Ten seconds, he'd said as he'd stood at the foot of his bed with a clipboard and a white coat. Ten seconds had made the difference between the starched whiteness of hospital bed linens and the black plastic of a body bag. If Mac had hesitated, or if the Ipod idiot hadn't had a shoelace. Sometimes after a nightmare had pulled him from sleep, he could hear Rebecca's sharp intake of breath and the convulsive grip of her fingers around his.

Every one had been earned by months of grueling rehab, months in which he'd sometimes forgotten to be grateful. The pain had been enormous and ravening, and more than once, he'd huddled in the corner of the rehab shower and vomited while water rilled down his shivering, spasming back and washed the evidence of his weakness and misery away. He'd been glad Rebecca hadn't been there to see him like that, naked and broken by the simple act of bending over.

Not that she hadn't wanted to be. If he'd let her, he had no doubt she would have posted herself at his bedside for the duration. But after a week in which she'd done nothing but flip through ancient magazines and watch him sleep, he'd told her to go back to work, that she could help him best by holding down the home front and giving him the time and space to work as hard as his doctors demanded of him.

It had seemed so rational, so damn sensible, and there was a part of him that still insisted it was, but in retrospect, he wondered whether it hadn't been the hairline fracture that had widened into a weeping, bleedin break a few weeks later when her hand had come down in the wrong place.

She was stunned when you brought it up that night. She was sittin' at your bedside, pickin' at the
tinfoil on her peach cup, and your wound throbbed in time to the scrape of her fingernails. Her peas and tuna sandwich sat on the plastic tray, untouched.

You licked your lips. Hey, doll? you rasped.

She blinked and dropped the cup onto the plate, scattering peas. Hey, sweetheart. Tender. You okay? You need some water?

You shook your head. Naw. I was just thinkin'. Maybe you should go back to work.

Work, she said as though you'd suggested she drop trou and take a steamin' dump in the middle'a your room. What makes you think I could concentrate on work? She pushed her tray away.

Well, I mean, there's nothin' you can really do here, and I'm sure it's dull as shi-really dull. Work would give you somethin' to do.

She shook her head. If you think I'm leaving you at the tender mercies of these vultures, you're higher than I thought. I'm right where I need to be. She patted your hand.

I really think you should go home, you persisted. She flinched. Your senses were blunted by morphine, but you noticed that much, and you picked up her hand and kissed it. You're beautiful, and don't think for a minute that I don't love seein' you here when I open my eyes, you assured her.

But? she said dully, and if you hadn't been so fuckin' stoned and in so much pain, you'd've recognized it for what it was-the protective indifference of a child who's just been slapped.

But you're tired, doll, and I know you're not sleepin' good on that cheap-ass cot. It makes you stiff, and I'm worried about you fallin'. 'Sides, somebody's gotta keep the house runnin' while I'm on my back.

You really think I'm going to sleep any better alone in our bed? she countered.

You had no answer for that, and in truth, you doubted it, but you had to get her away so she wouldn't see you cryin' and pukin' on yourself and realize that you weren't half as strong as you'd advertised durin' your courtship. You wanted some breathin' room, space to hurt without an audience, no matter how lovin' and sympathetic.

I just think it'd be better if you weren't here all the time, you said at last.

At the time, it seemed the kindest thing you could've said, but knowin' what you know now about what went on during the eight days you were runnin' on autopilot, it was a savage cut to an already raw heart. To her, it was an affirmation of every nasty word your ma uttered in the waitin' room and hallways.

You didn't know that then. You were blissfully ignorant of everything but your own need for privacy in which to recover your ass-raped dignity. So, you thought the sudden brightness in her eyes was relief.

You know, you're right, sweetheart. I should go home and get things ready for you. I could do laundry, change the sheets, and maybe move the TV so you can watch your Rangers from bed. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I just wanted-, She straightened abruptly in her chair. In fact, I think I'll go right now.

You could only blink owlishly at her. You hadn't meant for her to go then. You'd wanted to spend one last night holdin' her hand and fallin' asleep to the sound of her pencil scratching
mathematical equations onto a yellow legal pad. But then she was haulin' herself upright by the bedrails and leanin' over to kiss you goodnight.

Goodnight, babe, she whispered. Her lips lingered against your mouth, warm and tremblin'.

You hooked your arm around her neck to keep her from pullin' away. The movement and subsequent tension it required hurt like a son of a whore, but you knew that if you showed it, she'd distance herself, so you put on your game face and swallowed the pain.

Rebecca, I love you, you said softly, and gathered her hair in your hands.

Another flinch, and an exhalation that might'a been a laugh. I know, love. I love you, too. She kissed you again. But you're right. All business now, brisk and tight, like she was talkin' around a gut wound. I've got no business being here all the time and sapping your energy. You need rest.

She slipped out of your embrace and carefully lowered herself into her chair again. She offered you a wan, fragile smile as she gathered the books, pens, notepads, and math journals she'd brought to entertain herself while you drifted, stoned outta your damned gourd.

Sweet dreams, darling, she murmured. Then she slipped the straps of her canvas tote bag over the push handles of her chair and was gone.

You felt the loss of her then, too. It was so acute that your chest ached, and you thought for a minute that your stitchin's had popped. You had your peace and quiet, but it was hollow, and suddenly, you didn't want it anymore. You wanted the reassurin' prickle of her presence against your skin and settled in the center of your chest like the weight of her palm. You wanted to hear her swearin' like a fuckin' sailor while she struggled to get comfortable on the concrete slab that posed as a cot, wanted the room to fill with the sound of her breathin'. But it was too late to take it back, so you turned up the TV too loud to cover the unnatural silence and the achin' emptiness of your room without her in it.

It scared the shit outta you when she didn't turn up the next day or the day after that. You worried that she might'a fallen or gone on a bender. When she didn't show that second afternoon, you cranked up the adjustable bed and called her. She picked up at her office on the third ring, and you wondered what the hell she was doin' there at eight o'clock at night. Working, was her reply. It's what you said you needed me to do. There was a long silence. Then, The bed's too big.

The simple admission broke your heart, but you kept it light and casual when you asked her where she'd been. She was incredulous, like you'd asked her why she'd relocated to Mars.

You said you didn't want me there. Thin, words formed around the blade of a carvin' knife.

You had an inklin' of what was goin' on then. You told her that you did want her there, that you missed her like hell. You thought she'd come that night, but it wasn't 'til the next afternoon that she rolled into the room. No tote bag that time, just her handbag and a cup of applesauce tucked discreetly into the folds of her skirt.

She arrived just in time to see the nurse injectin' the protein paste that was your dinner into the port of your nasogastric tube. It looked like packaged turd, and you were thankful that you couldn't taste it. She sat quietly just inside the doorway until the nurse trudged out, and then she shut the door and locked it.

She tasted like salt the first time you kissed her that day. Now you know why, of course, but back
then, you were perplexed. Not bothered enough to ask her, though. You were so glad to see her that you gabbled about the Rangers and the excessive icing calls in the game the night before and coaxed her into soft, open-mouthed kisses. Maybe if you'd've taken the time to pry that sliver of glass from her heart then, it wouldn't've fragmented into microscopic shrapnel that shredded her when you opened your idiot mouth and confirmed her worst suspicions. You've spent the last three months pickin' it out and cleanin' the wounds, but you know you'll never get it all. Every time you think you've gotten the last of it, more rises to the surface, pushed up by a careless word or a moment of déjà vu. You suspect that there'll always be a piece of that shrapnel lodged behind her beatin' heart, and it'll cut her every chance it gets.

The months of rehab at the hands of talc-handed therapists had remolded him, strengthened and reshaped muscles weakened and torn by a copier and shards of a cellphone. It had returned him to himself and his job in fighting trim, but he wasn't quite the same, and never would be. His body was different, marred by the scar left by the pound of flesh the bomb had required in exchange for his survival. The skin was toughened and wattled, no longer supple, and when Rebecca ran her fingers over it, the sensation was distant and niggling, more recollection than stimulus.

Rebecca had been remolded, too, shaped by his well-intended but clumsy hands. He had done the best he could, had worked from memory and feverish hope, but the restoration had been imperfect. She no longer rested easily inside her skin, and he could still feel sharp edges and awkward angles where his hands had faltered. She was better now than she had been in the beginning, when she had been little more than shifting sand and broken bone beneath his soothing fingers, but she was still not whole, still not the Rebecca she had been before that Sunday morning in May, and he wondered if he would ever be able to unearth her from the ashes.

Sometimes, he felt the aching emptiness of her absence even when she was in the room. He'd be chattering to her about the Yankees or the latest audio book he was listening to in the squad car or the rare funny case that passed through the precinct, and she'd nod and quirk her lips in all the right places, but he'd know that she wasn't really there. It was in her eyes and the flatness in her voice. She was somewhere else that had nothing to do with a cramped living room in New York City.

For a while, he'd thought she was having an affair, but she still smelled the same and tasted the same and came to him with the same fervor. He'd run their credit cards and phone records, looking for any evidence of the man who had turned her thoughts from him, but there had been nothing. Not one phone call or suspicious charge. Her routine never varied. At work by eight and home by four-thirty. Most days, there was even an I love you on his voicemail.

He listened for the slinking creep of her wheels on the carpet or the furtive scrape of an opening door, but there was nothing, not even the whisper of moving clothes. He rolled over as quietly as he could.

Rebecca was sitting in front of the open closet. She was naked, and his stomach lurched in alarm because she had been wearing her flannel nightgown to insulate her from the biting December cold. He couldn't see her face for the fall of her hair, but she was clutching something in her hand, and as he watched, she raised it to her face and sniffed it. She was shuddering convulsively, and he realized that she was crying.

It's a loop of my intestine, he thought stupidly. She's found my missing pieces and is going to help me put them back.

He shook his head and threw back the covers. "Rebecca?" he called quietly, and swung his feet to the floor, where the winter chill burned the soles of his feet. "What're you doin', doll?"

He padded across the floor to where she sat. His feet struck something soft, and he looked down to
see several of his jackets and shirts strewn over the floor of the closet and around her wheels, as if she'd tried to build a nest from his clothes. There were ties, too, curled atop the piles of rumpled fabric like strips of drying meat. She was holding one of the ties to her nose and drawing deep, desperate breaths.

"Rebecca," he said again, and grazed her shoulder with cautious fingers. She was cold as marble to the touch. "Shit."

He abandoned his plan to roll her back to bed and scooped her from the chair instead. She shivered at the sudden warmth of his body, and her teeth clacked like rattling dice. He carried her to bed and crawled into it with her, tucking her against him as snugly as he could as he pulled the goosedown comforter over them. Her nipples were hard points against his chest, but he was too worried to be aroused. She was too cold, too quiet, and stiff in his arms.

"Rebecca, what's goin' on? Why're you freezin' to death?" He chafed her arms to increase circulation in her limbs.

A rattling exhalation, and then she turned her head and looked at him. Her wet eyes were silver in the moonlight. Her hand cupped his face, and his skin prickled and stung at the bloodless touch. He covered her hand with his and kneaded it until warmth crept into her fingers.

"I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to wake you," she murmured.

"That doesn't answer my question," he persisted, but he tightened his grip on her.

She turned and burrowed into his body, head tucked just beneath his chin. He felt her shrug. "Bad dreams."

He relaxed and drew his fingers over her bare arm, light and reassuring. He knew all about bad dreams and the strange compulsions they engendered in the middle of the night. He'd had them almost nightly in the first three months after the bombing, and he still had them every few weeks. They tore him from sleep and drove him to the cold tile of the bathroom or the barren desolation of the roof. Sometimes, he sat on the edge of the latter in nothing but his undershirt and boxers and watched the city sleep below him.

The dreams were all the department shrink had wanted to talk about for the first few sessions. She'd needled and prodded and tried to dissect the pictures in his head with the point of her ballpoint pen, and he'd lied and told her he couldn't remember them even as they replayed in his head. He wasn't going to tell her about the nights he died in Rebecca's arms while the rain came down in blinding sheets and blood poured from her nose and mouth. Nor was he going to tell her about the wedding dance that turned into re-enactment of Carrie, or of making love to her, only to realize that his intestines were slipping and slopping between her open legs. They were his crosses to bear, not carnival exhibits to be hauled up for public inspection and used as an excuse to bounce him from the job as mentally unfit for duty.

Besides, it wasn't like he'd never had bad dreams before. After his sister died, he'd had plenty of nightmares that had sent him scrabbling for the john, and his rookie year hadn't been a cakewalk, either. And there was 9/11, of course, when the nightmares had come hard and fast and he'd awoken every night with the feel of grit on his hands. The worst one during that period had been the one in which he'd discovered a body with his face in the acres of rubble. Nightmares were part of the job.

9/11 was a rough patch for the both of you, too. She had nightmares then, too, but you didn't know that until the first week of October. September was spent in a blur of lookin' for bodies and makin'
death notifications and goin' to funerals in your dress blues. September was a boom month for the dry cleanin' business. You didn't see your apartment for days, and it might make you a bastard to admit it, but Rebecca was the furthest thing from your mind for the first couple'a days after the attacks. You were still in shock, still tryin' desperately to save your wounded city that was bleedin' blue from the gapin' hole in the skyline.

You finally got a free phone line on the 15th, and when she heard your voice on the line, she cried. Then the guilt came as it occurred to you what she musta been goin' through, not knowin' for four days whether you were alive or dead. You called her every night after that to reassure her that you were all right, but you didn't see her again until October 7th.

It's not that you didn't want to see her. But the fact is, you were so fucked up that you had no comfort to give. You weren't eatin' or sleepin', and your mouth and lungs were constantly full of your dead friends and fellow officers. You thought it best if you kept your craziness away from her and got your shit into at least a parody of together before you went to her.

You turned up on her doorstep at six o'clock on October 7th. You'd thought about bringin' her flowers or a bottle of wine, but colors and tastes hadn't returned to the world yet, so you came with just your haggard face and gritty hands and waited in her hallway. If she was disappointed that you were all there was when she opened the door, then you'd know she wasn't The One no matter how much you fuckin' loved her.

But when she opened the door, she never looked at your hands. She just pulled you inside, pulled herself to her feet with your shoulders, and clung to you. You swept her off her feet with the intention of carryin' her to the couch, but before you could take a step, your legs gave out, and you sat down hard on the floor with her in your arms. You tried to apologize, but you could only stutter and stammer and shake uncontrollably.

When you could get up, you headed for the bathroom and took a shower with your clothes on, pullin' hers off under the hot spray and tossin' ‘em over the shower rod. You took her in the shower and let the dirt, guilt, and ashes of other people swirl down the drain at your feet. You kept comin' back to her all night, fuckin' her blindly in the dark. It felt so good to have somethin' alive and warm beneath your hands after weeks of touchin' and smellin' nothin' but death. You told her you loved her over and over again while her cunt milked your twitchin' prick and her eyes rolled helplessly in their sockets.

Her whimperin' and thrashin' woke you up after that last time, and when you pulled her to you, her heart was racing inside her chest. She finally calmed down enough to tell you about the nightmare of you findin' your face in the rubble and reachin' up to find a raw, bloody hole where it should'a been. It made you sick to think about it, but it also reassured you that you weren't goin' fuckin' crazy. You rocked her to sleep, and then you got your first night of deep, uninterrupted sleep since September 10th. You spent most of October at her place, and by Thanksgiving, you knew you were gonna marry her. You bought the ring that January, and on February 2nd, 2002, you put your heart and soul on the line and asked for her hand.

"Dreams, huh? You wanna talk about it?"

She shook her head, but then she spoke. "You didn't make it. They played the bagpipes for you, and all the officers were made of tin, and the rain pattered on their bodies…"

He made a wordless sound of comfort and placed her hand over his heart. "I'm right here, Rebecca."

She drew her fingers over his skin, traced wandering patterns from sternum to the shelf of his
She lingered reverently over the scar, mouth parted in breathless concentration. The light, fluttering touches made him ache.

"You're so warm now," she murmured, and craned to kiss his throat. Her hand drifted to his belly and rested there, stroked it in lazy circles. "You were so cold before."

"In the hospital, you mean?"

"So cold, and I couldn't make you warm. They wouldn't-wouldn't let me."

"The nurses?"

She grunted, and he took it as assent.

"Is that where you go when you're a million miles away? Back there?"

She twisted and looked at him in surprise. "No. Not there. But I don't go where you think, either. If you die, love dies with you."

It was a blunt, brutal admission of the depth of her love, and though he'd always known it and felt it in kind, had always felt it beneath her skin and seen it in the way she looked at him, to hear it so plainly stated unmanned him, and he drew a deep breath to steady himself before he asked his next question.

"Then where do you go, doll?"

That answer was equally simple. "Somewhere to make myself warm again."

Her caresses gradually slowed and then stopped, and her breathing deepened with the stealth of oncoming sleep. He held her against his chest even after she had gone limp and heavy with the hope that his heartbeat would remind her that he hadn't left her in the bright sunshine of a May morning. Remind her that her dreams were only dreams, and nothing more. She cried out once more in the night, lost and despairing, but quieted when he whispered her name and kneaded the hard knobs of her spine.

There were no dreams for him because he did not sleep, and by morning he had resolved to find out what had happened to her in that hospital during his long, undreaming sleep.
A Talk Between Friends

Flack sat in the sports bar and stared across the table at Hawkes, who looked back at him with unabashed curiosity. The bar wasn't Sullivan's, thank God, full of cops just off second watch and smelling of the city, but it was dark and quiet and smelled of yeast and wood polish. At quarter to three in the afternoon, it was too early for the Little-Leaguers, and the barflies in business suits hunkered at the bar paid them no mind.

If he weren't on the clock, he'd have had a drink in kind since the subject he was about to pursue was unpleasant and left a sour taste in his mouth, but he was on the clock, and so was Hawkes, and so they sat clutching glasses of flat soda.

"So, what's up, Flack?" Hawkes asked casually, and took a sip of his drink, ginger ale with a shot of cherry syrup. "Why'd you invite me down here instead of to Sullivan's? It's closer."

Flack shrugged and took a gulp of his watery Coke. "Just thought it'd be more private." He grimaced at the bland, vaguely metallic aftertaste.

"Private for what?" Bemused, but Flack thought he detected a hint of wariness.

Flack turned his glass in his hands and listened to the ice chatter and clink inside. "I just need to ask you somethin', is all," he said. "About the bombing."

Hawkes' expression grew somber. "I'll answer what I can, but I'm not sure what I can tell you." He picked up the cherry bobbing in his drink and dunked it by the thin stem. "The case file would probably be more informative, and I'm sure Mac would be happy to let you see it now that the case it closed."

"I don't need Mac to let me see shit, Hawkes," he snapped. "I knew damn well what my gut wound fuckin' looked like." He stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. "'Sides, what I need to know ain't in any report. It's about Rebecca."

Hawkes' shoulders tensed, and he studied the oak-paneled wall over Flack's shoulder. He took a sip of his drink and held the glass loosely between his fingertips. Finally, he said, "I'm not sure what you think I can tell you."

"What happened to her, Hawkes? What happened to her while I was in fuckin' La-La Land?"

Hawkes turned his gaze on him. "She's never talked to you about it?" The question held the faintest whiff of the incredulous, and for a brief moment, Flack wondered if it was because Rebecca had talked to him about it, had maybe spilled every nasty little detail of it onto the good doctor's lap over cups of espresso in some cozy little coffee shop on the East side. Maybe she'd told him the whole story between sobs and bites of fresh, warm baguettes.

"She'd do it, too. Not out of faithlessness, but to protect you. Your mother told her the bombin' was her fault, and part of her-hell, most of her since we're bein' honest here-believes that. So how can she complain about just desserts to the one she thinks she hurt? 'Specially when you told her yourself that she'd done enough damage? And isn't that little gift still payin' dividends after all this time? She's a good wife, sweet, and the last thing she wants to do is add to your pain and give your ma another reason to roll her eyes and call her a burden under her breath."

"So, maybe she took her pain to someone else, to the good doctor, with his long, surgeon's fingers and his compassionate bedside manner. What's a doctor's job but to heal? He's always understood
her better than any of your friends and colleagues. Frankly, it's pissed you off more than once, his intimate, easy knowledge of the whys and wherefores of her CP. It's not fair because he never had to work for it, never had to fuckin' earn it. He just had to read a book. In your less flatterin' moments, you suspect he probably knows the best way to fuck her, too.

You've always consoled yourself with the thought that while he might be an expert on her disability, he doesn't know jack shit about her. He got the housin', but you got to lift the hood and watch the motor run. You knew what went on inside her head and heart more intimately than any man alive. Hawkes knew what she had, but you knew who she was. That distinction kept the jealousy at bay, kept your blue eyes from turnin' the deepest shade of green. Now you're not even sure of that anymore.

"Course she's talked to me," he muttered. "I just don't think she's tellin' me everything. You know how she is." Hawkes' rueful nod did nothing to ease his simmering pique.

"I do," he said. "That woman thinks the sun rises and sets on your say-so. She was bound and determined to stay by your side until you woke up. Declared war on sleep and food, and when Mac got to see you first when you came out of surgery..." Hawkes shook his head with a wry, fond smirk. "Let's just say I don't think Mac is going to be on her Christmas list."

That makes two of us, he thought, and the unwitting solidarity with his wife, even across the span of time, reassured him and soothed his bristling ego. She's still my girl. Not yours.

"Mac went first?" This was new to him. He'd simply assumed that Rebecca had been afforded precedence as his wife.

Hawkes nodded. "Mmm. Flash your badge and cited the ongoing investigation." Hawkes grimaced as if he'd swallowed gall and took a cleansing drink of ginger ale.

"That not sit right with you?" Flack asked. Neutral, but he watched Hawkes' face and body language with interest.

Hawkes was silent for a long time. He drained his glass in long, convulsive gulps, and Flack watched the muscles of his throat work without speaking. Finally, he set down his empty glass, leaned forward in his chair, and propped his elbows on the table.

"As a medical examiner and as a CSI, I know how critical time can be in an investigation, and believe me, I wanted to nail the bastard who'd hurt you and killed those other people. I protect mine just as fiercely as anybody else." Hawkes stared at him at this last, as though daring him to disprove the statement.

"But?" Flack prodded.

Hawkes sighed and reached into the cheap, metal condiment caddy in the center of the table for a packet of sugar. He tapped the corner on the tabletop and turned the small, white square in his nimble fingers. "As a man, I know that sometimes you have to do for the people who need it most. God rest their souls, but those six people were dead and not going anywhere but the M.E.'s office, and you were in God's hands. Rebecca was the one who needed help. I'm not sure those seven minutes Mac spent photographing your open wound made a damn bit of difference. All it got you was a higher risk of infection because he forgot to put on a surgical mask. Thank God Dr. Singh put you on massive doses of antibiotics."

Flack was surprised by the diffident timbre in Hawkes' voice. He'd assumed that since Mac had paved the way for his introduction to fieldwork, Hawkes would be inclined to defend his mentor.
But he didn't have time to invite him to join the Mac Taylor Is An Asshole Glee Club, so he merely filed the information away for future reference and asked quietly, "Who looked out for her, Hawkes?"

Hawkes pondered the sugar packet in his hand. "We all tried. Me, Stella, Danny. The detectives from your squad came down and paid their respects. The more people came, the more she withdrew. She just pulled into herself and shut down."

"Pay their respects, he says. Like you were already fuckin' dead. Of course she pulled in, hid beneath those layers of scar tissue she's built up over the years. Her ability to retreat from the pain of the present's what keeps her movin' into the future. It's how she fights, how she survives."

"It drives you crazy on those rare occasions that you get into it with her. It's like fightin' a damn wall, all expressionless face and impenetrable silence. You wanna hash it out right there, lay it raw and bleedin' on the table, but she digs in her heels and sets her teeth, and there's seldom talkin' until she's had a chance to survey the field and flip the emotional dampers to make sure you can't draw blood. It's infuriatin' as hell when your balls are up and your claws are out, but seein' what happened the one time she wasn't ready for your anger, her reservation's a godsend. It's probably saved your goddamned marriage."

"She laid it on thick it that waitin' room. You know that without the benefit of consciousness. She had to to protect herself from the crushin' reality that you might die, and from the hatred spewin' outta your ma's mouth in the guise of grief. She went to ground the only way she knew how because you weren't there to deflect the blows, and goin' on seven months later, she still ain't entirely convinced it's safe to come outta hidin'."

"Let me put it this way, Hawkes: who took care of her for reasons other than the tin clipped to my belt?"

Hawkes shifted in his seat. "Well, there was O'Bannion, the rookie from your precinct." He chuckled and shook his head. "Thought he was going to drown her with all the water he was bringing her. She held onto him something fierce."

Flack was hardly surprised. The kid had taken an instant liking to Rebecca, and as soon as he figured out that she was his girl, he'd looked at him like he hung the moon. It had disturbed and perplexed him at first, the kid's avid interest in their relationship, and then one day, he'd seen O'Bannion with his kid sister on the front steps of the precinct, and everything had clicked. Molly O'Bannion was one of the Chair People, fifteen and dragging Spina Bifida around her neck like an albatross.

"The kid wasn't tryin' to steal your girl or get his rocks off imaginin' you bendin' her over the interrogation table; he was playin' dress-up, picturin' more possibilities for Molly than life in the cloister of the family apartment in the Bowery or in some institution where dreams and people go to die. If Rebecca could find her prince, then maybe Molly could, too. Maybe it was all right for her to look at bridal magazines and talk about her own weddin' day, after all."

"News of your engagement got around quick, and by midday, you'd gotten ten invitations to celebrate with a beer after shift. Even Captain Gerrard offered to toss one back. O'Bannion offered a hearty handshake and was blushin' so hard you thought his head was gonna pop off his neck. Next day, he sidles up to your desk like his pants were loaded and gives you a bottle of 1990 Australian red wine. Hardly fuckin' dime-store hooch, and fuck knows how he afforded it."

For you an' Rebecca's engagement, he said diffidently. You know, to celebrate.
Yeah, O'Bannion, I figured. Thanks. *You didn't know what else to say.*

You drank some of it that night with Rebecca, and her lips tasted of plum and generosity. The rest you saved for later, other special occasions. Like Rebecca earnin' her Ph.D., or the day she became an Associate Professor of Advanced Mathematics at NYU. You shared the last glass in December 2002, two months before she took your burdens and your name at St. Patrick's.

*That was all right, 'cause the kid brought another bottle to the reception, not Australian, but still red. You drank most of that one on the day Rebecca got tenure and a pay bump, but there was still enough for a sip on your first anniversary, enough to make her mouth taste like plum and generosity again. Whether he meant to or not, O'Bannion established your first tradition as a married couple. Special occasions and achievements are commemorated with a glass of red wine, and you never settle for the cheap stuff.*

*Molly O'Bannion was there, too, dressed in a pretty, blue gown with matchin' slippers on her feet. You danced with her, and O'Bannion danced with Rebecca, though he let her stay in her chair. Guess he thought standin' her up would be a familiarity he wasn't entitled to. He was right. To put Rebecca on her dainty, fragile feet was to hold her close enough to feel her heartbeat, to cup her hip and the tapered small of her back. It was intimacy reserved for a husband.*

*It was a formal, proper dance, and when it was over, he escorted Rebecca to you on his arm and placed her hand in yours with a respectful tip of his hat and a quiet, Here's your wife, Detective. Then he took Molly, and they danced on the fringes of the ballroom for the rest of the night. Rebecca's fond of him and sends a wave his way whenever she stops by the precinct, and every now and then, he tips his hat in the stationhouse hallway and asks whether any little Flacks are in the works.*

*It's not a question you'd even acknowledge comin' from anybody else, but you let him get away with it because you know he's only askin' 'cause he wants to see how far the improbable fairy tale of the handsome prince and his princess on her cushion of metal and liquid polymer can go. He's rootin' for it to go all the way so that he can dole out another chapter to his baby sister like a piece of candied hope.*

*So you clap him on the shoulder and shake your head and tell him he'll be the first to know. Bullshit, of course. If part of you ever takes root inside of her, the only people that're gonna know are you, the doctor, and God. At least until the life you made is wet and bloody and screamin' on her stomach. But he means well, and you see no need in bein' cruel, so you let it ride. Looks like your decency paid off.*

*He made a mental note to buy O'Bannion a beer the next time they met. "What about my father?"

Hawkes' lips thinned, and he shifted uneasily in his seat. "He didn't say much," he said. He averted his gaze and took a sip from his empty glass. "I think he was in shock. He spent most of his time holding up your mother."

"So he just fuckin' sat there while my mother told Rebecca that what happened to me was her fault 'cause she was sittin' in a chair?"

Hawkes blinked. "She told you about that?"

Flack tipped his glass, caught a piece of melting ice between his teeth, and began to suck. "Yeah." He did not add that she had told him while slumped against the kitchen cabinets in a pile of broken dishes. Nor did he tell him about the blood on her hands and the tears on her face or the absolute conviction in her voice that his mother had been right. It was too raw, and it hurt too much to
examine the memory of his abject failure as a husband too closely.

"It was a very tense atmosphere in there, Don. Everyone was on edge. He did the best he could."

"Goddammit, Hawkes," he snarled. "Don't pussyfoot around. Did my father have the fuckin' balls to look out for my girl while I was out? Did he say word one in her defense when everythin' was fallin' around her ears?"

"He looked like he wished the couch would swallow him," Hawkes offered lamely, and looking at him, Flack thought the good doctor felt the same.

"Jesus fuckin' Christ," he muttered in disgust, and sat back in his seat. The chair groaned at the sudden shift of weight.

**Why the fuck should you be surprised?** Gavin asked pragmatically. **He never took up for you when it mattered. When Diana died, he was too busy wallowin' in his own grief and missed opportunities to notice that you were fallin' apart, drownin' in your guilt. You puked your guts every mornin' for three months, and he never once tapped on the bathroom door to see how you were doin'. He didn't give a fuck. When he finally got his head outta his ass and realized there was a problem, what was his perfect solution? To erase her from your lives and pretend she never existed. That was his solution for everything. It can't hurt you if you don't see it. Hey, maybe that explains why he only visited you in the hospital twice in the hospital after you opened your eyes. Maybe he didn't want to acknowledge how close he came to losin' his firstborn and the only kid he had left, or maybe he was disappointed you were still alive and not burnin' in Hell like you so richly deserved.**

*Bastard's let you twist on an invisible knife since you were sixteen, let you bleed from the gut, mouth, and heart long before Lessing exposed the wound to the light with his pussy little bomb. He's never protected you from a single blow since the day you let Diana die, so why should he look out for that precious extension of yourself that wears your ring and carries your heart inside her chest?*

*Because he's my fuckin' father, whether he likes it or not, and that should count for somethin',* he thought furiously. *Even if it doesn't, there should be enough cop left in him to protect the innocent. It's not Rebecca's fault that Diana died, and he never should've let her suffer.*

"Do I even need to ask if my mother's behavior improved?"

Hawkes sealed his lips with the damp rim of his glass.

"I need to know what else went on between them, Hawkes. I know there's somethin' Rebecca's not tellin' me."

Hawkes set down his glass and shifted in his seat. "If she won't tell you, Don, then I'm not sure it's my place to tell you, either."

"Goddammit, Hawkes," he shouted, and slammed his palm on the table hard enough to make their glasses bellydance. The melting ice inside chattered in its fading tongue. "I'm not askin' for shits and giggles. She's havin' nightmares, cryin' in her sleep. I can't help her if I don't know what the fuck is goin' on."

Several of the barflies turned on their stools, and Hawkes steepled his long, dark fingers beneath his chin. "I can only tell you what I saw," he said diffidently.

Flack dipped his head in acknowledgement. "That's all I'm askin'."
Hawkes sighed. "On the fifth night of your coma, I found her in the bathroom, hiding underneath the sink. She was hysterical and didn't want to come out. She was crying and rocking and scratching the dirty tile floor until her fingers bled. I eventually pulled her out and convinced her to come to the cafeteria with me."

Flack said nothing. If he opened his mouth, all that would emerge would be a wordless lowing of impotent fury come too late. He had no doubt that Hawkes was right about the blood on Rebecca's hands, but he thought he was wrong about who it had belonged to. It wasn't hers; it was his, stained there by the long hours spent holding his hand and tracing the outline of his wound in the air above his skin. She had taken it on just as she had taken on his name and his sins. But Hawkes had no way of knowing that, and so he'd seen what logic had told him he'd see.

His jaw twitched, and Hawkes continued. "I couldn't make a definitive diagnosis about what happened, but I'd guess it was brought on by stress, lack of sleep, and lack of food. I know for a fact that our trip to the cafeteria was the first substantial food she'd eaten since she got to the hospital—a bowl of pea soup and three slices of dry toast. I had to fight her for that much. I don't think she slept more than an hour at a time, and I think she was popping over-the-counter stimulants—maybe No-Doz or Dexatrim."

"What makes you say that?"

Hawkes gave a loose, one-shouldered shrug that struck him as elegant. "Nobody can stay awake for that long without help, and I don't care what blend of coffee you're on or how much you drink. She had tremors of the extremities."

"In other words, she was jonesin'," Flack said dully.

Hawkes blushed and dropped his gaze. "If you want to put it that way, yeah." He tossed the battered sugar packet back into the caddy. "For what it's worth, I didn't see any tremors once you decided to grace us with your presence. If there was a dependence, it was probably temporary. Have you noticed anything, any undue agitation or uncharacteristic behavior?"

"You mean like cryin' in her sleep or wakin' up in the middle of the night to build a nest outta my clothes and sniff my ties?" Flack asked wryly, and stared into his glass of flat Coke. 'Sides, we don't keep that kinda stuff in the house. Just sugar, coffee, and enough tea to interest U.S. Customs."

"Mmm. In that case, stress was the likely culprit."

"Did she say anything to you? While she was hidin' in the bathroom with the dirty paper towels and the used tampons?"

Hawkes rubbed his palms together with a sound like gently-turning pages. "Most of it was incoherent. She did say that 'it was all her fault,' but didn't say what 'it' was."

"Not exactly hard to guess, though, is it?" Flack asked wryly, and stared into his glass of flat Coke. It was mud at the bottom of a stagnant pond.

Hawkes said nothing and wiped tears from the rim of his weeping glass with the ball of his thumb.

Flack thought of Rebecca then, sitting on the kitchen floor in the rubble of their dinnerware, blood on her palms like stigmata. Painted-on eyes and listless, heavy limbs, light as bird-bone inside her clothes when he lifted her onto his numb legs and cradled her to him.

She said it was my fault. Breath and tears scalding on crook of his neck. That if you didn't have to
Heaviness settled into his chest like croup, the same breathless, crushing pressure that had shadowed him in the hospital and made breathing a conscious, exhausting effort. He swallowed, and the spit lodged in his throat. He coughed into his loosely-curled fist and wiped dry, tender lips with the pads of his fingers.

"Was there anything else?" he managed.

Hawkes hesitated. "Don, I-," he answered slowly.

"Hawkes," he prodded relentlessly.

"Look, there was something the night before you woke up, but I don't know what it was. I walked in on it by mistake. I was bringing Rebecca some soda crackers."

"What did you see?"

"She and your mother were having a…discussion," he said delicately.

"About what?"

Hawkes held up his hands in a placatory gesture. "I swear, I don't know. All I heard was your mother telling Rebecca that she owed it to her because she'd been responsible for nearly killing the only child she had left."

"God," Flack said thickly.

"Rebecca just cried and threw the papers at her feet, and your mother left after that."

"Papers?" Sharp.

Hawkes nodded. "She wanted Rebecca to sign them, but she wouldn't."

"Did you see what they were?"

"No," Hawkes replied.

"Haw-,"

Hawkes glanced at his watch and rose from the table. "I've got to get back on the clock, and so do you, I imagine. See you at Sullivan's after shift on Friday?" Hawkes slipped into his wool overcoat without looking at him. He spoke too casually, too quickly, words running before his legs could manage the feat.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure," Flack said wearily, and gave a half-hearted wave.

Hawkes departed without another word or a backward glance and left him with his thoughts and his watery Coke and the absolute certainty that he'd been lying. He got up and went to the bar, where he ordered a double. Sometimes, the job didn't pay him enough to give a shit about protocol.

In his office across town, Mac sat in his office and wondered why he had never thought to keep a bottle of liquor in the bottommost drawer of his desk. He was a teetotaler during job hours, which meant that more often than not, he was dry, but he would gladly have violated his long-standing rule today. But there was no booze in any of his drawers, and so he settled for the bottle of Excedrin that was in his topmost drawer.
He chewed two tablets and grimaced at the bitter grit of the medicine on his tongue, pool chalk and sand.

Then again, it's fitting, this bitterness. It matches everything else in your life these days. The sweet moments have been few and far between since Claire ascended to heaven on a thick plume of smoke, but they've disappeared entirely since Aiden slit the seal on an evidence envelope and let all the monsters out. Since then, it's been one cascading failure after another, and you've started to wonder if you're cursed. Aiden, Danny, Stella, Flack-they've all been touched by an unkind hand, and through them, it has battered you with the cruelest, black-fingered fist. You thought the worst was over when Stella and Flack picked up their broken pieces and rejoined the march, but not so. That was just a lull, and the storm is gathering on the horizon again, and it's all your fault.

He thumbed through the reports on his desk, and with each page, his stomach grew more leaden. According to every test he'd ordered, nothing was wrong with David Lessing. He hadn't been poisoned or beaten or lobotomized to ensure silence. He simply refused to talk, as though he had used the last of his words on the speech he'd read to the judge at his sentencing hearing. He had said all he had wanted to say with the roaring chorus of detonating explosives. A more emphatic statement than any human mouth and tongue could muster.

Worse yet, there was no evidence that Flack had any involvement in Lessing's excursion. He had watched hours of surveillance tape from the psychiatric hospital, looking for any suspicious figures, but mostly searching for Flack's familiar profile in the glare of the streetlights in front of the facility or in the dimly-lit hallways. If someone were involved in Lessing's escape, Flack or one of the other victims' relatives were the most logical suspects. He'd pulled up DMV photos of everyone connected to the tragedy and kept them near to hand while he was poring over grainy footage, but there had been nothing and no one familiar, just orderlies in rumpled scrubs and walking beat cops making their hourly rounds.

He had been so desperate for his revenge theory to hold up that he had started scanning the footage for unlikely suspects-ailing grandmothers on walkers, Federal agents murmuring to the electronic Sybils inside their ears, strolling couples. He had even looked for Rebecca Flack among the passing crowds. Her rage burned the hottest of those marked by Lessing's fire, and never mind that she was conspicuous by virtue of her disability and physically incapable of either violence or stealth. He had finally given up on the footage late last night and carried from it nothing but eyestrain and the sullen, throbbing promise of a vicious tension headache that had blossomed to full strength before noon.

It's a measure of how bad things have become that you consider Flack's unalloyed innocence a turn for the worse, isn't it? You courted the specter of your father's lung cancer to clear Danny Messer, smoked cigarettes in front of the building until your tastebuds registered only car exhaust and the needling bite of aluminum and your tongue was numb inside your mouth. You stained your fingertips with nicotine and wondered if it was the color of guilt.

When Stella slept facedown on her bedroom floor with cordite on her dress and hands like a mark of sin, you busted your balls and the balls of everyone around you to prove that the shoot was clean. Science would be the white knight who saved them both. When Flack fell asleep in a poisonous forest of stone and waited to be roused by a kiss from his lady fair, it was science that distracted the team from the horror of what had happened and proved Lessing's guilt beyond any doubt.

Of course, it also proved that he was mad as a hatter and paved the way for his cushy confinement in a psychiatric ward instead of a barren, grey hole in Sing Sing, but it's best-and easier-not to think about that.
Now you're sitting at your desk and sulking because Flack isn't guilty of...what? You can't even answer that question. You just know that something is wrong with the picture in your head, and as much as you prate about the inviolate sanctity of following the evidence, your gut is what tells you where to start sniffing in the first place. It's telling you to dig deeper, screaming at you, but no matter where you turn, you only turn up dirt and baseless supposition.

This job and your skill at it are your anchors to the world of the present. Without them, you'd be forever lost in the gently-tugging tides of the past, convinced that Claire was still alive and that your bed was still warmed by more than fever dreams. You keep from drowning in your own sorrow by redressing the wrongs of others. It's your only identifying marker, your only link to sanity, and you're afraid that if you lose it, you'll disappear.

Lately, you've been worried that you are losing it, that the magic you could once work is slipping like Flack's blood through your fingers. You're hurting the people you want to protect the most. You've broken Danny in more places and ways than you can count, and even Stella isn't as sturdy as she once was. Each day you look in the mirror, and you're a little paler and a little older than you were yesterday, a little less there. You're becoming a ghost in the mirror.

Now he could add Flack to the list of people he had broken in his mad grab for normality. For the second time, he had accused him of dishonoring the badge he had sworn to protect, and for the second time, he had been wrong. There was no apology he could offer that Don would accept, and he couldn't blame him.

Nor could he shake the feeling that he was right in spite of the mountain of nothing he had on his desk and the greasy knot of guilt in his stomach. He had been a CSI for too long to be this wrong, and before that, he had been a soldier with a sniper's eyes, lying in the desert sand and searching for the shadows of the enemy. He knew wrong even when he couldn't see it, and he knew that there was something wrong with Lessing's night-time jaunt through the city, no matter what the toxicology reports and psych evaluations wouldn't show. But for once, science had failed him, and that knowledge would remain a maddening, saltwater itch beneath the skin.

He heard Stella's heels clacking on the floor outside his office and swept the reports into a manila folder. She would only ask him why he was wasting time and resources on a windmill tilt when there were real cases that needed more of both, and he would not be able to give her an answer that made sense and was not steeped in suspicion and childish dread.

Because the David Lessing that came back scares me worse than the one I put in would not cut it, not coming from a man who had preached the gospel of hard evidence, of the cold, hard truths rendered in milligrams and deciliters. Live by the sword, die by the sword.

The blade sank deep beneath his ribs. The manila folder and the bottle of Excedrin exchanged places, and he waited for Stella to open the door.
While her husband and Mac Taylor struggled with half-revealed truths and unspoken regrets, Rebecca opened her mouth and breathed in copper and blood and soured vengeance. Her hands were slick with it, and it pooled around her wheels and splashed onto her feet, where it dried to russet as she worked. It was dried and tacky on her elbows and wet and warm on her palms, and there wasn't enough coagulant to stop its flow.

She talked, mostly to distract herself from the numbness in her chest and the stinking silence broken only by the wet parting of skin from sinew. Lessing had stopped talking days ago, and she wasn't sure if it was because his vocal cords had finally ruptured from screaming, or if he had accepted that it would gain him no respite. She found she didn't care. Her hand stuttered on a stubborn strip of skin, and she gritted her teeth and gave a savage twist. Lessing's lidless eyes stared up at her, and his fleshless jaws creaked, but that was all. No screaming. Not even a broken whimper. Ruptured, then, and thank God for it, because his screams and pleas for mercy had long since lost their novelty.

Everything had lost its color, truth be told. The ache in her arms and lodged between her shoulder blades like a knife was no longer the sweet, thrumming burn of the righteous, but the dull ache of muscles and bones too old for the skin that covered them, of too much for too little. The gore under her nails and smeared over her hands was no longer the viscous, potter's clay of unmaking, but useless, blind waste.

Worse yet, she could no longer remember the fine, heady taste of her hatred. It had lost its shape with the careless shucking of Lessing's face and dispersed, diluted, into the stale air of the Shrieking Shack. Now there was only dirt and blood and sweat on her tongue, and they were neither sweet with justice nor bitter with disappointment. They coated her tongue like ash and made her grimace when she swallowed, as though she were taking a pill too big for her throat. She wished that she could taste nothing, but the more she swallowed in an effort to wash the taste away, the more her mouth filled with it.

She was tired, and the fire that had sustained her since that night in November when she had gathered damp earth from a necropolis beneath the impassive gaze of the moon had guttered to embers. She was acutely aware of every creaking joint and crackling tendon, and from deep within her back, she felt the fluttery quickening of a seizure to come, heavy and proprietary as a tumor at the base of her spinal column. God's eyes were watching her in the darkness of the house that love had fled or never lived in at all, and though she had forgotten the import of what her hands were doing, He had not, and later tonight or tomorrow, He would reach out with a steady, avenging finger and make her remember it inside her twisted bones. He would make her confess her sin a scream and a spasm at a time. Soon, there would be no forgetting, but for now, she could, and so she did, blotted it out with the mindless, efficient movement of her hands and the dull cadence of her voice.

"The hospital was the first time I'd ever held his badge in my hands," she told Lessing in that dead voice.

_It was like holding his heart. Just as precious. Just as heavy. You'd never realized how heavy it was until it slid into your unsuspecting palm from the manila envelope in which the trauma nurse had put it. You'd only touched it in passing, to move it on the dresser or graze it with clutching, needy fingers when you were trying to suck him off or get him out of his pesky clothes. It was part of the sacred space that each of you had set aside from the other, as off limits as his service Glocks_
and the box of ammunition on the top shelf of the bedroom closet.

You never suspected. It was air in his hands, lifted and flashed and tossed onto the bed or dresser by nimble, practiced fingers. He was accustomed to its weight, conditioned to ignore its presence at his hip or in the broad cup of his palm. And why not? He's lived with it since he was twenty-one, and before it migrated to those more comfortable niches, it had rested directly over his heart.

Maybe that's why you taste it on his tongue and in his come, that tart tang you assumed was natural to all men. It leached through his skin and slipped into his bloodstream, where it infused every part of him with the memory of copper and tin and tattooed its numbers into his breast. It's still there, that mark; not even the explosion could obliterate it. Nor could it cleanse him of the taste. It's still on him, still sharp and metallic and unapologetic as you skim his teeth with your greedy tongue. It's toxic-lethal. You know it is, heavy metal poisoning by osmosis, but you kiss him anyway. You wouldn't stop even if you could because in truth, you could think of worse ways to die.

It was strangely organic in your hand, cool but not cold, as though it carried residual body heat. It was dirty and spattered with his blood. Some of it had dripped into the crevices of the shield and settled there like an offering. The eagle wept scarlet, and the olive branch in its talons had broken. Captain Gerrard offered to take it for you, to clean it, he said, but you refused. Holding it was the closest you could get to cradling Don, and you couldn't let it go.

So you sat in the surgical waiting room and cleaned his badge with a swab and sterile water from Hawkes' field kit and Kleenex from the box on the table. The other cops who came to pay their respects and offer prayers couldn't look at it. O'Bannion sat in a chair across the room, thumbs lodged in his oiled gunbelt and teeth locked against the bile in his mouth. He was so queasy that you pitied him, and in the back of your mind, you wondered how long it would be before he either puked on his shoes or bolted for the bathroom. To his credit, he did neither, and you admired his guts.

There was incredulity in his face whenever he watched you dab at your husband's blood, laced beneath the worry like an errant thread. He couldn't understand why you chose to handle a task normally reserved for less personal hands, hands protected from the intimacy of the job by a dual layer of latex. It was morbid and masochistic and indecent.

He wasn't the only person to think so; Mac looked pained whenever his raw, haggard gaze flickered to your cautious hands, and Captain Gerrard pursed his lips in a moue of dismay and blinked back tears of compassion and helpless rage. His mother thought you were a ghoul and told you so, eyes puffy from weeping and tongue forked and dripping with venom.

How can you just sit there? she demanded, shrill and jagged with pieces of her broken heart. How can you sit there and dabble in my ba-my son's bloo- bloo- like it's nothing? She pressed her shaking hands to her middle as though time had reversed itself and returned Don to her womb.

You never answered her. You just kept blotting, wiping and drying. There were no explanations you could offer to them to make them understand why you had devoted yourself so wholly to the sad duty. Could not make them understand that it was a duty, one that you had vowed to carry out on the day you took his name. It was scalding and wrenching, and grotesque to hunch in your chair and scrape at his tacky blood like an art restorer over a small canvas, but it was also inescapable, bought and paid for by the golden band on your left hand. It was yours, and you had grown up with the inviolate truth that a man tended what was his. You couldn't stitch his wounds or tear the bastard who'd hurt him limb from limb, but you could clean and protect his sacred space, and so you did.

His father had a glimmer of understanding. He was not surprised or offended when you refused to
let him hold the badge. In fact, he seemed to expect it. He recognized duty in your shaking fingers and tear-stained face, and part of him admired it. He would have done the same thing if you had never taken his son's name, would have considered it another obligation to the thin, blue line of which he had once been a part.

There were times while you worked that you were tempted to smash the shield into pieces and scatter its shards over the floor. What good was it when it had failed to protect him? If you crushed it beneath your rolling wheels, it couldn't burden him anymore with its demands for slavish devotion and blood sacrifice. The pressure would be off, and he could breathe again.

But you knew better. Your love was bonded to the hunk of metal in your hands, and if you destroyed it, you crushed him, too. He thrived on the pressure even as it wrung him dry, an addict in the deepest throes of addiction. He would lose himself if he lost his shield, and so you fought your instincts and swabbed blood from the eagle's feathers and mended the broken olive branch with careful applications of water, and when it was as clean as you could make it, you curled your nerveless fingers around it and traced the ball of your thumb over the smooth, cool numbers in an endless loop. 8571. 8571. The anonymous digits that made up the whole of his identity in the NYPD, inked into your thumb with blood and water.

The badge was the first thing he asked for once he had established that you were all right and that he wasn't going to die. You were sitting at his bedside, wiping his parched lips with a damp cloth and cleaning the white scum that had accumulated in the corners of his mouth.

So dry, sweetheart, you murmured. You want water?

He turned his head and licked his lips. Where's it? he slurred.

Where's what, love? You dipped the cloth into the plastic cup of water and pressed it to his lips. His eyelids fluttered, whether in pleasure from the moisture or fatigue from the morphine drip, you couldn't tell.

My shield an' gun.

Your tired brain processed the words as my shittin' gun before logic parsed the true meaning. Your gun is with Captain Gerrard. Probably in his desk drawer. You'll get it back as soon as you're on your feet again. You smoothed your hand over his cool, waxy forehead.

My badge? Where's m' badge? Did they take it? His eyes were wide and frantic with the possibility, and the steady chirp of the heart monitor increased.

Hey. Hey, you soothed. Nobody took it. They gave it to me with your— with your things. You swallowed the urge to weep and banished the recollection of the nurse bringing his possessions in that small, sad envelope. It's fine. I took care of it for you. It needed to be cleaned up a little. It was... dirty.

Your throat worked at the memory of bloody feathers and broken branches, and you turned from the remembered stink of copper and tin and well-tended leather. It's here in the night table. You opened the drawer and pulled out the badge. See? You pressed it into his lax, upturned hand.

His fingers closed convulsively around it, as though it were a lifeline, and he raised his hand. He blinked at it in an effort to focus his eyes, and the relief in them was so profound that your chest ached. He was a little boy who had found his cherished talisman against the darkness. He brought it to his chest and circled his thumb over the crevices you had so painstakingly cleaned.
You felt a stab of vicious jealousy towards that badge, furious that it could relax his face like none of your caresses and reassurances had managed. You were seized with the childish, ugly impulse to tear it from his hand and hurl it across the room, but you smothered it, ashamed and frightened by its sudden intensity.

What kind of wife would I be to let them take that from you? You'd meant to be breezy, but it was cracked and wavering beneath too many unspoken truths.

His hand snaked over the bedrail to cup your face. You're a good one, doll, and don't let anyone tell you different. Furry with exhaustion and painkillers. Now gimme a kiss.

You leveraged yourself upright by the bedrails and dusted kisses over his forehead and along his jaw until you reached his lips. They were still dry and sticky and tasted of eight-day breath and medical tubing, but you closed your eyes to savor the delicate frisson of contact and the sensation of his breath passing your parted lips.

I'm going to go ask the doctors when I can give you real water. I'd give you ice to suck if I wasn't worried you'd fall asleep and choke on it, you said when you pulled back, and your breath tickled his cheek.

You gonna have dinner with me later? he asked, and his eyelids drooped with weariness.

I wouldn't miss it, you promised him. Now rest. I'll be here when you wake up. You eased the badge from his tenuous, softening grasp. I'm going to put this on the night table, and if anybody gets any bright ideas about taking a souvenir for their booger-eating nephew, they'll be using their undergarments for dental floss.

An indistinct rumble from deep within his chest. You shouldn't make a guy who's just had abdominal surgery laugh, he chided gently, but his eyes were more alert than they had been since they had opened.

Sorry, babe.

Less than a minute later, he was fast asleep, and you trundled into the hallway in search of a doctor to berate. You cornered Dr. Singh as he was coming out of the surgeons' lounge and chewed him for the mindless catharsis of the deed, all bared teeth and cutting tongue, and you only stopped because you were running out of air. Dr. Singh waited for you to finish, and when you did-red-faced and stiff with indignation—he told you he could have room-temperature tap water if his barium swallow and CT scan the following day revealed no perforations or adhesions.

You circled the hallways for a while to clear your head and slow your racing heart, and with every meandering circuit, you stopped outside his room to look in on him and make sure he was only sleeping. You left at dusk to pick up a tuna melt and container of chicken noodle and pea soup from the deli down the block, and then you went back to keep your dinner date.

The nurse brought his food packet before Wheel of Fortune, and you sat beside him and scarfed the sandwich while Pat Sajak cajoled giddy, bug-eyed contestants through the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and the quadrillions of combinations into which they could be pressed. He watched as well as he could, but the effort of healing exacted a heavy toll, and he nodded and drifted for most of the night, lulled by the mundane mutter of the talking heads and the familiarity of seeing you on one side and his treasured badge on the other. He was surrounded by his favorite things and slept easily.

His badge was the golden carrot for which he drove himself to get better, and though you were
glad that he was healing, you couldn't help but resent that he had eyes only for it. Once he came home from the hospital, it resumed its rightful place on the dresser, polished properly by his expert hands, and sometimes when he was at his rehab sessions, you'd fantasize about flushing it down the toilet or dropping it down the sewer grate outside the building. You never did because you knew how much it would hurt him, but there were days, especially after the silence fell, that it was a matter of inches.

It wasn't fair or becoming. It was puerile and ugly, your jealousy, but you couldn't help it. You had watched over him and loved him and flouted magical law to soothe him, and yet, his only concern was the hunk of gold the blast had torn from his hip. He talked endlessly of the day he could get back to the job, but never spoke so lovingly of the day when he could stroll arm-in-arm with you through Central Park or stop for paper bowls of hot dim sum in Chinatown. It was a return to the job he wanted, not a return to his life with you, and that knowledge was salt in your myriad wounds.

Then one morning, he was summoned to the precinct, and when he came back an hour later, his Glock was in its holster and his badge was clipped to his hip. He was pale, but his eyes were shining. He swept you into his arms and held you tightly, face pressed into the crook of your neck. The Captain put me back on the active-duty roster as of this mornin', he crowed, and he was vibrating with ill-concealed happiness.

Congratulations, you answered with a heartiness you didn't feel, and kissed his cheek. He pulled back and surveyed you with those lovely eyes. Hey. What kinda kiss is that, mm? I was thinkin' I deserved one more like this.

And he laid one on you, all warm lips and possessive, stroking tongue. He cupped the back of your head in his palm, and when you gripped his shoulders to stay upright and thwart your buckling knees, he cupped your face in his hands, and made deep furrows in your hair with gentle fingertips. His breath came in an unsteady rattle through his nose, and when you lurched closer, his heartbeat fluttered against your scrawny breastbone.

He didn't break the kiss until black spots exploded behind your eyes and drool trickled indecorously from between your locked lips. Then he parted with a sputter of laughter, red-faced and tousled and delirious with the simple joy of life. He locked his arms around your waist to support you, and then he just studied you, triumphant and panting. You know how beautiful you look when you're like that? he asked quietly. 

You blinked. Like what? Drunk and wobbly?

A soft huff of laughter. Naw. Just...like that. Like this. Happy.

I bet you said that to all the drunks and nodders when you were on the beat.

Rebecca, I'm serious, he murmured. You're gorgeous, and I couldn't've done this-;" he let go of you long enough to tap his badge with a forefinger, "-without you."

Your throat constricted with a mixture of shame and love, and you tried to turn away before he saw the jealousy that had surged in your veins when he'd announced his return to duty, but he held you fast, oblivious in his love and adoration.

I'm not actually goin' back on shift 'til Monday, so I thought that maybe we could do some catchin' up-a little dinner, a little dancin'. A movie if you want. We could even get a hotel room for the
weekend, rattle the walls, you know? He waggled his eyebrows.

The tears came unbidden then, accompanied by a hitching bray that surprised you both with its ferocity. He carried you into the living room, settled you onto the couch, and asked you what was wrong. You couldn't tell him, but not because you didn't want to. There were simply no words to explain how lucky you were to have his love, and how ashamed you were to have doubted it for a single instant. So you coughed and sputtered and choked on salty snot, and when you could talk, you told him that you were glad to have him back, glad that he was still yours to hold. It was enough of the truth to satisfy him, but not enough to damn you.

He took you out on the town that night, sat through a bad horror movie for your sake and split a mammoth plate of steak fajitas and pico de gallo. He drank beer and loaded his fajitas with sour cream and guacamole. He laughed often and loudly and left a big tip for the waiter, and then he kissed you down by the river, with the smell of Irish Spring and wet earth in your nose. He tasted like beer and sour cream, and when he went down on you later that night in a strange, hotel bed, you came so hard that your thighs ached the next day.

The day after that was a trip to the zoo, where you watched the penguins and the monkeys and carefully skirted the lions and tigers. You watched the elephants and inhaled the rank stink of dung, and you sat on a bench and split a funnel cake piled high with cinnamon apples. He wrangled a runaway balloon for a crying toddler, and when you teased him about it being his first heroic deed since his recall to duty, he blushed, but he also preened and strutted for the rest of the day; when he fucked you that night atop rumpled bedsheets, he was possessive and feral and full of his old swagger.

The last day before he returned to the grind of the streets was spent in the lazy comfort of home. You slept past noon and padded around in your socked feet, and you spent all day making dinner together and watching TV. He screamed himself hoarse at the Rangers between bites of lasagna and sips of red wine, and you watched in bemusement from the corner of your eye. He went to bed with a full belly and slept the sleep of the just, and when his alarm clock sounded the call to arms the next morning, he bounded out of bed in bright-eyed anticipation.

That three-day weekend was an epiphany. It made you realize the enormity of the bond between Don and his shield. He wasn't whole without it, wasn't the man with whom you'd fallen in love. It was like the loss of a limb. That was why he was so distant from you and so obsessed with being declared fit for duty. Not because he loved you less, but because he could not love himself without its heft tugging at his hip and heart. From that day on, you vowed to love it as you loved him, honor it as you honored him, and when he gave you a coffee-flavored kiss on the way out the door, you were savagely proud to see him go.

It was his badge she thought of as she reached for the ebony-handled knife on the table beside her. Right now, she supposed that it was in pride of place on his hip, snug against his body and intimate as a lover. Perhaps it was winking in the bleak, December sun as he chased a suspect down winding streets and through garbage-strewn alleys, or maybe it was tucked in the bunched fabric of his pants as he sat at his desk in the bullpen and smudged his fingers with bleary lines of ballpoint ink.

It was a terrible, twisted irony that she had once swabbed blood from its reliefs and crevices, only to cover it in a cloying deluge six thousand miles across the sea. It was brilliant and cold in her mind's eye, and she winced as she brought the knife to rest on the line of Lessing's collarbone. It was another grotesque irony that the only part of Lessing that had been spared the Peeling Charm was his torso. It was smooth and obscenely white against the raw, wet redness of flayed flesh.
It was not an omission of mercy, but of necessity. She needed the smooth canvas of skin for the Binding Runes. Her lips thinned as she carved the first shallow line, and Lessing's mouth opened in a soundless scream. Blood seeped from the cut in mournful accusation, but she was numb to its pathos after so many nights spent bathing in it to the elbows. She paused, re-established her grip on the hilt, and guided the blade through the next cut. She lifted the blade from the skin, blinked sweat from her eyes, took a deep breath, and returned to the intricate work. All the while, Lessing screamed without sound.

She laid the knife across his chest, the steel blade cold and biting against his bloody, flushed skin. "It's a Binding Rune," she told him tonelessly. "Once it's finished, it will bind your soul to your body and prevent it from escaping. There is an identical rune engraved in the amulet I bought for the occasion. Knockturn Alley, for all its well-deserved and sordid reputation, is remarkably useful. When I complete the rune, your soul will be trapped inside the amulet and your body. There will be no death for you; not unless either your body or the amulet is destroyed. And I assure you, they're never going to find your body."

A Horcrux. Once upon a time, the fate of the wizarding world had hinged on the destruction of seven Horcruxes scattered across Europe. Diaries and lockets and swords that had kept their secrets well. Lives had been lost for the sake of paper and forged steel. Rivers of blood had been shed in pursuit of them, and Harry and the dynamic duo had braved Romania and Bulgaria on the merest wisps of rumors.

They had found them all in the end, guided by luck, Gryffindor bravado, and the sage advice of Albus Dumbledore, dispensed from the rich, oiled canvas of his Hogwarts portrait. The last, Helga Hufflepuff's cup, had been sundered on Harry's birthday in 1997, and Voldemort had collapsed in on himself and left nothing behind but a pile of earth infested with worms. Ding, dong, the Dark Lord was dead, and hysteria had come trailing after.

Horcruxes had always been forbidden, but now their creation or possession carried a sentence of death without trial, to be performed by an Auror on the spot of the offense. All information pertaining to their use or creation had been stricken from the record, purged from wizarding libraries across the continent. The libraries at Nice and Versailles had broadcast the burning of the relevant texts on the Wizarding Wireless Network, and she had listened to a copy of the burning at Versailles at the archives in London, where they had been preserved as a defining moment in British Wizardry.

But the libraries in Eastern Europe, China, the Middle East had not followed suit. The proprietor of the library at Alexandria had refused to burn the books on principle, and so they still adorned the shelves that rose toward a vaulted ceiling adorned with hieroglyphics that told the story of the pharaohs. They were restricted, but access could be bought for a few Galleons pressed into a dry, brown palm.

And what the books hadn't told her, Hermione Granger had. Inadvertently, of course, parceled out over the weeks and days of sixth year, when she, Harry, and Ron had researched nothing but. For all her cleverness, Hermione had been remarkably lax in casting Muffling Charms. Maybe since she had solved the mystery of Harry's long sleep in fifth year, they hadn't perceived her as a threat, or maybe they simply hadn't noticed her, slouched haphazardly in her chair and skulking in the flickering shadows cast by the common room fireplace. They'd had eyes only for each other then, and Harry's had been distracted by the specter of failure.

She doubted Hermione had ever intended her information to be used like this, but what could she expect from a woman who had gladly stood on the backs of house elves? Hermione would call this a natural progression of her lunacy. She chuckled in spite of herself. As far gone as she was, she
knew there was nothing natural about this. It was wicked and perverse and the only way she would be able to bury the image of Don's guts laid open to a dusty, lightless ceiling.

"I'm not going to close the rune yet, though. I wouldn't want to give you a painless immortality. Just enough life to know you're dying, but not enough to grant you release. I want the light from both worlds to taunt you for eternity, always out of reach. I want you to wish for the end as hard as he fought to come home. I want you to long for it. When I brought you here, I told you I owed you an hour for every minute that he was away, but I lied. I'm a Gryffindor, what can I say? We're chronic overreachers. So are Slytherins, come to think of it. Gets us into trouble."

"It won't be long now." Tender, and filled with the dust of her husband's would-be tomb. "I promise. Don't worry; I won't let you go too far." She picked up the knife and sat back to wait. It was as much promise to herself as to him. She was tired of the stink and the cold and the damp of the Shrieking Shack, tired of the dust that reminded her of Don's accident, settled and heavy as a shroud over the furniture. It had even settled over her in a fine mist when she had sat too long in one place, light as spidersilk. She was Mrs. Haversham in her rotten bridal veil.

The thrill of what she had done had disappeared after the first night and left behind a hollow brittleness in her bones, and she had wanted nothing more than to be finished. She had even considered abandoning her scheme, just snapping his neck, Transfiguring the body into a bone like Barty Crouch, Jr. had once done to his own father, and burying it beneath the front step like a housewarming gift. She'd thought of washing the dirt from beneath her fingernails and going home to her life, her revenge exacted. But to do that would've made all her careful planning and burning hatred worthless, and she had been taught by a long line of honorable men to finish what she began. Anything less was weakness and cowardice. So she had trudged doggedly on, cutting and peeling until blood lost all ability to move her, until Lessing was as irrelevant and inhuman as cured hide. She'd thought of slicing, but a piece of breathing meat, and she no longer wondered about his wife and daughter or if he had a mother to mourn him.

At first, her detachment had terrified her, and when she had felt it stealing over her like stuporous melancholy, it had so shocked her that she'd rolled into the furthest corner from Lessing and cried until she vomited in a wet, sticky splatter that had drawn a rat from its hole in a crumbling baseboard. Its mangy, grey fur and fat, pink tail had reminded her of Peter Pettigrew, who would later come to be known as Lord Voldemort's Wormtail. Thinking of him had inevitably led to thoughts of his master, and she had clapped her bloody hands to her mouth and sobbed in hysterical terror at the thought that she was becoming like him, cold-blooded and inhuman. She'd cried harder still at the thought that Don had touched her, and worse yet, had entrusted her with his heart and soul. She'd been horrified at the possibility and had sworn that she was going to kill Lessing and bury the evidence of her breakdown in the thicket behind the Shack, but ten minutes later, she'd left the rat to its feast and returned to her work. It would be better, she had decided, to finish an atrocity and claim it than to leave it undone and disavow it. The Lucius Malfoy inside her head had rolled his eyes and sniffed daintily at the mangled nobility of the thought, but she had simply refused to become the filth that Don risked his life to catch. When the coldness had overtaken her again while she was filleting Lessing's flaccid prick, she had simply accepted it.

After tonight, done was done. She was going to scrub the blood from her hands and the beds of her nails and rinse it from her lips and teeth. She was going to shatter the mortar and pestle and the
potion phials they had helped to fill and destroy the cauldron in which they been brewed, and then she would Banish their pathetic remnants to the shapeless void reserved for those things and people for which wizards had no further use. Hey, Evanesco, and all traces of her within these walls would cease to exist. She'd make sure there were no stray bits of Lessing trapped in the strands of her hair or the folds of her robes and remove what she found with a Scourging Charm. Then, she'd go home, and if there were any mercy left in God's breast for her, his most wayward child, the only red to stain her hands for the rest of her days would be the blood of cherry tomatoes sacrificed for Don's dinner salads or the juice from the roasted red peppers piled high on his red pepper, provolone, and pastrami sandwiches.

Lessing drew a deep, shuddering breath, and she sat forward, fingers curled tightly around the hilt of the knife. His eyelids fluttered rapidly, and his eyes slid out of focus. He was sliding into eternity. She aligned the tip of her knife with the unfinished rune.

"I'm sorry," she said, but she wasn't looking at him. She was looking at Don, lying in his hospital bed in pre-op, robbed of his mind by the morphine and whiter than the sheets that covered him.

She completed the rune with a stiff flick of her wrist.

The force of the spell, when it came, was so intense that the world burned green. There was a thunderous roar, and the Shack rocked on its foundations. Masonry fell from the ceiling, and she remembered her last night at Hogwarts, when Seamus Finnegan had crawled into her infirmary cot and shielded her from dust and falling masonry as the great castle had trembled to its cornerstone.

The concussion from the blast rocketed her into the opposite wall and pitched her from her chair, and she sprawled on the cold, dirty floor and blinked dust from her stunned eyes. Her chin was warm and wet, and when she touched her fingers to it, they came away red. Her teeth were spongy when she prodded them with the blade of her tongue, but they were all accounted for, and none of them fell out at the gentle inspection. Her chest was too light, and her stomach clenched in a vicious spasm. She rolled clumsily onto her side and vomited a bilious, black tar, thick and throttling as pitch.

"Well, no wonder they don't want people fucking around with that shit," she warbled, and scuttled away from the mess, propelled by a clawed, scrabbling hand and a trembling foot. She laughed, and sour, black bile hung from her chin and marked her passage.

She collapsed halfway across the room and sprawled where she had fallen. Her chin throbbed, and she realized that the air smelled of ozone and singed hair. She tittered and gulped lungfuls of metallic air, and her chin throbbed and stung. She spit to clear her mouth of the sour taste and only succeeded in drooling onto her cheek and chin. She raised her hand to wipe them clean, but decided it wasn't worth the effort and let it flop bonelessly to the floor again.

Magic had sucked all the heat from the room in the execution of the spell, and she shivered at the cold that crept beneath the thick wool of her robes and seeped into her bones and internal organs. She was frozen on the inside, and each breath that emerged from her blue-lipped, black-gummed mouth was a whirling, beautiful wraith that danced upon the heavy air with nimble feet. Each inhalation plunged a slender stiletto into her breast.

She was tempted to lie there and succumb to sleep, but the primitive portion of her brain that had colored her a ruthless survivalist from the cradle refused to let her lay her burden down, and so she forced her heavy-lidded eyes to remain open and fumbled in the sleeve of her robe for her wand. It occurred to her that her magic was gone, taken in tribute for the success of the spell, and as she drew her wand, she was surprised to feel no sorrow at the thought. Magic was a means to an end, and now her task was complete. If it was gone, she wouldn't have straddle two worlds and fit
comfortably in neither. She would just be who she'd pretended to be all along: Rebecca Flack, wife and teacher. No more secrets, and no more dreams of dragons and broomsticks silhouetted against the belly of the moon.

But no. There was the magic still, called forth by the Warming Charm she cast. It surged again as she cast a healing spell on her chin, and then she lowered her arm to her side and scissored her arms and legs and formed a snow angel in the thick blanket of dust and ash underneath her. Blood and warmth trickled into her chest and extremities, and when the worst of the pins and needles had passed, she rolled onto her stomach, pushed herself to her hands and knees, and resumed her trek towards her wheelchair.

As she drew near, she realized that the heat from the Binding Rune had warped the spokes and melted the rubber tires to the floor. She could only laugh and snort uncontrollably with her tousled hair hanging in her face and drool caked on her chin. Of all the contingencies for which she had planned, a mangled wheelchair had never been one of them. In retrospect, she couldn't remember why not. Vanity, she supposed.

She Levitated herself into her dangerously-listing chair and added a ruptured gel cushion to the growing list of casualties. The silicone gel dribbled from the cushion in a warm, milky foam that reminded her of come, and she grimaced as it coated the backs of her thighs and knees.

"Reparo totalus!" she muttered, and the spokes and bent frame righted themselves with a groaning, comical spang. The rubber tires peeled from the wooden floor with a viscous, alien slurp. The cushion, however, remained misshapen. There was no replacing the lost gel, which obediently plumped into shape beneath her chair. She heaved a rueful, exhausted sigh. "It'll be fun filling out the Medicare forms on this one."

She stowed her wand inside her robes and rolled to inspect her handiwork. Lessing was black as coal, and for one panicked moment, she was certain the spell had incinerated him, but when she came alongside him, she saw the shallow rise and fall of his chest. She reached out and touched the blackened bowl of his stomach, and grit shifted beneath her fingertips. When she removed them, there were five white dimples in their stead. He was covered in soot. The rune on his chest was a livid, raw red on a field of black, and she understood instinctively that while the soot could be removed, the rune would always glow with the same infected, blood-boil heat. She passed her hand over it, and diseased warmth brushed her cold palm. Her fingers snapped closed in a gesture of protection, and she withdrew her hand and pivoted to the worktable where she had left the amulet.

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It, too, was blackened, and she rubbed off the soot with the hem of her robes. The amulet was a cat's-eye marble made of ambergris. She had picked it because it had reminded her of a serpent's lidless eye, with its lifeless gaze and narrow, vertical pupil. She had thought it appropriate.

The serpent's eye glowed green on the end of its pewter chain, a hypnotic, pulsating emerald.

*Killing Curse in a bottle*, she thought, entranced, and turned the amulet this way and that in the scant light.

She dangled the bauble in front of Lessing's blank, unseeing eyes. "Your gilded cage, Mr. Lessing. Isn't it lovely?"

Lessing did not blink, but awareness flickered in his eyes.

*Good Lord, girl*, her grandfather grunted. *You and Bellatrix Lestrange could have a merry High*
Tea and discuss fine vintages of madness over Earl Grey and scones.

She crammed the back of her wrist into her mouth to stifle a heehaw of laughter at the image of her and Bellatrix Lestrange sipping from china teacups with their pinkies raised in proper fashion. And then she was laughing, howling around the flimsy barrier of flesh and bone like an animal in a snare. One long, ululating bawl after another, and tears streamed from her gritty eyes, so that she was unsure if she was laughing or sobbing. Soon, there was no difference, and she rocked back and forth in her chair, hands clamped to the hard, sharp pikes of her knees and legs outthrust like a broken exclamation point.

It was over. The weight of obligation had been lifted from her bowed shoulders, and the nigging tugs from her emaciated conscience had ceased, as had the voices of remonstrance. There was nothing to discuss or plan or justify. She had carried out her wizards' justice, had finished what she had started, and now it was between her and God. All that was left was to bury the bones, kick the dirt from her aching, eggshell heels, and go home to Don. She slipped the amulet over her head and tucked the serpent's eye inside her robes.

She cast a Concealment Charm on Lessing and lurched outside into the cold December air. The rest of the cleanup could wait, or maybe she wouldn't bother with it at all. In the unlikely event that someone summoned the courage to visit the Shack, they would find only empty phials and a dented cauldron, and who could say what they had been used for or how long they'd been there? She'd have to clean herself up and clean or burn her robes, but right now, she only wanted to breathe the fresh air and bask in the cleansing light of the moon.

She closed her eyes and tilted her face to the sky, palms thrust outward and spread in silent entreaty to the cosmos.

"God in his Heaven, Rebecca, but what have you done?"

Seamus Finnegan emerged from a thicket, wand at the ready. In the moonlight, his blue Auror's robes made him look like a ghost.
Midnight Confessions and the Ties That Bind

A Horcrux," she said to him. "A variant, anyway." She looked at him without smiling and swiped the back of her bloody hand across her forehead, leaving a tacky, red smear.

The admission was so blunt that he couldn't process it at first, and when the words finally sank in, all he could manage was, "What?" Strengthless and muddled, Neville Longbottom with a faceful of tit.

"A Horcrux," she repeated.

He belatedly remembered his wand, which sagged in his stupefied, clumsy fingers. He re-established his grip and leveled it at her. "Give me your wand," he ordered.

"No. Besides, we both know neither of us needs one if push comes to shove." No challenge, just a bald statement of fact.

"I'll not ask you again. Surrender your wand, or I'll Bind you and take it."

She rolled her eyes. "If you were going to, you would've done it by now," she said dismissively.

"Rebecca-,

"I loved you then, and I love you now. If I were going to kill you, you'd be dead. I give no warnings. You know that."

Too right you do. Warnings were for fools and corpses, and the former almost always became the latter. She had no compunction about Cursing someone in the back or stuffing mud into the mouth and nose of a fallen enemy to drown them in dirt and ensure that there would be no hex spit from a dying mouth. She took no pleasure in it, but she didn't shy from it, either, and she gave no quarter on the basis of age. Children died alongside adults and merited the same number of tears-none. A handful of black, oozing mud for the lot of them with no hesitation.

You and the other children of the light were so appalled the first time you saw her stuff thick, bloody mud into the gaping mouth of a fifth-year Slytherin who had been laid open with a Flaying Charm. You and Dean Thomas were going to leave him where he lay, give him a faint chance of being tended by a healer and cheating Charon, but she followed behind, picked up the mud, and slopped it into his mouth.

You stared at her in disgusted incredulity. What the bloody hell are you doing? You're going to kill him. He was throttling on the black, bilious earth, his tongue a fat, pink earthworm beneath the bubbling mud.

She gazed dispassionately at him. No, I won't, she said. The wound will, though. Then she turned her flat, stony gaze on you. Besides, isn't that my job? To kill them before they kill me? Then she faced forward again and crawled over the body of an Auror who had been two seconds slower than his foe.

Dean was repulsed by her, called Lucifer's whore, and to be honest, you were rattled to the marrow yourself by her detached pragmatism in the face of morality's rude upending. But three weeks later, Dean was dead, skull cleaved like a rotten melon by a troll's club, and she was still alive and perversely vital amid the mayhem. She was still crawling over the bodies, and he was one of them, and so it was that you adjusted to survive.
That was the hell of war. It stripped the varnish from the world and made a mockery of the catechism you had been taught at your mam's knee. There was no room for politeness or civility or even decency in shades of grey. There was only black and white and unapologetic scarlet. A month after your stomach turned at the sight of her cramming mud into a fifteen-year-old's mouth, you brought a wet rock down onto the head and neck of a thirteen-year-old girl because it was her or you and you wanted to live.

Not that you could wrap your head around what you had done at first. After it happened, you staggered to your trench and collapsed into it, and you spent the next few hours hugging your knees to your numb chest and sicking into the mud. You couldn't get her face out of your mind. She had been plaited and wide-eyed with shock, and the only difference between her and the third-years you were dying to defend had been the side on which she stood when the hexes had begun to fly. You were sure you were headed for eternal damnation.

Rebecca sat next to you in the trench while you blubbed. She didn't touch you, and she offered no useless platitudes. She just watched, archless feet splayed indelicately in front of her and bony back slumped against a crumbling wall of mud. Her skinny, boneless legs and inscrutable, reptilian eyes reminded you of a crocodile, ageless and fathomless. You knew that when she opened her mouth, there would be too many teeth, needle-sharp and yellow with old death.

You did what you had to, she said when you vomited for the third time. It was the only comfort she could offer.

She was thirteen, you screamed, as if her youth made the crime worse. Not even old enough to have bubs. It was a stupid thing to say, but the thought was lodged in the back of your mind like a pebble in a mill wheel, and you could turn your mind to nothing else.

You looked? she asked mildly, and drew a circle in the mud with a black-nailed finger.

You could only gape uselessly at her. Snot dripped onto your lip in a clear, cold runner, salty and bitter as blood and iron. It's just something blokes notice, you muttered dully.

She was old enough, she went on, as though you had never spoken. To die? you snapped. To choose her side and the consequences that came with it.

What if she chose the way she did because somebody told her it was the right thing to do? you insisted.

A craggy, inelegant shrug. So? Isn't that why you chose to follow Dumbledore?

No. I followed because it is the right thing.

How can you be sure? A humorless smile played at the thin corners of her mouth, and you thought of Dean Thomas calling her Lucifer's whore. Because the Headmaster said so?

What if it was us, there on the other side of the line?

She sundered the circle she had drawn in the mud with a scrape of her nail. Then we'd be fighting just as hard to stay alive. Life makes right. She patted your hand with her cold, dirty fingers. Don't worry, Seamus, she assured you. You'll learn to live with it in the end.

And damned if you didn't. You had wicked awful nightmares for years after the War, but they
gradually faded, and when you think of the girl and her flat chest during waking hours, they inspire nothing. You no longer worry about damnation because the question has long been settled. You know you're going to Hell, but you've made peace with it because you know you can handle it. After all, you've been there before. With Lucifer's whore as your guide, perched on your shoulder and steering you towards the light of survival with the most savage of rods—pitiless, remorseless truth.

Lucifer's whore. That was what Dean Thomas had called her once upon a time, and that was who he was seeing now. She was a queen of blood and bone, stripped of all childhood softness. She sat in her chair, bathed in blood of wool and man. It was on her hands and flecked in her hair, and beneath the swath on her forehead, her eyes were bright and beautiful in the night. He was repulsed, but he was also fascinated, and though he was loath to admit it, the carnage had lent her an eerie beauty.

"Whose blood is that?" he demanded.


"You murdered him?"

"I gave him his hell as he gave me mine." She shifted in her chair, and his wand arm tensed in preparation for an attack, but she only said, "Are you going to kill me now? I believe that's the statute."

Yes, it was, as a matter of fact. By law, the sentence should have been carried out ten minutes ago, and she should be ashes cooling to cinders in front of the Shack. But too much has passed between them for him to kill her without thought, without knowing why she had given up all pretense and let the death mask have her. She had saved him once, and he wanted to save her if he could.

*I loved you then, and I love you now.*

"You don't seem too concerned about the possibility of dying," he observed, and moved to sit on the rickety steps of the Shack. He let his wand dangle loosely between his knees, and the tip nudged him in gentle reminder of his duty.

She laughed, a raw, throaty rumble. "I'm tired," she said. "Do you remember how tired we used to get?"

How could he? Seventeen and staggering through days filled with mud and blood and the stench of burning flesh, eating stale biscuits from the Headmistress' battered tin because that was all there was. Popping maggots like kettlecorn to amuse themselves and lessen the burden of mortality, children still in the face of atrocity.

War had not allowed for the luxury of sleep; it was snatched in increments, found in the scant shelter of squelching mud or against the boles of ancient trees. For a few days at the beginning of battle, they had taken refuge in the passageway beneath the Whomping Willow and slept nestled against one another like kits, but Peter Pettigrew had wasted no time in divulging the passage to his Lord, and they had fled their cramped sanctuary with sleep and rain in their eyes.

Until then, he'd never known true weariness. He had slept in soft beds and dreamed of Quidditch. Sometimes his calves had burned with the pleasant throb of a day on the pitch or his head had grown heavy and nodded on the thick stem of his neck with the dullness of slumber delayed. He had even known the boneless joy of satisfaction after a good wank, but he had never *longed* for rest. His body had never wept for it, pores and nerve endings open and raw to the world in a
And then the War, and true hunger, for food and for sleep and for a scrap of sanity. His belly had cramped with the emptiness of too little, and his head had pounded with the fullness of too much. Too much seeing, too much hearing, too much knowing. He knew how blood tasted on the tongue and felt on the teeth and lips. He knew what a human skull sounded like when it shattered beneath a troll's club and what burning hair smelled like against the dewy greenness of a spring dawn. He had never wanted to add those truths to his store of knowledge, had never pondered them in his idle moments, but there had been no blessed sleep to repel them, and so they had become his.

They had all forgotten sleep, kept awake for days by the constant threat of death. Wakefulness had settled into their bones like ague and made them heavy and clumsy. They had lived in a world of fever dreams, and phantoms had lived beneath the thin membranes of the world. Some had hallucinated and succumbed to madness and run, raving, across the moor until enemy fire had granted them sleep.

Some, like Rebecca and Loony Luna, had coped well in that hallucinatory, twilight world. Luna had survived the War largely unscathed and had taken over the publishing and distribution of The Quibbler, and in many quarters, it was deemed more credible than the Prophet, whose reputation had been in tatters after the War. Luna lived quietly in Kensington, spinning tales of Crumple-horned Snorkacks and doxy-human hybrids and tending orchids with Neville Longbottom in the garden behind the flat.

There had been few nightshade lilies, though. Most had simply endured and learned to sleep on their feet or in a crouch, and those fortunate enough to have friends among the healers had cultivated addictions to Pepper-Up Potions or Biliwigs, and as an Auror, far too many of his days had been spent canvassing the alleys and flea-ridden flophouses for soldiers cum addicts whose lives had been reduced to the next fix. Last year, he had caught Parvati Patil selling her once much-coveted quim for five quid and a phial of Pepper. He had offered her a robe before he took her in, but she had only stared at him in dull-eyed indifference and gone to the station with her emaciated breasts on display.

The lack of sleep had been both boon and curse on the battlefield. Fatigue had made them slow and uncertain, and he was convinced that weariness had killed Dean Thomas as surely as the troll's club had. He had simply been too tired to take the step that might have saved him. It had been easier and kinder to stand where he was and let the end come with the wet, muffled grate of exploding bone.

If one went without sleep long enough, they could see around the wavering, displaced curves of the world. The stuporous heaviness of limb and mind gave way to a giddy, nitrous reality. They grew light inside their dirty skins and were attuned to the slightest noise or flicker of movement. Reflexes improved, and hesitation vanished until they became dust-dancers in the night, whirling and crouching and stabbing in an airless ballet that required neither bone nor muscle. The hyper-awareness was more addictive than the Pepper-Up that provided it, and he suspected that that release from thought was what had led beautiful girls like Parvati to shed their dignity and their clothes in squalid, tavern rooms that stank of Firewhiskey and filthy wool and wood rot.

In truth, you're addicted to it just as much as she was and is. The need for it is another reason why you joined the Aurory. What is Aurory but organized, undeclared war on the unsavory souls who haunt the world in their dirty, black-hearted bodies? There is precious little time for sleep even if you've a soft, feather-stuffed four-poster in which to do it. You can stay up for days, until the leaden exhaustion sloughs and leaves bird-bone lightness in its place, until the prickle and scald of eyestrain peels away the filter behind your eyes and lets you see the shadows behind the light.
You don't use Pepper-Up or Biliwigs to thwart your body's need for sleep, though God and Merlin know you could; the evidence vaults below the Ministry are rife with both, and no one would blink if the counts were off by a phial or two, not with the notorious shambles record-keeping has become in the wake of new Ministry regulations and the decimation of the goblins, who clung to their neutrality until it slaughtered them.

You use tea and sugar and chicory coffee and high-bollocked Irish stubbornness. Those are in never-ending supply and perfectly bloody legal. You tell yourself that your wakefulness is naught but what the job demands, and it's true, but what is truer is the fact that you've acquired a taste for dancing on the edge of barking madness. Standing on that thread is life undiluted; it feels so good and hurts so bad, and after a while, you can't tell the difference.

"You're not sleeping, then?" he asked.

"When I first moved to New York, I couldn't sleep. I wasn't used to the cold after being home in Florida. I could turn the radiator up until it was like dragon's breath, and the sheets would still be frozen. Then I met my husband, and he kept me warm. He was a frigging heatbox. And then the bastard blew him up, and the cold got into him, too."

He blinked. He had no idea what she was on about. "Blew him up? Your husband's dead, then?"

"No!" It was a scream, short and shrill, jagged glass in the darkness. "No, no, no." An anguished moan. "He didn't kill him, but he t-ried. Tore a hole in his abdominal wall and let the cold inside." She began to rock back and forth in her chair as though soothing a restless infant. It was too dark to be certain, but he suspected she was crying. "I couldn't wake him up, and I couldn't make him warm, not for a long time. But I tried."

"I know," he said, and he did. Rebecca might have been Lucifer's mad whore, milked and forged from blood and sorrow, but she was not faithless. Her enmity was unfailing and eternal, but so was her loyalty. If she said she loved, then so it was, and it would not be turned aside, and there was nothing unconscionable in the quest to protect what was hers.

"He was my Prince Charming," she went on, and now there was no doubt that she was crying. The salt of tears was rough and smothering in her throat. "All those years, you and the twins and Harry, you tried to tell me what life could be, that hatred and bitterness didn't have to be all there was to the world. And then he came along and showed me you were right. It was like flying all the time, like freefalling with my arms outstretched. But it was all right because I knew that someone would catch me."

"Not only did he catch me, Seamus, but he bloody married me, stood in front of God and everybody in St. Patrick's Cathedral and told them that out of all the women in the world, I was the one he wanted. This to a girl whose own mother told her that no one would want her like that. And there he was, offering me…everything."

"Life didn't hurt anymore. I caught myself waking up and looking forward to the day. He made love real and not some bullshit fairy tale that people made up to make themselves feel better. He kept promises. If he said he'd bring me sunflowers, then he brought me sunflowers—big bunches of yellow flowers that got pollen and the smell of green things on his hands. It was all right to dream with him because he wouldn't break them if he didn't have to. Before that morning, we had started talking about a baby, and then Mac called him in, and oh, holy fuck-,"

She slowly folded in on herself, spindly arms wrapped around her middle as though she were trying to keep her insides from becoming outsiders and slipping through her cold fingers onto the frozen, black earth. He knew he should go to her and offer what comfort he could with his clumsy embrace.
and surrogate warmth. He had done it without thinking as a boy, had covered her body with his own while the castle had shuddered and groaned around them, but the ease of childhood was far away and long ago, and even if he could have persuaded his adult-heavy legs to close the distance between them, his mouth would never rise to the occasion. He would just loom over her, mute and stupid and a piss-poor substitute for the true comfort she so clearly needed.

*Your beloved bloke's not the only one who got blown apart that morning, is he?* he thought as he watched her from the corner of his eye and scuffed his embarrassment into the dirt with the toe of his boot. *You did, too, and then you stitched yourself together again with your contrary hands. It wasn't a thorough job, though. There are missing pieces and sharp, fractured edges that draw blood from tender places and send it into your mouth, where you taste it and lust for vengeance. The only reason you're still walking about is your pig-headed refusal to die.*

"Five years, and everything was fine, and then it went tits-up with the press of a goddamned button. Five years out of twenty-six. Shit," she swore, and he heard her wiping mucus on the sleeve of her robes. "He was fine, and then he wasn't, and there were assholes asking me to dole out pieces of him like sweetmeats while I'm still grappling with the possibility that he might leave gone." A muffled low of suppressed grief.

She heaved herself upright and scrubbed at her face with bloody hands. "You ever wonder why things never stay fine, but they'll stay fucked up as long as you please?" she mused. Too old for her years. That much had not changed, at least.

He did, indeed. "More than a few times."

A lifetime ago, he had asked her a simple question, and he had never suspected where it would lead him. He had learned more about her in twenty minutes than in the three years of their childhood friendship. She had made a patchwork quilt for him, fashioned it from all the secret hurts she had never conceded or shared. Words and fragments of a life unconsciously chosen to paint a picture of who she had become and who she had always been behind her towering fortress walls. It was an unbidden confession, and not just to the blood gone sticky and dry on her restless hands.

"He tells me he's all right now," she said quietly. "That it's over and we can just go on. There's a scar where the cold got in, all wattled and puckered. He's warm now when I touch him, like he used to be, but I can still feel it underneath my fingertips, that cold, razorblades on the pads. It's underneath his skin, hidden in the tissue, and I know it'll never leave him. It's just waiting for the next opportunity, and there's no guarantee that he'll come back to-,

She stopped. "It's on his lips, in his blood. I can taste it on him, just like I can taste the copper and tin of his badge. It's not his fault, God help me, but I can kiss goodbye on his mouth and tongue, and I-I don't want to." A moaning wail, wind soughing through broken chimes.

"What did you do, Rebecca?" he prodded, grip slick around the shaft of his wand and belly heavy with apprehension.

The answer, when it came, was inevitable, and later that night when he sat in his bedroom, secure in a haze of Firewhiskey and snuffed tapers, he would admit to himself that he had been expecting it from the moment he had stepped from the bushes with his wand drawn.

"I fixed it. I couldn't fix him; they wouldn't let me, so I did the next best thing. I found Lessing, and I fixed him instead. The outside to match the inside.*

She hated to lose, to be seen as inferior. That's why she took on Snape the way she did: she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of being right. You and Neville told her a thousand times to
forget him, to skate through your detentions like everyone else did, but she wouldn't hear of it. She answered that imperious bastard's summons every night and came back to the Common Room with her hands bloody and cramped into claws from gripping a pestle for hours on end in the cold and damp. Sometimes, she'd be so stiff the next morning that it was all she could do to grip her wand or quill, and no matter how often she went into the dungeons, it was never enough.

Sometimes, she just sat by the fire in the Common Room and cried, rocked slowly back and forth in her with her clawed, bloody fingers wrapped around her shoulders. You'd fume and swear and beg her to tell the Headmaster, but she'd just shake her head.

No. If I do that, it's an admission that I'm as weak and useless as he says I am.

You wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled inside her skull whenever she said that. It wasn't about strength or weakness or being good enough, and it drove you mad that for all her intelligence, she couldn't see it. The only one who'd ever questioned her worth was her; the Slytherins, too, but sod the lot of them. When she turned her eyes outward and away from the fractured internal mirror that captured so much of her attention, she was as fine a Gryffindor as ever put on the robes. But those moments were rare. For the most part, she was content to look into the mirror and see her self-doubt reflected and magnified.

Letting Snape near her was a bloody disaster, and the Headmaster should've known better. He took the hairline fractures in her spirit and prised them until they were bleeding, bottomless gashes and exploited her need to prove herself for his own ends. She was his pet project, his opportunity to play God and mold a soul in his image, and damned if he didn't try.

He didn't entirely succeed, though. She was stronger than even she thought, and she wouldn't surrender to his whims. She believed what she believed and wouldn't be swayed, and despite her jeering cynicism of Gryffindor vainglory, she went to the trenches with you without hesitation.

He tempered her with his fury and venom, but the price was high. Too high. You knew it, and so did she. You realized that on the night you held her in the Hogwarts infirmary and listened to her scream her rage and betrayal to the cracking ceiling. She vibrated with it, hands fisted in the dirty, dusty sheets and hair snarled and flecked with mud and blood and bits of bone. She looked most like the girl she was that night, lost and tired and impossibly young, shocked out of her hard rime by the bitter understanding that Snape had wearied of his game.

It might've been too high, but there was no question of paying it. She had been doing so every night for three years, doling it out hour by hour as the sand trickled through the hourglass and her spirit grew as callused as her fingers. She's still paying, if her face is any indication. She's been blooded to the point of exhaustion and well beyond, and all that's left are hard angles and open holes. A Bone Queen, fleshless and hopeless and breathing because to stop would be an admission of weakness.

He rose from the steps and scuttled forward in a crouch until they were inches apart. He cautiously rested his free hand on her knee and was unsurprised to find that it was hard and cold.

"Rebecca," he said gently.

"They taught me how to hurt, Seamus, but nobody ever taught me how to heal. He was lying there in bed, and the morphine was doing sod-all, and he'd look at me, and I couldn't help him. All I could do was mutter a low-level Healing Charm that Madam Pomfrey used for firsties with scraped knees and elbows. Like that did a fucking thing except illustrate how useless I was, how useless magic was."
His lips thinned, and he tightened his grip until the thin, cold flesh bulged between his fingers. "Did you stay with him? Tell him you loved him?"

"Of course I did," she snapped. "Every chance I got."

"Then you did enough."

A snort and a wry smile. "How do you know?"

"This." He grabbed her hand and held it up until her wedding band twinkled in the moonlight. He shook it at her. "In case you've not noticed, you're a right prickly bitch when you want to be. I don't know your bloke from Adam, but he must've been a determined bastard to chase you through your barriers and peel away that mask you wear."

"And because I'm looking at you," he said. "You're a right prickly bitch, but you love as hard as you hate. You don't love easily, but you love well and forever. If you love him, you'd crawl through the pits of Hell to do right by him. And if he was bright enough to see through all the piss and vinegar you spew, then he damn well knows that. Did he ever tell you it wasn't enough?"

She shook her head. "Never. He tells me that he got through it because of me, but-,

"Then it was enough," he interrupted. "Unless you're telling me you've yoked yourself to a liar and a fool."

She gazed at him with anguished longing. She wanted to believe, to believe that she had not shortchanged her husband with her trembling fingers and inadequate magic, but the venom Snape had injected into her veins so long ago had lost none of its potency. He watched the poison seep into the balm he had offered and saw the flickering shadows of doubt steal into her eyes. He could see her thoughts as clearly as if she'd spoken them.

*Is it really, Seamus? Is it? How can it be when I still can't find all the pieces I left behind on the moors just up the narrow footpath?*

Her face crumpled. "It didn't feel like enough."

He could not answer her because it was true. He had spent his life since the War picking up his own pieces and soothing his own wounds by avenging the wrongs of others. But no matter how many Dark wizards he found and executed or led away in handbills to the dead womb of Azkaban, it was never enough to quash the need for a draught of ale in the evenings or banish the memory of Dean Thomas' skull splintering like china under a troll's club and letting his brains sluice down his back in grey gobbets. None of the arrests had ever raised the dead.

He was as furious now at all the wasted lives and lost futures as he had been as he stood on the smoking, sloshing battlefield and watched the Hogwarts lake run red. Catching Fred Weasley's killer three years after the War hadn't made Fred any less dead or George any less mad, and when he walked through Diagon Alley, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was just as shuttered and derelict as it had been since Molly Weasley had closed its doors for the last time the day after Fred's funeral. Nothing had changed. All it had created was another hole in the world.

"Where is he?"

"Inside," she said. "No wards, no traps. I guess I'm not immune to Gryffindor arrogance, after all."

He went inside with his wand drawn. Thirty seconds later, he was sprinting for the hedgerow beside the shack, bile tart and sweet in his mouth. He doubled over and vomited onto the wet earth,
hands clamped around his unsteady knees to keep him from toppling headlong into the sick.

_We're all werewolves under the skin,_ he thought as he retched. Then, _The outside to match the inside. That's what she always said. Good fucking God._ He found himself trying to laugh and vomit at the same time, and his nose burned with displaced vomit.

_"That was almost enough,"_ she said from behind him. _"Almost."_

He straightened and reeled from the mess, the aftertaste of vomit sour on his tongue. _"Are you mad?"_ he asked, and wiped his slick lips with the back of his hand. It would be easier if she were, kinder.

"No," she said, and he knew it was true. _"I told you, I'm tired. If you're going to kill me, get on with it. But tell my love what happened, would you? I don't want him to think I deserted him."_ She sat calmly in her chair with her wand in her lap and waited for him to carry out his Ministry-sworn duty. _"But don't destroy the Horcrux. Let the bastard suffer."_ She was crying again.

Lucifer's whore had been broken at last, broken not by her all-consuming hatred, but by the tender poison of love, and that realization shifted the fulcrum of his world and sent his heart into his knees. It was not supposed to be this way, to end this way for either of them. She was supposed to stand astride the world and piss on the graves of those she had outlasted and outlived, and he was supposed to play football for the West Ham team and live in Cork with his wife and children. They were not supposed to be chasing ghosts and making them of each other.

_"The hell I will,"_ he said finally. _"God in his heaven, Rebecca, I love you, but you'll not use me to slip your tethers. You're going to go home to your bloke, and we're never going to speak of this again."_

She gaped at him. _"Seamus-,"_

_"Not ever,"_ he repeated stubbornly. _"I'll have no more blood on my hands. Go home and forget you ever set foot on this accursed place. And if you've a brain in that thick skull of yours, you'll destroy that Horcrux before it throttles you."_

She did not thank him. She simply inclined her head in acknowledgement and was gone with an echoing _pop._ When it had stilled into silence, he turned and went inside to clean up the mess.

_I loved you then, and I love you now,_ the wind whispered as he closed the warped door behind him, and the tender poison settled into his veins.
Family Ties, How They Cut and Strangle

He had spent the first eighteen years of his life in this house, and sixteen of those had been happy. Relatively. Captain Kirk and Kojak had been more father to him than his old man, but he'd had his ma and Diana, and neither of his parents had ever washed his hands in drain cleaner or fucked him up the ass with the toilet plunger. He hadn't fallen asleep to the sound of his parents fighting over the kids and the bills, and he hadn't spent his nights covering his sister's ears so she wouldn't hear fist on jawbone. There had been food on the table and clothes on his back, and once in a while, there'd been the time and the money to take in a Rangers game at the Garden.

Then Diana had died in the fall of '93 and taken all the light in the house with her. He suspected it had been buried beneath six feet of graveyard dirt. Shadows massed in the corners and underneath the stairs and pooled at the foot of the basement stairs, where he often sat to escape the thundering silence of his sister's absence and his father's disinterest. The darkness had even stained the doors and kitchen cabinets, aged them with the corrosive touch of grief and unspoken anger.

There had been more money to do things after Diana had slipped off to heaven with no sound but the snapping of her neck, but no one had wanted to do them. He hadn't gone to a hockey for nine years after her death because the scraping of steel on smooth ice had reminded him of the grinding of bone, and the echo of a slapshot was the snapping of her neck as she stepped off the riser and into forever. He'd played lacrosse his junior and senior years of high school because it was hockey on grass, soundless except for the rustle of trampled grass and the jostling of teenage bodies; when he'd watched the Rangers on TV, he'd watched with the sound off so as not to awaken rotten memories.

When he'd finally set foot in a hockey arena again, it had been because Rebecca had begged him to take her, and he could deny her nothing. He'd spent the first period watching her watch the game and swallowing the bile in his throat, but when she'd kissed him during first intermission and slipped her frozen hand into his, the knot of guilty apprehension had uncoiled, and he'd been overwhelmed by a giddy euphoria. He'd bought her cotton candy and a large rainbow ice, and they'd cuddled for warmth, her wrapped in his leather trenchcoat and nestled against his suddenly-light chest. He'd bought her a Messier jersey at the souvenir stand on the concourse, and she'd worn it to bed that night. The fabric had been cool and soft under his hands and between their bodies as they'd moved together in sinuous, lazy rhythm, and to this day, to see her in it was sexier than expensive lingerie.

His father had loved baseball once upon a time, had taken him to his first ballgame when he was ten, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd gone to a game. He'd invited him to the ballpark one spring to tell him that he'd enrolled in the police academy, but the old man had never shown, and he'd wound up sitting alone in a cheap, plastic seat, eating peanuts that tasted of grave dirt and explaining the nuances of the game to Diana's ghost. He'd never called to ask why he'd never turned up, and at the time he'd told himself it was because he didn't care, but in truth, he'd been too afraid of the answer.

He and his father's limited communication had become non-existent after Diana died, smothered by disappointment and guilt. His father had stopped calling him Donnie like he'd always done, and when he shambled downstairs to breakfast, there were no hearty pats on the back or grunted inquiries about his plans after school. Just shuttered glances over ceramic coffee mugs and morose slurps of straight black Folgers. Diana's parting had severed all ties between them, and they had moved in separate circles within the same house. Ma had acted as the conduit and purveyor of paternal law from the on high of the La-Z-Boy in the den and done her best to pretend that the
frosty silence that blanketed the dinner table was nothing more than the expected symptom of domestic bliss.

His mother had done the best she could after Diana's death, had taken off the black veil of mourning faster than either him or his old man. Not because she had wanted to, God knew; half of her had died that night with her daughter, and though her eyes were dry within two weeks of the funeral, they were red-rimmed and haggard for years afterward, and haunted by the emptiness of family minus one. Grief had shortened and withered her, hollowed her cheeks and belly and whittled her joints to sparse, jagged points with cruel, gouging fingers. Grief had touched her thick, chestnut hair and made it grey. Grief had used her up, and thirteen years after Diana died, she was still trying to fill the void with chatter and color and the frenetic chirp and clatter of dishes and tableware.

She had set her sorrow aside because there had been no other choice. Pop had spent all his time at the stationhouse, exacting his revenge on the dirtbags and junkies of the city, and on the rare occasion he came home, he stumped into the bedroom, closed the door and pored over pictures of his dead daughter in the family albums, snapshots of one-dimensional perfection. He looked at them and told himself that such was the way it had always been, carefree and happy, never mind that Diana wasn't smiling for him in those pictures, and never had been.

Not that he'd been much better. He'd closeted himself in his room and vomited his aborted sorrow into the toilet every morning. He'd stayed out as late as he could after school, jerking around on the lacrosse fields or helping Mr. Fitch down the corner deli by bucking boxes until the sun set and turned the sky as red as Diana's favorite hooded sweatshirt and painted her bittersweet memory behind the clouds. Sometimes, Mr. Fitch would give him ten bucks for his troubles, and he'd buy a package of red licorice-Diana's favorite candy-and choke the cloying sweetness down in sticky gobbets on the front steps of the church. Most of the time, he loved her enough to swallow the pieces, but sometimes, he couldn't and when he spat them out, they glistened on the dirty, stone steps like blood clots.

The Roman Catholic boy who had sat dutifully through catechism had shuddered at the defilement of God's house, but it had been an act of petty rebellion. God had stolen his baby sister, punished her for his disobedience, and a bastard like that deserved no respect. So, he'd spat candy pieces on the steps and smashed them beneath his sneakers and left bloody footprints on the sidewalk to mark his path.

When he wasn't crouching on the steps with sugary blood on his teeth like a fallen gargoyle, he was inside the church, huddled on the front pew and staring at the cross mounted behind the altar. Jesus hung on it with his artfully bronzed arms outstretched and a meticulously rendered expression of Divine agony on his face. He wore a crown of thorns, but they were blunted and harmless, not sharp like the ones that sank into his chest and guts whenever he thought of the coffin that had once rested at the altar, covered in roses and baby's breath.

He'd sat in the pew with his hands fist in his lap and the smell of rotten absolution in his nose. Sometimes, the nuns would slip into the nave and flit on the periphery of his burning vision like black rose petals, trailing lavender and old age behind them like perfume. They'd never spoken to him, and he had been glad of that because inside the church, the milk of kindness curdled in his veins, and all that was left were hollow bones and empty spaces.

Sometimes, Father Carmichael had emerged from the sacristy to sit beside him, and then the taste of red licorice was hot and cloying on his tongue. He would try to recoil from his serene presence, but respect for the clergy had been pounded into him since infancy, and he could only sit, cowed and miserable, beneath the gentle weight of his hand on his shoulder. He'd wanted to scream at
him, tell him to stop thrusting his well-intended fingers into open wounds, but the words would never come, stayed by the aftertaste of candy and the horrified certainty that if he pissed off the priest, he'd be sent home, where Diana peered from the shadows and haunted his dreams. So he sat and tasted the sugar of sin and the salt of unshed tears until Father Carmichael had released him with a parting benediction and a soft goodbye.

He'd thought of those youthful tantrums on his wedding day. Father Carmichael had offered to restructure the ceremony so that they could exit smoothly through the rear of the church and down the accessible ramp, but Rebecca had steadfastly refused to start her marriage by skulking by the dumpsters and torn trash bags and marking it as an unworthy union in the eyes of God. So, he'd promised to take her down the front steps, and he had, offering her his body as support while she tottered and lurched to level ground, hands locked around his steadying arm. It had been a slow, patient process, and he'd painstakingly guided her wobbling feet onto solid ground and around his unwashed sins. He hadn't wanted her tainted by him so early in their marriage, her pretty dress marred by ancient bloodstains she couldn't see.

His mother had kept life running after the family had fallen apart. She had swept dust and Diana from the corners and scrubbed her from the floors and bathroom fixtures. He could remember entire weekends passed with the sound of her scrub brush on the edge of his consciousness. She had logged countless hours on her hands and knees, scrubbing the bathroom grout with a toothbrush to purge her lost child from every last nook and cranny of the house in which she no longer lived. She had used enough bleach and Comet to make his eyes water, and when she was finished and the water in the bucket was foggy with bits of his sister's yesterdays and unformed tomorrows, she had opened the windows and let her fly away on the fumes.

She had fixed his breakfasts and washed his clothes and not asked embarrassing questions about the stains that had sometimes stiffened the crotch of his shorts or the crumpled tissues she found crammed underneath his mattress. She'd remembered his birthday and stuffed his Christmas stocking with candy canes and mittens long after growing up had killed Santa Claus and left him to rot in a rat-infested alley with winos and broken dreams. She'd painted on a smile broad enough to obscure the two empty seats at his high school graduation and taken pictures to commemorate his graduation from the police academy while his father sat in stone-faced indifference beside her. She'd also made excuses for him when he'd left shortly thereafter. She had tried to love for two with half of a broken heart.

It was his mother he was watching now. She bustled around the small kitchen in the act of making him a tuna melt on toasted rye. She hummed as she plucked two slices of toast from the toaster, and then she scuttled to the nearby countertop for the bowl of chilled tuna.

"Be ready in a minute, sweetie," she called over her shoulder. "Oh, I wish you'd told me you were coming over. I'd've made something special. Look at you; you're skin and bones still."

"'S'okay, ma. I was just in the neighborhood an' thought I'd stop by. You don't have to go to any trouble on my account."

"Trouble?" she scoffed. "It's no trouble to feed my boy. That's what mothers do." She dolloped a spoonful of tuna onto a slab of toast and spread it with brisk efficiency.

He smiled in spite of himself, a wistful twist of lips that went all the way to his heart. She had been making his favorite sandwiches for as long as he could remember. He had watched her as a boy, seated at this same table with a glass of cold milk in front of him. The sandwiches had been peanut butter and jelly or bologna then, and she had painstakingly cut off the crusts and cut them diagonally across the middle. Sometimes, there had been two-one for him and one for his sister-
and they had always been served with a kiss and a smile.

She dropped the knife into the sink with a clatter, topped his sandwich with the remaining slice of toast, and placed the sandwich on a small plate. She carried it to the table and set it in front of him, and then she bent and planted a kiss on the crown of his head.

"Such a handsome man," she said fondly. "So much better since you cut your hair." She glanced at the table and clapped her hands together. "Oh, I almost forgot."

"Ma," he protested. "You don't have to-," he protested, but she had already gone to the refrigerator and retrieved an enormous garlic pickle.

"Nonsense, I don't," she chided as she brought the pickle to him wrapped in a paper towel. "Someone should spoil you."

He decided to ignore the unpleasant implication of her declaration and picked up his sandwich instead. It was warm and crumbly in his hands. "Thanks, ma," he said, and took a prodigious bite.

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and sat in the chair opposite him. "It's so good to see you," she said. "But you're so peaky, honey." She reached out to brush a phantom strand of hair from his forehead. "You need more iron in your diet. I'll give you some good recipes to take home, mm? God knows what Rebecca feeds you. Not much from the looks of things."

"Ma," he began, but she cut him off with a stern shake of her head.

"Don't talk with your mouth full. It's rude. I taught you better."

He dutifully chewed and swallowed his food. "Rebecca feeds me fine, ma," he said when he had finished. "We make dinner together five nights a week, and I grab takeout to bring home the other two."

"Hmpf, that explains a lot," she sniffed disdainfully. "All that greasy food is bad for your stomach, especially since-," She trailed off, and her chin trembled. "Your accident," she finished weakly, and studied the tabletop through rapidly fluttering eyelids.

His heart constricted at her obvious anguish and her valiant struggle to hide it. 

**Rebecca did it, too, he thought sadly. It's how we ended up here in the first place.**

"Ma-"

"Anyway," she said stubbornly, "that explains a lot, not least of which is why you're so pale and tired all the time. What is she thinking, having you cook dinner for her after you've been out on the streets? I've prepared all your father's meals for thirty-two years without any help. His and yours. And I cleaned the house and washed your clothes and did the shopping. She got you doing that, too? Wouldn't surprise me."

He took a deep breath and willed himself to remain calm. She was his mother, and love had made her afraid, and he wouldn't hurt her if he didn't have to. He dropped his partially-eaten sandwich onto his plate and pushed it away. His appetite had vanished.

"I know you did, ma, and I'm grateful, 'cause I wouldn't be here without you. But Rebecca does right by me. She gets my food on the table and takes care of my dry-cleanin' and makes sure I got a warm bed to come home to. She just has to do it a little differently, is all, and yeah, sometimes she needs help."
"There's a difference between needing occasional help and running you into the ground so that when push comes to shove, you can't look out for yourself," she snapped, and her hands curled into trembling, blue-veined fists.

His stomach and legs were suddenly leaden with stunned disappointment, and he slumped in his chair, his tongue numb and sour inside his mouth. "I don't believe it," he croaked. "Unfuckin'believable." A laugh that bore a perilous resemblance to a sob.

"Don? What is it? What's wrong?" She reached out a to stroke his forehead, but he flinched and evaded her solicitous fingers.

"She told me," he murmured. "She told me twice, but I didn't wanna believe her."

"I don't under-,"

"I didn't wanna believe that my mother, who brought me into this world and taught me everythin' that I know about bein' a decent fu-a decent human bein', would sit in a hospital waitin' room and tell my grievin', terrified wife that what happened was her fault."

"I was terrified for you," she protested, and tears filled her eyes. She reached for his hand, but he retreated and pushed his chair from the table with the balky scrape of wood on warped linoleum.

"And that gave you the right to blame her? What the hell is wrong with you, ma? When are you gonna get it through your head that she carries my heart in her tiny fu-tiny hands? You attacked her, but you might as well've been attackin' me."

"That's not fair," she wailed. "You know what else ain't fair? It's havin' the people I trusted the most takin' advantage of me getting my guts blown out and rubbin' her disability in her face."

"How dare you?" she roared, and her complexion turned a deep, ugly maroon. "I would never- It was never about her. You were my son, my baby, the only one I had left, and I-I-," Her chest heaved, and she dissolved into wracking sobs. "I wasn't going to lose you, too," she moaned. "I couldn't. Not because of her."

Well, ain't this déjà vu? said the father that lived inside his head as he sat frozen in his chair and watched his mother weep. You been here before. Sixteen and standin' in the doorway of your sister's room while she made the bed over and over again and smoothed the sheets with tremblin' hands. Watchin' her clean up for a just in case that was never gonna happen and drown in denial and misery. She was fallin' apart, and you couldn't help her 'cause it was all your fault, and a soul ain't a broken vase that you can put together again with steady hands and some glue. It's infinitely more fragile, and if you were havin' any doubts on that score, the summer you spent puttin' your guts and Rebecca back together dispelled 'em nice and neatly. You couldn't help her then, and you can't help her now.

The sense of déjà vu only increased as he rose from the chair on wooden, jointless legs and moved to enfold her. "M so sorry, ma," he mumbled as she burrowed into him like a frightened animal. 'M so sorry for scarin' you. I didn't mean it, ma. She was right behind me, I swear, and I thought she was gonna be all right. 'M sorry for growin' up to be blown up in an apartment buildin' on Sunday mornin' because some whackjob got a bug up his ass about 9/11. 'M sorry for hurtin' you again.

I'm sorry. It was all he ever said anymore. The bombing had reduced his once varied and colorful lexicon to those two powerless words, and he said them on an endless loop. To the families of the
six people he had not been fast enough to save. To Rebecca, who clung to him now with fingers of iron, and who now spent her days listening for the heavy knock of a white-gloved hand upon the door. To Mac, who blamed him for Truby, and to all the victims Truby's stink had robbed of justice. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

Funny thing was that no matter how often he said them, their weight never lessened. In fact, they grew heavier with every utterance, soaked up the sorrow and recrimination of those he had sought to console until they stifled his lungs and crushed his heart inside his chest. Sometimes he was sure he was drowning on them, could taste them as they filled his mouth and nose, chlorine and silt, pool water and mud flats from the Hudson.

He began to rock to and fro as his mother sobbed. "'S'all right, ma. I'm still here. The bastard didn't get the job done."

"But he could have. He *could* have," she insisted shrilly, and clung to him all the more tightly.

"But he didn't. And even if he had, it wouldn't have been Rebecca's fault. None of it was. She loves me, ma, and she did right by me when it mattered. Even told me I was good-lookin' with a tube shoved up my nose."

"I never said she was stupid," came the peevish, watery retort from the vicinity of his armpit, and he bit the inside of his cheek to quash a bray of surprised laughter.

"Naw, she sure isn't," he said softly, and petted the soft wisps of hair that had faded to grey, dusted by time and too much unhappiness. "You taught me better than that, remember?"

She raised her gaze from the damp fabric of his shirt and offered him a sad smile. "I did, didn't I?" She patted his shoulder and stood on tiptoe to plant a salty, too-warm kiss on his cheek.

He dropped his arms, and she brushed past him and gathered his half-eaten sandwich and untouched pickle and glass of milk. "You didn't eat much, sweetheart. You sure you're all right?"

She spared him a concerned, red-rimmed glance as she carried the leavings to the trashcan.

"My stomach's fine, ma. I just got a lot on my mind." He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Anything you want to talk about? You know I'm always here."

It was the perfect opening to broach the subject that had drawn him to this house of sour memories, but he hesitated. She was fragile, just as broken as Rebecca, and he had no desire to inflict more hurt. He opened his mouth, sidled from foot to foot, and closed his mouth again.

*You don't wanna hurt her for the third time in your life, a three-strike felon with blood and spirit on your hands. You've tried to be a good son, to atone for the unforgivable mistake you made when you were sixteen and stupid, and for a while, you thought you were makin' progress. You got your diploma and your A.A. and graduated from the academy near the top of your class, and you got your shield three weeks after you came up for it. You were the youngest homicide dick in the history of the department, younger than me, and you came home the conquerin' hero. She was so proud'a you, and all that was left was to settle down with a nice girl and give her a few grandbabies.*

*And then you brought home Rebecca, and all the goodwill you'd built up started to evaporate. You'd brought home a girl-the girl of your dreams, as a matter of fact-but not only wasn't she the girl your ma had pictured, she was her bitterest disappointment. Visions of grandchildren that had been dancin' in her head since you called to say you were bringin' your girl for dinner withered*
behind her eyes and joined the dust that had settled over the spaces on the wall where your sister's school pictures had hung.

It was nothing she said; your ma never had an uncivil tongue in her head, and she'd rather die than be rude to guests in her house. It was in all the words that went unspoken and the way she looked at Rebecca when the latter was distracted with the bothersome mechanics of handling her salad fork. Disbelieving and wounded, like she couldn't believe you'd get her hopes up just to spit on them.

She tried to cover it for your sake, but you knew, and so did Rebecca. She never said a word about it, but she was quiet on the ride home, so quiet that you were afraid she was rethinking the whole engagement, that when you got home, she was gonna slip the ring from her finger and set it on the coffee table in concession of defeat. Two blocks from this house, she rested her hand on your thigh and flashed you a faint smile.

I'm sorry I didn't make such a good impression, she said. I guess I shouldn't have chosen Copernicus as my opening conversational gambit.

You suddenly realized you'd stopped breathin', and then you laughed because you'd been convinced that she was gonna say somethin' else entirely. Naw, doll, you managed between sniggers. You did outstandin'. I think they were just a little shocked, that's all. I never brought up your- You gestured dismissively in the direction of the trunk, where her surrogate legs made strange bedfellows with the spare doughnut tire.

She blinked. You never told them?

Didn't think it mattered. You drummed your fingers on the steerin' wheel while you waited for the light to change. I'm not marryin' you for your snazzy wheels. You made a show of lettin' your gaze travel over her legs. You do have some sweet legs, though.

She giggled. Liar.

Don't worry, doll. They'll come around.

But she never did come around, your ma. She spent most of your engagement tryin' to talk you outta takin' the long walk down the aisle, and when the big day came, she looked like she'd swallowed a mouthful of lye. You thought things would get better once you settled into marriage and she realized that done was done, but then came that first Christmas, when she told you Rebecca wasn't welcome to sleep in your old room with you. Like you were a pair of horny teenagers, and not properly wed in the eyes of the Church.

You hadn't even thought of fuckin' her under our roof until she brought it up, and then you were tempted just for spite. You gathered your beddin' and slept on the livin' room floor with her. You couldn't bring yourself to fuck her, but you did neck somethin' fierce, and sometime in the proceedin's, she wrapped her cool fingers around your hot prick and jerked you off.

Her fingers were so gentle, like she knew the violence of raw need was goin' too far, an insult she would not cast upon the house you grew up in. She could cuss like a sailor, your girl, and make it sound like music, but that night, she only whispered that she loved you, loved you dearest, while her hands worked their clumsy magic inside your boxers.

It was surreal and forbidden to be getting your rocks off on the same floor where you and Diana had watched Saturday mornin' cartoons and played Monopoly, and you felt a twinge of guilt when you thought of your little sister watchin' from between the branches of the Christmas tree. On the
other hand, it had been a feverish fantasy growin' up, and more than once, you'd sat on the couch or lain in your bed and stroked it to thoughts of nailin' the girlfriend of the moment in our house.

And there was Rebecca, makin' it reality on Christmas Eve, bringin' you off under the baleful gaze of the plastic Santa your ma had set up by the coat rack. Maybe that was why it felt so good, and why you made so much damn noise. Or maybe it was because you got an ugly stab of rebellious satisfaction from the fact that you were lovin' your girl right under her nose and there was nothin' your ma could do about it.

Rebecca had to smother your grunts and gasps with hot, frantic, open-mouthed kisses while you pumped into her hand, and it wasn't enough when you came into the cup of her palm and between her coaxing fingers. You sagged beneath the sheets, boneless and light inside the skin, and traded breathless kisses with her while you came down and twitched in her sweaty palm. You used the edge of the sheets to clean off your thighs and her hand.

You were up with the sound of me shufflin' into the kitchen to turn on the percolator. Neither of you said mum about your doin's by the glow of the Christmas lights, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to put two bodies together. You were smilin' like the cat that ate the fuckin' canary, and Rebecca was far too happy for a woman who'd been told she couldn't sleep with her husband on Christmas Eve. You might'a gotten one over on your ma, but you didn't wanna subject Rebecca to the poisonous atmosphere of this house any longer than you had to, so you bundled her off not five minutes after the last present had been unwrapped. Your ma was convinced that was all Rebecca's idea, and so that was another mark against her.

But the worst and darkest mark against her has been the lack of grandchildren. You're comin' up on four years of marriage, and there still ain't been the patter of little feet. Since your baby sister died, your ma's been pinin' for another soul to fill the void, a piece of the future that burbled and walked and talked and chased away old pains. An empty vessel with your face to be filled with the knowledge she'd never gotten to pass to her angel. And with every month that Rebecca's stomach doesn't round with new life and renewed hope, her desperation and bitterness grows.

And then you go and get your ass blown up and almost leave both of them behind with nothing but an abundance of memories and scars.

Maybe it's best if you just let the mystery of the papers drop before you hurt them more.

Except he couldn't. He was sure that they held the answers to everything, the magic words that would undo the damage wrought by Lessing and his pussy bomb. His scars might be with him for the rest of his life, but he could sing the secret song that would slow Rebecca's frantically-beating heart and return the warmth and awareness to her eyes. She would stop looking at him like he was a dead man walking. He could kiss her and not taste blood and stifled terror. But only if he knew what was on those papers.

"Actually, yeah," he said at last. "Hawkes mentioned that while I was in the hospital, you asked Rebecca to sign some papers." Casually curious.

She froze, suddenly white as parchment paper. "Oh?" Strangled. She resumed her scraping of his sandwich plate, and the tines of his fork on cheap porcelain reminded him of the screams of a smack junkie coming off a high in central holding.

His cop instincts reared their head, feral and relentless, and his mouth went dry. Bingo. "What were they, ma?" he pressed.
Her eyes were raw and anguished inside her bleached face, and the fork stuttered in her convulsive grip. "N-nothing, sweetie. Nothing." She dropped her gaze to the trashcan and redoubled her efforts to clean the plate of every crumb. The fork wailed.

_Are you erasin' me, ma, or tryin' to work the blood off your hands?_

"Ma?" Louder now, and he closed the distance between them. His pulse pounded in his temples and the heavy flesh of his balls.

She recoiled. "It was nothing," she insisted shrilly, and the tines were a continuous, discordant howl.

"If it was nothin', ma, then how come you don't wanna tell me about 'em?" Calm, persuasive, the same tone he used to calm rabbity vics and high-strung suspects.

She gave a jerky shrug. "We've had a nice visit. Why ruin it with this unpleasantness?"

He swallowed a bitter laugh. There was nothing nice about this visit. This house and the people in it were tainted, haunted by a ghost despite their efforts to erase her from their lives. There were no pictures on the walls, and Diana's mementoes had been donated to Goodwill, parceled out to unsuspecting people who had plucked pieces of her from the bargain bin, but she lingered here. She had cursed the house with her absence and exiled him from it with the somnolent thump of sifting damp earth onto a coffin lid.

"Ma. I need to know. What was in those papers you asked her to sign?" He enunciated each word with clipped precision.

There was only breath between them now, and his abdomen brushed her elbow. The hard point grazed the wattled scar beneath his navel, and he instinctively braced himself for a bright point of agony even though there had been no pain in months, only phantom twinges conjured by an uneasy mind and easily brushed aside by love and willpower.

She huddled over the trashcan, the plate and fork now held like sword and shield in her hands. She was a small, cowed animal backed into a corner, and he loomed over her like pestilential shadow.

"What does it matter now? You're better."

_Because I'm better, but my life is still fucked up. My wife is still fucked up, starin' at me with plastic eyes and livin' with a glass heart that threatens to shatter every time it beats. I can't go on pretendin' there's nothin' to see here, and I can't lose the one sweetness that gunpowder and street dirt hasn't soured. You're the only person that can help me now. I know you don't love Rebecca, but please, God, love me hard enough to be my mother one last time."

"Mama, please," he cajoled, falling back on a childhood endearment. He reached for her shoulders and gently pulled her upright. He cupped her face in his hands, and his fingers, recognizing the flesh from which they had been formed, cradled it with reverence.

She twisted from his hand with an anguished bleat, staggered past him with her face in her hands, and collapsed against the kitchen table.

He moved toward her, arms outstretched, and his heart thudded inside his chest.

_I gave my ma a fuckin' stroke, he thought dismally. Won't Pop be proud of me now?_

She rounded on him, face contorted with fury and anguish. "She owed me!" she shouted, and
pounded on the kitchen table. "I'd already lost one child, and I wasn't going to lose you. If I was going to watch my boy die, then I was going to make sure I still had a chance, a part of him to tend. All she had to do was sign the papers, but she wouldn't, damn her. Selfish little bitch."

"Ma, what-"

He trailed off, stunned and heartsick. He did not recognize the woman in front of him. She had been twisted into unrecognizable angles and serrated in unexpected places, reshaped by the blast like everything else in his life. His mother had birthed him and kissed his scraped knees and carried sufficient love for him to play mother and father all at once. Mother had been soft and safe and kind. But this was Mother 2.0, the distorted mirror-image that inhabited his world of After, and she was none of those things. She was hot wax and ground glass and salted wounds. She was terrible, the Queen of Hearts in mother's clothing.

*Off with his head,* he thought.

*A part of him to tend.* The phrase struck a primordial chord in him that resonated in the dimmest recesses of his brain and inspired a dull, swooning dread that he could not name. It cramped the soles of his feet and greased his stomach and soured the spittle in his mouth. He told himself that he had no idea what she meant, but the panic tickling the roof of his mouth like the warning signals from an exposed nerve ending showed him for a liar, and he knew that if he thought hard enough, he would understand. He was not sure he wanted to.

Before he could press the issue, the kitchen door flew open, and his father filled the threshold, sports section of the newspaper clutched in one beefy fist. He looked from him to his mother, who leaned heavily on the kitchen table, palms pressed flat against the scarred surface to support herself. His bushy, brown eyebrows knitted themselves into a thunderous scowl.

"What the Sam fuckin' Hell is goin' on in here?" he demanded. His gaze settled on him and sharpened. "What'd you do, Don?"

*Of course it's always me, isn't it, Pop?* he thought petulantly, and opened his mouth to supply the equally childish reply of, "Nothin'."

His father's eyes narrowed. "For nothin', you're sure as hell stirrin' up a bunch'a shit." He turned his attention to his wife. "Ana, darlin', why don't you go upstairs now an' get some rest, huh? Go on, now. I'll be up in a few."

His mother gave a weak nod and shambled out of the kitchen without looking at him. His father moved to let her pass, and as she did so, he stroked her hair with swollen, arthritis-tortured fingers. It was a gesture of tender familiarity, and seeing it made his chest ache. He turned his head and watched the second hand make its inexorable circuit around the face of the Felix clock mounted above the stove.

It had counted fifteen paces when his father said, "Mind tellin' me what the fuck you think you're doin', comin' here and upsettin' your mother?" An authoritative rumble from the center of his chest, rough with nicotine and the memory of countless orders to freeze in the name of the NYPD.

*Like I ain't done that enough already, right, Pop? What, with killin' my baby sister and getting my ass blown up?* "I didn't mean to upset her. I just had a question about somethin' that happened while I was off my ass in the hospital. Some papers."

He braced himself for the inevitable diatribe about upsetting the domestic tranquility of his father's house and his reading of the sacred box scores, but to his surprise, his father's expression softened,
and he stepped into the kitchen and shut the door behind him. He ambled to the counter, and the ancient linoleum bubbled and wheezed under his weight. He tossed the newspaper onto the table and proceeded to the cabinet above the stove hood.

"What, no lecture about how I ain't got the right to go upsettin' ma over some goddamn papers?" he needled incredulously.

His father took down a package of coffee and a fifth of brandy. "Nope," he grunted as he dumped heaping spoonfuls of the former into the percolator that squatted by the refrigerator like a territorial dowager. "Matter of fact, I'm kinda surprised it took you this long."

He mouthed helplessly for a moment. "You knew about 'em?"

"I'm not deaf or a dumbass," he said mildly. "I was there when they had their big hooraw. Coffee?"

He turned on the percolator with the flip of a switch.

"Naw."

"Suit yourself. It ain't that stationhouse swill. It's Folgers," he announced, as though it were a coffeehouse exclusive and not available at any rundown joint with an inventory.

"Do you know what they were? What they said?"

"I ain't blind, either."

"So what were they?" he prodded relentlessly. He sensed discovery, and he teetered on the knife-edge of expectation. It was an agony of ecstasy, as the dead poets said, and it was-

Glorious. Like that breath before a perp spills his guts onto the interrogation table or that infinite instant before your hips buck and spill your hope into Rebecca's twitchin' cunt. It's the surety that in that fleeting moment, you'll hold the secrets of the universe in your hand and glimpse the face of God, turned askance as he resets the sun in the firmament.

His father glanced at him, lips pursed in surprise. "Rebecca didn't tell you? I thought for sure she would, pissed as she was."

"Yeah, well, I guess she didn't want me to worry." Especially not after dear old ma told her my bein' there was all her fault. Wouldn't wanna get me blown up and stress me out.

"Yeah, they're good like that," his father mused, and his lips twitched in a fond smirk.

It took him a minute to realize that he meant his mother and Rebecca, women who had volunteered to live and love in the shadow of the shield. It struck him then that he had never known his mother before time and the demands of child-rearing had taken their toll. By the time his first memories of her had solidified, he had no longer been the sole apple of her eye; Diana had been screaming and fussing and ruling the roost with a chubby, newborn fist.

"She was somethin', wasn't she, when she was younger? Ma, I mean."

"You have no idea. Soon as I saw her kickin' the flat tire on that cab and cursin' that driver, I knew."

"Ma cursed?"

His father only laughed.
There was an awkward silence broken only by the gurgling hiss of the percolator, and then Flack said, "So, those papers?"

His father studied him. "You sure you wanna get into this?"

"It's not a question of wantin', Pop."

His father did not speak until the coffee was ready and he had poured himself a cup. He carried a second cup in his other hand and set it in the center of the table.

"Pop, I told you I didn't want any," he protested.

"So you don't. I'll drink it then." He plopped into his chair, grabbed the bottle of brandy, and poured a jigger into his coffee. He set down the bottle, picked up his cup, and took a slurping gulp. He set the cup down with a grimace.

"Those papers," he began, and leaned forward, elbows propped on the table and coffee cup curled snugly in his palms. "The thing you gotta understand is, your ma's been crazy for a grandkid to spoil."

He snorted. "You gonna tell me somethin' I don't know, Pop? She's been after me since I graduated the academy."

"Yeah, well, you know. Since-," He stopped, and the thought hung in the air between them. "Since Diana died, you mean?" he finished bitterly. "I killed her daughter, so I'm supposed to make up for it with a grandson?"

His father flinched as though struck, and his eyes were wide and disbelieving. "It ain't like that, Don. You didn't- She just wants to be a grandma, is all."

*You didn't-* The closest he had come to absolution in his life, and yet it was still far out of reach. He was Tantalus, reaching for a peach he would never taste, and disappointment burned on his tongue and made it sharp.

"Then why are my balls and what I do with 'em any of anybody's fuckin' business, Pop? Tell me that."

His father had no answer, only averted eyes and fidgety fingers, and that was answer enough.

"'S what I thought," he said dully. "The papers."

"She wanted Rebecca's permission, if you didn't make it, to harvest your, uh-," He shifted in his chair, took a fortifying gulp of coffee and cleared his throat. "Your, uh, y'know." He coughed. "I believe your friends on the Nerd Squad'd call it 'genetic material'," he finished at last.

"My semen," Flack said flatly.

His father blushed and studied the murky depths of his coffee. "Yeah."

"Let me get this straight." He was suddenly too hot inside his skin, and too light, as though he could leave his body if he closed his eyes. "My mother went to my wife while I was lyin' in a coma and asked her to let her take my jizz and freeze it so Rebecca could carry it later like she was some fuckin' brood mare?"

His father picked up the bottle of brandy, unscrewed the cap, and poured four fingers into the

It took him a moment to process the full implication of that denial, but when the penny dropped, he picked up the spiked coffee and drained it in a single convulsive gulp, never mind that it was black and gritty and cold and sour with booze. He set the empty cup too close to the edge of the table, and it fell to the floor and shattered. Dregs spattered the runnelled linoleum and scabby baseboards like castoff, but it wasn't new blood, evidence of fresh atrocity. It was old, pushed to the surface by new light.

"Don," his father said. "You have to understand-,

"Fuck you," he said without looking at him. He scraped the dust and grit from his soles on the threshold of the front door when he left, and he did not look back.
While her husband quaffed cold, spiked coffee to help the vilest medicine go down, Rebecca sought a nostrum of her own. It was not to be found in the clean, well-lit aisles of a pharmacy or the sterile fluorescence of a doctor's office, nor—if she found it—would it be tempered with sugar and honey and vanilla extract. It would be bitter and caustic and purgative as castor oil, and it would be found in the shabby, seedy gentility of Spinner's End.

She had spent two feverish nights there with Hermione Granger in her sixth year, hunched over a table in the root cellar and crushing nightshade into deadly ichor with a smooth, stone pestle. The Serpent King had been there, too, of course; it was his den, and he was a proprietary bastard of the first water. He had overseen their desperate work with a tyrant's impatience, snapped and snarled and sunk his poisonous fangs into them to goad them, and the damnable tactic had worked. They had redoubled their pace, each for their own reason: Hermione because she was determined to prove him wrong, and she because she had not wanted to disappoint him.

It had been cool and damp in the root cellar, and beneath the mossy odor of moisture had been the less pleasant smell of rotten wool, as though the professor had left old robes to rot. It had been the smell of Snape corrupted, and as it had swept into her nostrils and crept into her mouth to coat her tongue and throat, she had thought, very clearly, that it was how he would smell just before they set fire to his corpse. The thought had made her stomach roll with a mixture of terror and revulsion, but her face had remained impassive. The Serpent King had tolerated neither children nor weakness, and vomiting was a sign of both.

Hermione had noticed it, too, and as she descended from the last wooden riser onto the oiled dirt floor, her nose had wrinkled in unthinking distaste. "Erm, Professor, what is that smell? It's awful," she had asked, and waved her hand in front of her nose to emphasize the point.

The Professor had paused on the steps, one knee bent in preparation for another step and one hand resting lightly on the crumbling banister. The other hand had been curled imperiously in the folds of robe at his throat, and she had thought of Jonathan Edwards and the hands of an angry God; it was a comparison she had made before, but that night, there had been no fear, only a dim, simmering anticipation.

"Now, Granger. Now you'll see," she had thought, and her teeth had sharpened inside her mouth.

"With your unbridled lust for keen observation, Miss Granger, I should have thought you would have noticed the formidable textile mill nearby," he had murmured drily. "My apologies on overestimating the abilities that Professor McGonagall touts to the bloody ceiling and beyond in the staff room. Given her longstanding penchant for gross exaggeration, I should have known better. No matter. Rest assured that I shall not make the same mistake again." He had glided down the remaining steps and flicked a bony wrist at her in dismissal. "You've your instructions, girl. Why are you standing there with your mouth agape? If I had wanted Longbottom, I would have brought him."

Each word laced with the finest, most delicious venom that intoxicated as it ravaged. She had been intimately familiar with it by then, and more than a little addicted, though she would never have admitted it. His tongue had tempered her, broken her in her soft, unguarded places and reforged her, fitted her with adamantine bones and an obsidian heart. She had considered each strike with the forked lash of his tongue a test to be borne and passed, and so, she had experienced a faint, fleeting pang of disappointment that the venom was not for her.
The Professor had summarily remedied his oversight. "Why are you looking so pleased, Stanhope, you insufferable chit? You're no better, slouching in that mechanized menace with a vapid expression. I would have been better suited with Goyle and Fang than the Dunderheaded Duo with which I have so clearly been saddled. Get to work, and so help me, Stanhope, if you damage my stores with an errant jerk of that jouncing contraption, it will be my most profound pleasure to hurl you from the roof like a garden gnome."

It was cruel and petty and blessedly familiar, and you savored it even as your cheeks flushed with humiliation and indignation. You fought a smile as you rolled towards the shelves and cabinets stacked high and deep with potions, phials, and ingredients because here was a dance you understood. It had been enmeshed in your pores through long hours of toil under that baleful, black gaze, and you recounted its steps with the unthinking precision of muscle memory. Hermione might have been smarter and more coordinated, but you were on surer ground.

Yes, sir and No, sir and Yes, sir again when his clipped step sounded behind you. You knew not to drop your gaze when he asked you a question and not to lie when you didn't know the answer. You also knew to handle the tools of his craft with care and reverence. Hermione knew, too, but sometimes, she forgot in the heat of her anger and desperation, and he gave her no quarter for youth or exhaustion.

He worked you for hours, but he asked of you nothing that he was unwilling to give himself. He ground and catalogued and brewed alongside you, eyes narrowed against the steam from three cauldrons. Eventually, the ambient heat overwhelmed the cold, and sweat beaded in his hairline and beneath his long, thin nose. It dampened the starched collar of his robes and turned it grey, and you couldn't help but blink in surprise and swallow a lump of unease. You had seen him undone by the agonies of Cruciatus in the privacy of his chambers, but that was an ugly, precious rarity. In the classroom, he was poised and cool, perfectly pressed and creased. The deepening stain on his collar was just one more proof that the world had gone mad.

It was so unsettling that you opened your mouth to comment on it, but time was short and his temper was shorter still, and he had neither the time nor the patience to soothe your skittish, child's heart. He brought the knout down across your shoulders and throat with ruthless proficiency, and the words withered on your tongue.

The work was simple and numbing. Hermione called out the names of decoctions and ingredients and gathered them from the shelves, and you ground and chopped and peeled. It was a testament to the importance of the task that he forewent his hard and fast rule against you use of magic, and your wand was hot and heavy in your grip as you murmured the commands to chop and section and bindle, and your lips cracked and bled with the endless repetition. You spent the night with blood on your tongue and teeth and the deep, throbbing ache of exertion in your wrist and shoulder.

The Professor brewed endlessly, batch after batch of potion. Pepper-up and Dreamless Sleep and Blood-Replenishing Draughts. Skele-Gro and Felix Felicis. Potions to sustain and potions to ease suffering and potions to undo the damage wrought by magic upon the human form. Medical miracles rose from his cauldrons in a fine, shimmering haze or a thick, rolling boil. Once, when you paused in your grinding to wipe the sweat from your eyes and adjust your grip on your wand, you saw him through the unsteady, hallucinatory curtain of heat. He loomed over the cauldron and peered into it through half-lidded, speculative eyes, heedless of the heat and noxious vapors that enveloped his sallow face in torpid, corrosive fingers. He was motionless, and the steam danced around his long, lean frame, made a mirage of him even as he lived and breathed. It was hypnotic and beautiful; he was beautiful, and for a moment, your grip grew lax with mournful wonder. Then Hermione had thumped her mortar on the workbench in wordless frustration, and you returned to
your appointed task.

He brewed other potions, too, these neither so simple nor kind. Veritaserum and the Draught of Living Death. The first amber as honey and the last black as pitch. He kept the latter in a corked glassine well apart from the rest. One drop was enough to do its work, and inhalation of the vapors could cause coma and brain damage. He warded it against your unwitting predations, and when you returned to Hogwarts two nights later, it was the only potion he wouldn't let Hermione carry in her padded, compartmented trunk. He stowed it in a burlap satchel belted at his waist. You wondered why he needed such a potent decoction, but you knew better than to ask. You let Hermione do it for you and duly suffer the consequences.

He stopped only when Hermione began to slur her words. He herded you up the stairs and into the living room, the caustic, boiled-cabbage reek of industry embedded in your clothes and skin. He offered you tea and stale crackers, and then he shepherded you behind a bookcase and up a winding, rickety staircase that scarcely accommodated the hulking width of your chair and groaned beneath the weight of it when your floating wheels skimmed the risers. He led you to a small, spartan bedroom with a bed in one cobwebbed corner and a pallet of ancient, dirty linens in the opposite.

The floor is yours, Mrs. Granger, he said. Do mind the rats. They can be rather bothersome. And then he was gone. For once, Granger was too exhausted to complain.

The rest was brief. He roused you with the sun, and you shambled, stiff and bleary-eyed, into the root cellar again. The scant sleep had done little to improve his mood. Indeed, he was savage, angered perhaps by the hours of rest happenstance had so rudely denied him. He drove you hard, his helpless dray horses, and all day and long into the night, the cellar sweltered with steam and repressed emotions. If there was no rest for the wicked, then there was even less for the righteous.

Hermione cracked near the end, simply sat down hard upon the floor with a ledger in her white-knuckled hands and sobbed, and you could hardly blame her. Your own eyes were hot with fatigue and swollen in their sockets, and your defenses were buckling under the strain of too little sleep and too much expectation. Your scrawny chest constricted in sympathy as she sat on the floor and bawled.

The Professor was unmoved. He loomed over her, arms folded across his chest. Miss Granger, he murmured. Fascinating though I find this display of childish hysteria, I haven't the time for it, he snapped. Get up, stop sniveling, and get back to work.

Hermione met his gaze and scowled at him, face wet with tears and snot and sweat. I don't care if you've time for it or not, Professor, she retorted. I'm tired, and I bloody well need it. You can spare five minutes.

His response was unflinching. No, Miss, Granger, I cannot, and neither can the Aurors and students who will depend on these potions for survival when the hexes begin to fly. Potter, for instance. He paused to let the myriad implications of that statement sink in. Now get up. Almost gentle. You don't see Stanhope succumbing to lunacy.

Yes, well, I never claimed to be soulless.

You tensed in anticipation of fury at her cheek, but he startled you with a bark of derisive laughter. Only a Gryffindor would mistake weakness for the evidence of Divine animus. Then his face hardened. Either get up, Miss Granger, or get out of the way. No gentleness now, only contempt.

To your surprise, Granger fled, and for a while, it was just you in the room with his urgency and
his bile. But Granger returned a few minutes later, goaded perhaps by conscience or pride or both. Her face was blotchy but defiant, and her chin was steady. There were no apologies from her and no words of encouragement from you. She just squared her shoulders and picked up the ledger, and the work resumed.

From dawn to dawn that time, stopping only to use the cramped lavatory off the sitting room. Cold and damp crept into your muscles and bones, and by the time you returned to the castle, you could barely move. Hermione wasn't much better, stooped and shambling as she delivered the store of potions to the infirmary. You both needed a hot bath after your adventures. She sequestered herself in the prefects' bathroom, and you consigned yourself to the fluttering, solicitous hands of Winky and Dinks, who barricaded themselves in the girls' lavatory with you and soaked and scrubbed you in hot water until muscles loosened their grip.

Those two days weren't enough; two hundred days wouldn't have been enough, as it turned out. The Professor brewed what he could in the dungeons, but even after he commandeered empty rooms and advanced students to help with production, the demand outstripped supply. When the trench warfare began in the fall of seventh year, he co-opted the Hogwarts kitchens and brewed Blood-Replenishing Draughts alongside pans of blackberry crumble.

It was no use. Wizards were wounded by the hundreds, and the dying were needy. Supplies meant to last weeks disappeared in an afternoon, and the Ministry, mired in its own battles and casualties across the country, siphoned precious resources. Desperate Mediwizards and Healers diluted the potions with water in an effort to conserve what little they had. In the thick of battle, when all hands were needed in the trenches—even a Potions Master's skilled ones—Healers filled empty phials with mud and called it medicine, knowing it brought no cure but kindness and false hope.

You had always thought that you would return to Manchester after the War, settle in as the Potions Master's dutiful assistant. Never so lofty a title as apprentice, no. That was not for you, with your palsied, clumsy hands. But you could buy his supplies and equipment and make deliveries. You could mind his inventory and rouse him from his single-mindedness long enough to keep him from starvation. You would be useful.

You had thought to be useful in other ways as well. You had hoped, in your young girl's heart, that he would come to you for satisfaction of other, less pragmatic needs. Not love; even at seventeen, you had lost enough rosy-eyed optimism and seen enough of his soul to know that such was beyond him, but mutual tolerance, perhaps even deep regard. He would come to your bed and share his warmth, and you wouldn't die with your maidenhead withered and dried between your legs. So intricate was the fantasy life of After that you had fashioned for yourself that you had thought to roost in the room you had shared with Hermione and had even envisioned the curtains you would hang in the dingy windows.

It's vulgar now that you were willing to settle for so little, but back then, you could not conceive of the deep, abiding love you would one day know and share with Don, your improbable prince. With no lover and no prospects for greater happiness, it seemed a paradise, an Eden of routine and familiarity. Better to be conveniently used than forgotten.

But there were no curtains, no loveless trysts in a bed with ragged linens. The Serpent King preferred a loveless life to a sweet death with you, and he tore your dreams to pieces. The gingerbread house in Manchester had gone rancid, and you hated it and him. It was a blessing unlooked for, but at the time, it was the end of the world and the dying of your light, and you swore you would never come back.

Except you had no choice. Don saw the bruises on your chest from when the magic hurtled you
across the Shrieking Shack and asked how you got them. Of course he did; he loves you more than
the air he breathes, and he has spent your marriage making you comfortable and happy, making
you safe. He traced his fingers over the blossom of the bruise and bent to kiss it, eyes dark with
concern.

What the hell happened, doll?

And you lied. You had told lies of omission over the course of your marriage, white lies designed to
keep from him the truth of unicorns and fairies and dragons, but never lies of occlusion, fashioned
from whole cloth to protect you from unwanted scrutiny. Those were diseased lies, corrosive and
poisonous, and you had promised never to tell them. Not to him, your fair prince. It was another
promise broken, a livid scar across your heart.

You tried to ignore it, tried to purge yourself with the salt and iron taste of him on your tongue,
and all you could think with his scarred belly under your mouth and his endearments in your ears
was that you were tainting him. You burst into guilty tears and robbed him of his arousal, but he
only gathered you into his arms and tried to croon your sorrow away, and that made you guiltier
still. You knew then that you could not abide another lie, not to him. So you waited until he slept
and went in search of your truth.

And here you are.

Here she was, bundled in her balaclava and wending through the grimy, grey streets of the city. It
was cold, the dead heart of English winter, and the wind off the river cut through the flimsy
protection afforded by the balaclava's thin, woolen hood and scoured her cheeks. Breath marked
her path like a smoke trail, and she blinked to clear her watering eyes.

She maneuvered around a pile of dog shit gone grey at the frozen edges, and the cold, metal rims of
her wheels sank teeth into her gloved palms. "Shit," she muttered. "Should've bought dragonhide."
Not for the first time, she cursed Severus Snape his Muggle roots that prohibited her from using
magic in public.

The city was unchanged from her memories of it. The sky was still the color of boiled lead, and the river still stank of industry and inedible fish. It had been the industry of wool once upon a time, or
cotton. Maybe it still was. She couldn't say. The stink was different, though, deeper and fouler and
more entrenched in the soil. Dirty nickels and wet paper in her nose.

Even the garbage strewn along the streets was the same—plastic candy wrappers, glass bottles,
chewed gum. Sometimes there were more exotic things, like used condoms and dirty diapers, but
these, too, had been there before, she was sure. Maybe they were the same ones she had glimpsed
back then, or maybe these were descendants. Garbage bred just like everything else.

There were few people about, and of those that were, fewer spared her a glance. They walked with
their mittened hands stuffed into the pockets of their overcoats and their rough chins tucked snugly
into thick mufflers. The faces were as bland and indifferent as the sooty, rundown buildings she
passed, and she wondered again how she could ever have thought of this place as Eden. It was a
necropolis of dead hopes.

Well, New York isn't lush, precisely, her grandfather pointed out.

She grunted. On its face, New York was an ugly city of stone and steel, dirty with the reek of eight
million bodies and teeming with rats. The only greenery was in the oasis of Central Park, and even
that was not pristine. Its grasses were marred with streets, sidewalks, and bike paths, and all of
them were clogged with joggers and dog walkers and horse-drawn carriages. Yellow cabs flitted on
the periphery like mechanical bees and pollinated the green with another thick dusting of human traffic.

But there was a deceptive beauty to New York, a vibrancy that seethed in its grey, concrete arteries and drew the wayward and dreaming there with its promise of hope, of better sometime. The neighborhoods and barrios had their unique flavors and tastes and smells, and you could start in Cuba at dawn and find yourself in Taiwan at dusk. It was "Hello" and "Fuck you" and "Hallelujah". An aspiring writer who had surrendered his pen too soon had once called it a place of "millions of Manhattans", and she thought that was right. It was a place of poverty and pride and secrets, and everything grew lushly there.

She hadn't realized it at first. She had been blinded by her hurt and cynicism when she touched down in the city with nothing but her undergraduate diploma and a trunk full of clothes and books. It had been so much dirt and smog and stone. And then Don had come, and his enthusiasm for his cradle city had passed to her like contagion. He had showed her the colors and textures of the city, rubbed them into her skin with his eager hands and tender lips, and once she had seen them, she couldn't unsee them.

New York was home. New York was where happiness lived.

Closer and closer to the river she wound. And when she stopped on the muddy, frozen bank, she watched the water bubble and rill as it sought out the sea. It was thick and brown and smelled of tannins, and the weak sunlight did not glimmer and dance on the surface. It sank to the bottom and died, a pebble cast by a thoughtless hand. It was dead, just like this city and the people in it.

Opposite the river, the crooked chimney of Spinner's End jabbed the sky like an impudent finger. She set out for it and left the stink of the river behind. The quickest route to Professor Snape's doorstep was up a steep embankment gnarled with hillocks and exposed tree roots. Without magic, it was an impossible climb. Her only alternative was to double back along the narrow, rutted highway and hope she wasn't mown down by a mill worker impatient to get home to his pinch and his pint.

She snorted. "Oh, fuck this. What good is magic if you can't use it?"

She cast a furtive glance at the crest of the embankment to be sure that no one had stopped to sick into the weeds or piss into the snow, and then she withdrew her wand. She gave all four wheels a brisk tap, and the chair rose gracefully from the mud and snow. She sighed in satisfaction and stowed her wand inside her robes. She waited for several long minutes, poised for the telltale crack of Apparition that would herald the arrival of an Auror, but when none came, she raised her hands to Levitate the chair even higher. It hovered magnificently above the earth, and it glided forward with a gentle flick of her wrists.

She lowered it to the ground as soon as she cleared the embankment. It wouldn't do to cause a car accident. The wheels skimmed the surface as she nudged them onward with her fluttering hands, and with each turn, more of Spinner's End came into view.

It was uglier than she remembered, but then, it had been ten years of hard winters and long absence. Snow piled in lumpy, dirty drifts in the yard, and what the snow had not claimed, hardy scrub weeds had. The brick façade was coated with soot, and the heavy, wooden door was stained with it, too. It was also, she noted with an inexplicable pang of trepidation, missing its ornate, iron knocker. The roof was missing shingles, and the exposed tarpaper reminded her of blood boils.

Maybe it's vacant, she thought. Or maybe it's inhabited by some wheezing old Muggle who's not going to have the faintest idea what I'm talking about when I go rapping on his door and asking
after Professor Snape. He could be dead for all I know. It's been nine years since I saw him and almost two since I burned his owl in the oven. If not dead, then maybe he's in Azkaban, going black-toothed and even blacker-minded at the thought of his enemies getting the last laugh.

She hesitated on the fringes of the lawn, and her fingertips prickled with adrenaline. Even before the War, the Professor had ruthlessly safeguarded his privacy with an array of wards. Some had skirted the bounds of legality, and she had no doubt that if he hadn't been bound by Dumbledore's conscience and the terms of his Hogwarts employment contract, he would have happily used the darkest, most lethal wards at his command. Why not when they would have incinerated his most persistent bothersome pupils? The only reason she had trod his inner sanctums unscathed was because he had permitted her to do so. But that was long ago and far away, and absence did not make the heart grow fonder; it only made it forget.

She closed her eyes and listened. Not to the howling wind or the growling putter of passing cars, but to the subtle undulating thrum of magic radiating from the earth. It was faint, the fleeting skitter of insectile feet on her nape and against her eyelids, but it was also unmistakable. Anyone with a whiff of magic in their veins could sense it if they knew what to look for, and if the magic was strong enough, Muggles could feel it, too. They did not know it for magic, of course. They gave it other names—the paranormal, the unexplained, miracles. The promise of this last drew sick and desperate Muggles to places like Lourdes or Stonehenge, where they brought totems and offerings and prayers and left with nothing but misplaced faith. The magic would not, could not help them without a knowledgeable hand to guide it. It simply lay fallow upon the ground and bought them a little more hope, a little more time to put off goodbye.

There was magic here, of that there was no doubt. Some of it was old and thin, an echo of past spells and wards that had since dissipated or been removed, but much of it was fresh. She thought she could almost see its colors on the black canvas of her closed eyelids, pink and orange and scarlet, faint as smoke and fog. She sat for a while and let it wash over her in rhythmic, dancing eddies, curious fingers and tongues that sought her crevices and unprotected skin. It slipped into her nostrils to tickle the coarse hairs inside, and she wrinkled her nose to suppress a sneeze.

She opened her eyes and surveyed the lawn and the flagstone walk that led to the front door. The chances of the wards being lethal were slim. The Professor was eloquent, but it would be hard to explain a steady parade of unwary Muggles spontaneously combusting on his lawn. Even so, that did not mean the consequences for setting foot in his yard would be minor. Magic, like the language and tongues that had crafted it, was endlessly inventive, and its potential for violence was limited only by the imagination. And the Serpent King was possessed of a formidable one, indeed.

She steeled herself and thrust her left foot onto the lawn, eyes closed and fingers curled around the armrests of her chair in white-knuckled anticipation of immediate immolation.

You put your left foot in, you put your left foot out; you put your left foot in, and it doesn't come back out, she chanted inside her head, and giggled at the mad absurdity of playing Hokey Pokey on the lawn of Spinner's End. The giggling caused her extended foot to bounce wildly, as though it were dancing to the unvoiced song.

Only the image of the Professor scowling at her from behind the flimsy curtains in the front window kept her from dissolving completely. She sniggered and hiccupped and retracted her jittering foot, and then she trudged up the uneven, flagstone path to the front door. She smoothed her mussed robes with her mitten hands and knocked on the door.

He's not here, declared a pessimistic, rabbity voice inside her head. He's dead or fled. He had neither friends nor lovers here. He was a Death Eater, and some said he was a turncoat twice over.
McGonagall trusted him as far as she could throw him, and Moody would just as soon have clapped him in irons and shunted him to Azkaban to rot. Lupin was indifferent, and the rest of the Order judged him a valuable nuisance, there under the Headmaster's auspices. None would've shed a tear if he died; they'd have viewed it as a waste of perfectly good water, the stingy sods. Hell, Potter and his slavering coterie would've danced on his grave and pissed on the dirt that covered it.

So what reason would he have to stay? Teaching was a means to an end for him, a chance to flaunt his knowledge of a subject before a sea of inferior, dumbfounded faces. He held no love for the students under his care. He taught for the art, not for the would-be artists. Hogwarts was a sanctuary and a convenient place to exercise his art and his petty tyranny. If he could find neither there, he would have discarded it. Just as he summarily discarded you when your purpose had been served.

He's in Latvia or Lithuania or the dark heart of Bulgaria, countries where darkness is embraced as a necessary counterpart to the light and the Dark Mark isn't viewed as the Mark of Cain. Perhaps he traded the fortress of Hogwarts for the squat, subterranean bunker of Durmstrang. Each of its three floors is a dungeon unto itself, and his ambition and ruthlessness would serve him well as its headmaster.

Even if he chose to remain at Hogwarts, odds are that he's still there. He seldom left for the winter holiday when you were a student, and he was ever a creature of routine. Took his tea the same way and at the same time every day, and stayed behind over the winter hols. Practical, he said, and one of his duties as Head of House, but the simple truth was that he had no reason to leave. Hogwarts was as much his home as it was his prison.

She was contemplating Apparition to Hogsmeade and a trek up its winding egress to the castle when the door opened with an authoritative click of retreating tumblers. Severus Snape, black knight of childhood past, loomed over her, and as she had done one September afternoon a lifetime before, she craned to get a better look at him.

Age had lined his narrow, sallow face and streaked his lank, black hair with strands of white, but he was otherwise unchanged. His eyes were polished obsidian inside his face, and they still burned with the Devil's fire. He was tall and lean, a living shadow in his black robes, and she thought again of Jonathan Edwards and God's wrath. One long-fingered, alabaster hand curled around the door, an albino tarantula creeping stealthily from its lair, and she shivered.

Once upon a time, she had dreamed of those hands, had willed them into feverish, desperate places in her most secret, shameful dreams. She had imagined them dipping between her legs and stirring the pleasure coiled in her cunt like a cramp, dancing over her lips and clit with an artisan's cunning. He had palmed her breasts a thousand times in sticky-fingered fantasies that had left her shivering and spent and wet as she wiped her hot, pruned fingers on the pillowcase. Those hands and fingers had molded her into a woman in the dark recesses of her mind.

They had done nothing of the sort, of course. The only gentleness they had ever shown her had been on the floor of the Gryffindor girls' dormitory, when she had shaken herself to pieces in the throes of a seizure and he had pieced her together with delicate efficiency. He had braced her against his bony chest while she had bowed and shrieked, and those flawless hands had brushed the hair from her mouth, cool against her burning skin. His hands had never been more intimate than that, not even when his own fits had turned him inside out and stripped him of his mind, but that simple, necessary caress had made her ache and fueled her dreams until his tongue had shattered them.
They were still beautiful, and though her body no longer yearned for them to map its contours, she knew how they would look in the flickering torchlight of his laboratory, how they would move, nimble and precise and elegant as they danced over the tools of his trade. She was startled by a wave of nostalgia so fierce that her throat constricted. If nothing else, she wanted, needed to see him work one last time. She swallowed with an audible click.

"Professor." It was a strangled, phlegmatic rasp.

"Miss Stanhope." He gazed at her without enthusiasm.

"I…didn't expect you to be here."

"Hence your serendipitous appearance at my door," he muttered. "What do you want?"

Vituperative as ever, and she found that comforting even as she shifted in her chair. "To see you."

He surveyed her through half-lidded eyes, face impassive. "I don't know what nostalgic madness drove you to seek me out, nor do I care. Inflict yourself on someone else." He made to close the door.

"I need your advice," she blurted.

"I spent three years playing nursemaid and manservant to you, you miserable chit. I've no desire to play agony aunt now."

"You played nursemaid to me? I-you— You were my teacher."

"I see you are still able to conjugate verbs. If only you could grasp their subtleties as well. I was your teacher, but I'm under no obligation to be so now. There is no pity for you here. Go. Now. And for the love of Merlin, put it in reverse. I have no desire to gaze rapturously at the self-portrait your mangled form would make should it crash through my unsuspecting door."

And then he slammed said door in her face.

She gaped uselessly at the door, stunned and furious, and she told herself that the tears blurring her vision were from the scouring wind, which howled in reproach and tore at the hood of her balaclava with icy, triumphant fingers. This was not supposed to happen.

Because despite all the evidence to the contrary and your hard-bitten cynicism, you believed that you were different, that a bond had been forged between you by the long hours of eternal night in his dungeons and tempered by being the keeper of his secrets. How could you not be special when you had seen him stripped of his armor and his dignity, writhing in a stew of shit and piss and revisited sin? You had kept his secrets even after he betrayed you, loyal to the last, and you had held his hands though they were slathered in blood. You had saved his life not once, but twice. He owed you. Of course he would repay those debts, if not for love, then for salvaged pride and an opportunity to divest himself of another unwanted obligation.

A staccato thud interrupted her thoughts, and she was surprised to see that her fisted hand was banging on the door. The pocked wood scraped her knuckles, and the reverberations from each rap rattled in the small bones of her wrist and elbow like aftershocks. She pounded until the rattling of the door in its frame began to sound like music and her raw knuckles left stippled smears of blood in their wake.

_A pox upon thee and thy house_, she thought, and redoubled her assault.

The door flew open so suddenly that she nearly pitched out of her chair. Only a mad scrabble for
her armrests prevented her from toppling across the threshold in an indecorous, twitching heap of upraised ass and splayed limbs.

Professor Snape stared dispassionately at her. "Why are you still here? I distinctly recall telling you to leave." Flat, bored, but his eyes flashed with indignation.

"As you pointed out, sir, you're no longer my teacher, and I'm no longer obligated to give a damn what you want," she shot back. "Since you won't be my teacher or even a decent bloody human being, you'll have to be a wizard. You owe me a life debt twice over, and I've come to collect. One or both, I don't care. You can hex me if you wish, and it's a safe bet you'll win because my coordination is nothing short of appalling."

"An epiphany at last," he sneered.

"But if you do," she went on as though she had not heard, "it better be a killshot, or so help me, I will draw blood before you're rid of me."

"You've been gone too long; your Gryffindor is showing," he mused idly.

Heat rose in her cheeks. He was right, of course. In the old days, there would have been no threat, only raw, unapologetic action. Only fools and braggarts make threats, and they are often paid in blood, Stanhope, he had told her once upon a time. Make certain it isn't yours.

"Are you going to invite me inside, or would you prefer to freeze your bollocks off while you play agony aunt?" she demanded.

Her voice was stony, but her stomach was a fluttering, greasy ball of apprehension. If he chose to call her bluff, the jig was up. She had no killing in her veins; even something so simple as Sectumsempra was beyond her now. All her hatred had been spent on Lessing, and only dead embers remained.

He pursed his lips and stepped back, and she thought he was going to slam the door in her face again, but he only pivoted on his heel with the crisp snap of swirling robe. "You have ten minutes," he snapped, and stood aside to let her enter.

Spinner's End, like the city beyond its genteelly shabby walls, was unchanged, frozen in time. The same drab curtains and spindly furniture, the same books lining the shelves. The same boiled-cabbage stink, dirty wool and sour youth.

The Professor scowled at her and strode to the yawning threshold that led into the root cellar. "Nine minutes," he spat, and disappeared into the black maw of his laboratory.

She sighed and followed him down the rickety staircase. "Not even going to offer me tea?"

"Tea implies an invitation, which I did not extend. However, if you wish to spend the nine minutes of my time at your disposal mucking about with tea, be my guest. Far better for me than your inane blather." He crossed the dirt floor to his worktable. Ingredients lined its surface like surgical implements, and he plucked a fat, pink gobbet of flesh from a cloth and held it to the weak torchlight for inspection. It took her a moment to recognize it as a weasel gallbladder.

"You're making Camoflous Draught?"

"Once again, your powers of observation astound," he murmured. "I thought you wanted tea. It's in the kitchen; this isn't Hagrid's kettle." He gestured carelessly at the cauldron in front of him.
"I haven't come for tea." Here in the den of the Serpent King, her tongue had reverted to the formality of the Queen's English. One less shortcoming to pique his inexhaustible ire.

He snorted. "What did you come for, you miserable pestilence?" He set the hunk of weasel gallbladder on a wooden cutting board and began to slice it into wafer-thin slivers.

She looked at him for a long time. *Tell the truth and shame the Devil. Or make him smile.*

"Seven minutes." Quiet, implacable as the ticking of a clock.

"Tell me how to live with damnation."

The rhythmic tap of his blade on the scarred wood of the cutting board stopped for the briefest instant, and silence blanketeted the room like a cauld. "The melodrama does not become you. What damnation consumes you, Miss Stanhope? The feverish shame of wanting to shag your Potions professor? You're hardly the first pubescent imbecile to harbor a schoolgirl crush, and I assure you that your hormone-addled lapse in judgment never left the field on which it was made."

Though the time measured by the steady *thock* of his knife was slipping through her fingers like sand, she could not resist rising to his obvious bait. "I should think the story of my idiocy and subsequent humiliation would have proven rich fodder for your tales of infamy and scathing repartee. Then again, perhaps you didn't want the world to know you'd captured the heart of a misbegotten mutant." Sullen and juvenile, but old hurts welled between the fissures of her crumbling fortress walls, and rage mingled with the sweet, milky desperation in her mouth.

"You've unmasked my villainy at last," he murmured, and swept the translucent slices of weasel gallbladder into his cupped palm. He tossed them into the gaping, iron mouth of the cauldron with practiced grace. "Go. Bask in your victory. Burn me in effigy if it pleases you. But leave me to my work. I've neither the time nor the patience to nurse the useless wounds of your adolescence."

Dismissed.

"A man blew up my husband. The Muggles sentenced him to life in a sanitarium. It wasn't enough. All the blood in his veins and all the marrow in his bones wasn't enough," she hissed, and tendrils of remembered venom caressed the backs of her teeth and dripped from her burning tongue like acid. "Nothing would be enough. So I brought him into this world and made my own justice. Piece by bloody piece." She let out a rattling, strangled breath, and tears warmed her numb face.

The Professor had gone very still while she spoke, his back turned to her as he watched steam rise from the cauldron in a shimmering vapor. He rounded on her with the crunching grit of spinning heel, arms folded across his chest. "So you come to me seeking absolution? You want me to ease your guilt with saccharine platitudes about redemption and hope and the triumph of the human spirit over the nascent evil that lurks in the souls of man? Would you have me ease the agonies of your conscience with the promise that there exists no Hell beyond this one? That is beyond my purview even if I were still your teacher. You need a vicar or a confessor, Miss Stanhope, and I am neither."

"But you know why I have no guilt," she croaked. "Why I peeled another human being like a potato and felt…nothing. You can teach me about that."

Oh, yes he could. A hundredfold. A thousandfold, if he were honest with himself, and the Ghost of Albuses Past that had taken up residence in his mind since the damnable old saint had fled the bonds of earth would allow him to be nothing but. He had been divorced from his conscience for so long that he seldom recognized it, and when he chanced upon it, he greeted its appearance with
nettled irritation. It only served to complicate matters that should have been as simple and stark as life and death. It bollixed affairs quite nicely if permitted, a Peeves housed within the cockles of the heart and impossible to outrun.

He had lost his conscience to Lord Voldemort at seventeen, forfeited on the promise of greater glory, and even then he had counted it as no great loss. It had been baggage to be left behind. He had sold his conscience to Albus Dumbledore at nineteen, and for the rest of his days, the canny old Headmaster had shaped it according to his whims. Albus Dumbledore had needed a viper to do what his own conscience would not allow, and so he had told his charge that murder destroyed the soul, all while pressing the means of its execution into his outstretched hand.

He had spent eighteen years walking the valley between shadows and light, and he had survived because he had been stripped of conscience. By day, he had prowled the corridors of Hogwarts, dispensing knowledge to ungrateful dunderheads and reading unintelligible essays from those who purported a grasp of human speech, and by night, he had crept into unwarded homes in his Death Eater's mask and slit the throats of their sleeping parents while their infant sibling squaled from its cot. On one memorable occasion, he had sat at the High Table with dried blood under his ragged nails and listened to the Headmaster wax rhapsodic on the sanctity of life. His throat had burned with the bloody taste of irony.

The Headmaster had not been a liar, precisely; he had simply been in possession of a disposable conscience. Hardly surprising, since the old bastard had collected people like baubles, plucked them from the rubbish heap and the flat breasts of ale-soaked slatterns and set them to his own ends. Argus Filch, a filthy squib with rotten teeth and sharp eyes who shambled the bowels and ramparts of the castle and learned its secrets. Hagrid, a great, lummoxing oaf of a half-giant who had a rapport with every misbegotten creature ever to crawl from the deep. Mundungus Fletcher, a tosspot who would scavenge the rings from his mother's bones for the right price. Remus Lupin, the flea-ridden wretch, and Peeves the poltergeist, who acted as sentinel while the rest of the castle lost itself to dreams. Potter, the golden child who could taste no death, and Stanhope, the miraculous chit who held the spool of the world in her unlovely hands and could read its threads or weave them howsoever she chose. And him, of course, his conscienceless sin eater, swallowing depravity so worthier lips would never taste it.

So, yes, he could teach her about life without the luxury of regret, but she was the last witch under the light of Helios' fire to need it.

She came to you hard as adamant and fierce as the lion I deemed her to be, said the Headmaster inside his head, and he saw him in all his glory, seated behind his desk with his long fingers laced across his chest, bright as the phoenix that sidled to and fro on its perch in the opposite corner of the room. Merlin, but the memory was strong, strong enough to smell the tart sugar of his beloved sherbet lemons on his breath and see the sticky dewdrops of honey in the thick mat of his beard. Stanhope, it seemed, had brought the past with her on her infernal rubber wheels.

 Damn you, you insufferable chit, he thought.

Oh, but you did, Severus, the Headmaster reminded him, and now twinkling blue eyes were grave. Every time she refused to buckle beneath your deliberate, crafted cruelty. You cursed her resilience, her refusal to yield. You railed at her audacity and devised the most wrenching tasks, designed to break her will. You made her chop and slice and grind until her fingers sloughed flesh and blood onto the dungeon floor in tribute. You pushed her past the limits of human endurance without a moment's pity, and when her muscles rebelled and left her shrieking and spasming on the ground, you stood over her and told her it would stop hurting if she but wanted it to.
Sometimes when the spasms struck, you sat in a chair opposite her and watched, as though she were another in an endless series of experiments. In truth, she was. You wanted to see how hard you could push before another human soul shattered in your hands. She was a phenomenon to be studied and catalogued and properly disposed of when the game was over. Each shudder and guttural howl was another data point for your collection.

It should have been easy. She was fragile and wracked with infirmity, eggshell and spun sugar beneath cold, pale skin. She had been formed haphazardly from the dust of the earth by novice hands, and you sometimes wondered if she wasn’t the product of inexpert Transfiguration, a broken puppet that had been twisted into human form and imbued with life by virtue of arcane magic. Cold or prolonged tension could reduce her to a shivering, dribbling wreck and turn her piano-wire sinew against her. She was helpless and boneless as an infant when fatigue stole over her. She should have offered little resistance to your machinations.

But she was a bundle of contradictions. The misbegotten angles of her twisted body afforded her an endurance you had not foreseen. She bent and weathered your blows with the implacability of the tortoise and plodded inexorably onward. Even when her body surrendered, her mind stood firm. She lay on the cold floor and clawed at the stone, eyes wild and defiant and locked on your face as the convulsions wracked her. She never closed her eyes, never turned her head in shame, and later, when the game had escalated to asking her questions on potions-making techniques while she waged war with herself, her answers were decisive if not always correct. Sometimes, she spat them at your spit-polished feet and bared her fangs in challenge.

You could not break her, and Umbridge could not, and Lucius could not. She was as the rocks against the sea, and it maddened you and fascinated you by turns. Soon, irritated fascination became grudging admiration, and when you could not induce in her a perfect hatred untainted by injustice, you sought to remold her in your own image, harness her unexpected strength into a valuable commodity. I had my golden child in Harry Potter, and you would have yours, though she would be made of darker gold by far.

There was surprisingly little work to be done. She was fifteen and devoid of the dewy-eyed sentiment of youth; it had been subsumed by the remorseless instinct to survive, to go on breathing long after her enemies were dust. It was batrachian and inexhaustible and unnerving even as you reveled in it. No one so young should be so hard, so steeped in the watches of the night. She smelled blood and did not balk, tasted death and did not weep.

You trained up your child in the way she should go, and she was a most avid pupil. She was your faithful fetch, following in your wake as though she were a part of your soul sundered from the flesh. You taught her hexes and Curses not found in any textbook because you knew she possessed sufficient bile and hatred to cast them. Sectumsempra and Malleus Necros and Excoriatum. They flowed from her wand with disturbing proficiency, and when you inflicted them upon her, recognition flickered in her eyes. She had met their kind before, and she relished their company.

Then the War, and the hard shell of the tortoise metamorphosed into the liquid, sinuous twine of the asp. You had thought, by then, that she had been graven in your image, but oh, Severus, you had underestimated her once more. When you unleashed her upon the battlefield and commended her into the hands of the Fates, she was no serpent. She was a Fury made flesh, Alecto with her lash of bone and tongue of fire. She was howling, bloody-handed Vengeance, scouring the moor in her clanking, improbable chariot of metal and rubber.

Her hatred was boundless, dredged from the pit of her belly and vomited onto the earth and spit into the faces of her foes in black clots. Alecto, with her unceasing anger, and Tsiphone with her need to avenge the dead. For all her rage, she injured more than she killed directly, though you
often saw her picking through the bodies and snuffing out those too weak to defend themselves. An altruistic soul would have mistaken it for mercy, but you knew better. You had driven the last vestiges of mercy from her heart. It was ruthless expediency that compelled her.

Only once did the unquenchable flame of her hatred flicker, and that was when Lucius stood over her with wand upraised and triumph in those grey eyes. She sprawled at his feet with blood on her face and made no attempt to deflect the killing blow that must surely come. If he had but stifled his insatiable need to preen, your rescue would have come too late; she was tired and weak, and for once, her eyes looked beyond her ravenous anger. She would have gone to death gladly. But Lucius was as predictable as he was insufferable, and his gloating earned you precious seconds in which to orchestrate his dramatic exeunt with a lazy point of your wand.

She had been so resigned to the end that her sudden reprieve startled her, and for the briefest instant, you saw disappointment in that flat, reptilian gaze. Then unseated Alecto reclaimed her throne. She writhed and twisted until she was within reach of Lucius’ body. Even in death, he was the picture of elegance, porcelain and bruised dignity in the bloody dirt. She admired him for a moment, and then she dipped her fingers into a seeping shoulder wound and flicked her tongue to taste of his blood. It was the atavistic gesture of a lunatic, but you knew her to be utterly sane. She spit it into the mud beside him, and then you scooped her up and carried her to the castle infirmary. She went without a whimper of protest, slack and heavy as a corpse in your arms, but she returned to the moor with the grey, fog-shrouded dawn and watched the carrion crows plunder Malfoy’s stiffening body. What he had refused to give in life, the birds and the grubs took in death.

And yet, her armor was not impervious. He who forged it knew its weaknesses, and one night in the trench, you drove the blade deep. She tried to kiss you, brushed her lips against yours, and despite the blood and dirt, they held sweet promise. But love was a killing weakness, a distraction you could ill afford, and what was more, she was but a child, and she would never stir in you the desires of a man. So you did what you must to save you both and drove her out. You cut to the bone and held no mercy for the soul that had shown you nothing but and attached no strings to the gift. You made sure she hated you by the end, but your salvation came at a price, and when you carried her to the infirmary, she did not emerge from the scorched wood and stone like a broken phoenix. Her fighting, her War, was over.

She left Scotland after that, packed her trunk and forsook all the ties that had thought to bind her, Slytherin to the last. Your indifference was the one obstacle she chose not to overcome. Some might call it cowardice, but you know that it was simply enough. She had found the line she would not cross, the sacrifice she was unwilling to make, and in typical Stanhope fashion, she set her feet and refused to yield. In truth, you admired her bollocks. Tears and snivelling were the tools of the cheap and useless, and she was neither.

You never thought to see her again, your Alecto with the golden hair and Hades’ spleen, especially after your owl went unanswered, but in the miniscule part of you that allows for hope, you wished her godspeed and a softer place than you had made for her in your belly of smoke and stone. Now, here she sits, nine years older and asking you a question to which she has had the answer since she was fifteen, as though she hopes yours will be kinder.

He thought he knew why. She had found the softer place he had wished for her in his idle moments. The evidence of it rested on the third finger of her left hand. She had traded her dull, battered armor for a piece of Potter’s gold, had traded its stalwart, inglorious protection for pretty, sparkling hope and left herself unguarded. He suspected there would be other shiny baubles if he looked for them, tokens of the affection that had undermined the steely resolve of her youth. Love had wounded her to the quick, and she had been unprepared for the consequence of vulnerability.
"I told you love was poison." No malice, just unflinching fact.

She offered him a rueful smirk. "Yes, sir. You did. But I drink from it gladly."

"His name?" Brisk, as though they were discussing the properties of aconite and not the man who had clearly stolen her soul.

"Don Flack. He's-," Her mouth worked, and she closed it with the click of clacking teeth.

"Your softer place?" He concentrated on the consistency of the Camoflous Draught, but he could see her on the periphery of his vision.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Yes," she said. "Yes."

He stirred the potion and then turned to face her. "Do you regret what you have done?"

"No." Dark and ugly, a pebble spat upon stone.

"Then you know what to do, Miss Stanhope, and I'll not mollycoddle you. I'm not a Weasley, thank Merlin for small favors."

She stared at him in the gloom, and resignation warred with desperation on her face. "But-," she began.

"You're not Potter, Stanhope; the world cannot be accorded to your petty whims. I've told you the truth. Pay a visit to that infuriating tartan baggage, McGonagall, if you want fairy tales. There will be no foolish wand-waving here. Live with the lie or accept the consequences of the truth. I can make it no plainer. Make your choice and be on your way."

She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. "Thank you, Professor. I'll leave the way I came in. I appreciate your time."

She was halfway to the stairs when he said, "Why did you come to me, Miss Stanhope? There are kinder hearts than mine in your past."

She gazed at him over one rounded shoulder, and blue eyes shone silver in the deepening dark of the room. "Because I knew you'd tell me the truth. You never lied to me, not even when I needed you to."

A glimmer of Alecto still in that answer, and he was tempted to ask her to stay and resume the task of apprentice, if only for a few hours. But she was his fetch no more. Too much damage had been done and too much time had passed, and so he merely acknowledged her honesty with a terse inclination of his head and returned his attention to the potion.

He felt her presence for a moment longer, heavy and perversely intimate, and he was convinced that if he turned, she would be but a hairsbreadth away, gazing at him with that terrible expression of absolute awareness, one hand poised to touch his bony shoulder or caress his sallow cheek as she had done so often during his fits of helpless shame. Then he heard the rumbling groan of warped riser and knew that she was gone. He felt suddenly hollow, but he told himself it was relief and kept working.

When he trudged upstairs several hours later to brew his evening tea, he discovered that she had left the door open. A light dusting of snow had accumulated on the threadbare threshold, and as he pulled out his wand to Banish it, he thought it was morbidly fitting that Rebecca Stanhope had gone and left cold and darkness in her wake. She had not forgotten her lessons, after all.
>He checked the apartment twice to be sure, moved from room to room with methodical precision on legs that moved only because the motion was ingrained by muscle memory and years of training. His empty fingers curled around the grip of a pistol he did not hold, and his tongue was hot and small on the floor of his mouth, a dry pebble that threatened to choke him each time he swallowed. He ended where he had begun, standing in his socked feet in the doorway of the room that served as Rebecca's den of numbers.

The room was gloomy in the pre-dawn light, and it occurred to him that this was how a room looked when its dearest and most frequent occupant was no more, reduced to memories and two-dimensional photographs already beginning to fade. He had seen it a thousand times in the living rooms and kitchens of widows and sudden orphans. Absence took on a weight of its own in the houses of the unexpected dead.

*It was the way Diana's room looked after she was gone,* Gavin observed inside his head, gruff and tender all at once. *The night she died, you couldn't sleep; every time you closed your eyes, you found yourself inside the Whisper House, tuggin' on her frozen arm in a bid to snatch her from the snappin' jaws of that damn pile. But she wouldn't come. She was rooted to that filthy floor and starin' into the dark with eyes like covered mirrors. She was already gone, but you didn't know that, didn't want to know, so you pulled until the dream carried you onto the lawn and left you on your hands and knees in the wet, cold grass, snivelin' and pukin' and starin' into the face of your father.*

*Sleeplessness was better than lookin' into them cold, dead eyes, so you opened your eyes wide and stared at the ceilin'. That was okay until you started seein' your sister's face in the darkness above your bed. It twisted itself into shape from the sparse light from the buildin's across the street and the hard, spidery fingers of the trees in the backyard. It came and went, like she was playin' one last game of peek-a-boo before childhood ended and forever began. Seein' her made your chest ache and filled you with a longin' that burned like sickness in your gut. You wanted to reach up and touch her face when you saw it, fill the cup'a your palm with its dark cheek, but you were afraid, 'cause you knew it would disappear the second you tried, fragile as the hope that made it, and you didn't wanna be disappointed.*

*You saw her in other places in your room, too. You thought she was hunkered at the foot of your bed, rocked back on her haunches with her arms dangling loosely between her thighs. You thought she was watchin' you, and that any minute, she was gonna open her mouth and eat the night. You knew that when she did, her teeth would be long, narrow needles and gleam silver in the faint light. You held your breath and waited for a cool, fleshless hand to dart out and seize your ankle, the better to drag you under. If she caught you, you would wake up inside her coffin, facedown in the liner with her death in your nostril.*

*You left your ankle exposed just in case. You wanted to go with her, even if she was damned to ride the rivers of Hell. Home was wherever she was, and Hell was more than you deserved anyway.*

*She never grabbed your ankle because she wasn't there. The shadow at the foot of your bed was your dirty clothes and wishful thinkin'. So you swung your feet over the side of the bed, a lure to coax her from under the bed in case she'd decided to play hide and seek, too. You whispered her name through a wad of phlegm in your throat and willed her to come out, come out wherever she was.*

*Ollie, Ollie oxen free,* you murmured to the floor, and watched your feet with feverish, tear-stained
hope. Ollie, Ollie oxen free, Di.

But she never came out of hiding, and even in grief, your patience wasn’t inexhaustible, so you gathered your pillow and a blanket and padded across the hall to her room and stood on the threshold just like now, in your socked feet with tears and weariness in your eyes. Your heartbeat vibrated against your ribcage and made your vision blur and waver at the edges. You wanted to sit down and rock back and forth, but you knew that if you did, you’d never regain your feet. You’d just sit there until morning, when either your ma or pop shambled upstairs and found you on the floor like a pillar of salt. So you stayed upright with your beddin’ clutched to your chest like a goddamned teddy bear.

You’d planned on goin’ right in and settlin’ into her bed, or, if that knife cut too deep or too close, beddin’ down on the floor beside it like you did when you were kids. You used’ta drape a sheet over chairs and call it a tent. You went campin’. Sometimes, you slept on the floor because it was warmer on those deep winter night when the furnace went to shit and the cold cut like piano wire across exposed skin. It was warmer heartbeat to heartbeat under the flannel blankets your Pop brought up from the basement. It was safer, sweeter, and you did it as often as you could until circumstance and basic biology said you couldn’t.

Sometimes, you’d slept on the floor together to keep her night terrors under control. They started as soon as she was old enough to dream, and she could raise hackles with her screams. Your folks tried everythin’—your old man, who thought his fatherin’ responsibilities ended at the crotch of his undershorts, walked her across the floor of the nursery for hours on end, makin’ up nonsense nursery rhymes and recitin’ baseball stats while he bounced her in his arms—but she just kept screamin’, chubby toddler fingers clawin’ at the collar of his undershirt. She’d scream until she puked sometimes, and then your ma would lift her from your father’s arms and carry into the bathroom, where she’d plop her in a tub of lukewarm water and wash her blotchy face until she’d cried herself out. Sometimes, she never cried herself out; she just cried herself to sleep in the tub.

She started askin’ for you as soon as she could talk. Do’, she’d scream or whimper, and reach for you with clutching, baby fingers. Do’, Do’, Do’. She knew early on that you were a protector, the guy to turn to when the world went to shit. She wouldn’t stop howlin’ until your ma put her in bed with you, and then it was like throwin’ a switch. She’d stop cryin’ just like that and pat your face or try to stick her fingers up your nose, and five minutes later, she’d be dead to the world, thumb in her mouth and diapered ass lodged against your stomach like she owned it. Once your parents figured you were the magic trick to stavin’ off the screamin’, it was your job to look after her, and from three to thirteen, that’s what you did. Until there were too many hard points and subtly roundin’ curves and too much burgeonin’ knowledge to sleep comfortably and innocently.

You went to her room that night with the intention of seekin’ her out, of wrappin’ yourself in remembered comfort. You’d curl on top of her ugly, lavender sheets or on the hard floor and wait for the familiar sensation of an ass butted against your belly and balls or arms around your middle and an ear over your heart. But when you got to the threshold, you couldn’t bring yourself to go inside. Not because she wasn’t there, but because she was.

You could feel her from where you stood on the threshold, a heaviness in the center of your chest and a distant pressure on your eardrums. It was as though she had crept behind you to blow in your ear, but when you turned around, the hallway was empty. If you held your breath, you were sure you could hear the furtive rustle of her socks on the worn mat of the carpet or the shift of her body as she turned on her mattress. She was waitin’ for you in the silence.

You hesitated. What if she was as mad at you as your folks were, especially your father, who was already buryin’ you in his mind? What if she blamed you for her death, damned you for her stolen
life? Why shouldn't she? It was your fault, and for most of the year before her death, she thought you hated her guts. The only reason she was there that night was because you were tryin' to prove her wrong. You loved her, loved her best and still and always, and you couldn't stand the thought of seein' disappointment etched on her face and knowin' it was forever.

But the chance to spend one last night with your little sister overwhelmed your shame, and you made up your mind to cross into her room. You had one foot up and your heart in your mouth when your father materialized outta thin air and blocked the doorway, an avengin' angel barrin' the gates of Eden. Instead of a flamin' sword, there were broad, slumped shoulders and a haggard, sleepless face.

What're you doin', boy? Tired, but there was no trace of sleep in his voice, no fuzziness of distance to indicate he was returnin' from the land of Nod to the here and now. It was the voice of a night watchman. The voice of the job, and you'd inherit it a few years down the road when you pulled off your white gloves and watched them flutter to the earth like shed feathers.

You gazed into your father's stony face. It was sharper in the dark, longer than it had any right to be, and you shuffled from foot to foot and hugged your pillow and blankets. You couldn't see his eyes in the dark, and you wondered if they were glazed with more than just grief and weariness. Like the scotch he kept in the cabinet above the stove.

You shrugged. I don't know, Pop, you answered slowly. I just wanted- Wanted to be where she was, to find the echo of her heart in the house. Her room was the place she'd spent the most time, the place where the world of her head and heart had the most power. It made sense that what was left of her would linger there. But you were sixteen and heartsick, and you didn't know how to say it. The words and the sentiments behind 'em were too adult for your child's mouth. So you let the sentence hang and prayed your old man would have a bout of parental osmosis like the ones that always got you and your sister in deep shit.

Well, Di won't have to worry 'bout that anymore, you thought suddenly, and the wave of grief that accompanied the thought coaxed a hiccoughing sob past your lips. Oh, shit, Di, I'm so fuckin' sorry.

But your father musta left his psychic powers in the bottom of the scotch bottle because his impassive expression never softened with understanding. He just stood in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest and watched you like you were a perp on the verge of spillin' his guts.

I just thought-, you began at last.

You don't think nothin', he barked. You done enough thinkin' today, and look where it got you. There ain't nothin' for you in here, he said. You ain't got no business in her room. Go on back to bed now.

He stepped into the hallway and closed her bedroom door behind him with an authoritative, final snick of engaging tumbler. He put paid to any thought of sneakin' in anyway by standin' in front of the door until you went back into your room.

Close your door, he ordered, and you knew better than to defy him.

You closed the door and locked it, and then you sat in the middle of your bed with your knees drawn to your chest and your ankles crossed and listened to him hover outside your door. Sometimes you could see the shadow of his feet beneath the door as they paced back and forth, drew near and backed off again. He was standin' guard, making dead sure you obeyed his law. He was there for nearly an hour before you felt him leave, and after he was gone, you laid down,
turned to face the window, and waited for dawn to paint the sky.

You went into her room for the last time three days later, when your ma was changin' the sheets over and over again, fluffin' 'em and smoothin' 'em down again like she was tryin' to reform her daughter from the miniscule bits of her embedded in the linens and mattress. It was a wrenchin', fruitless task, made more so by the fact that Diana was everywhere you looked. In the ugly, lavender sheets your ma was smoothin' over and over again with her tremblin' hands. In the My Little Pony that was still perched on the corner of her dresser even though she'd outgrown it years ago, and in the Strawberry Shortcake doll at the foot of her bed that was supposed to smell like strawberries, but just smelled like a plastic fart. Especially in the Nancy Drew books that littered her room in teeterin' piles, on the night table beside her bed and peeked from beneath it. Your folks mighta hoped she'd get married and be a seamstress or weddin' planner in between havin' babies, but you'd always thought she'd follow in your old man's footsteps and yours, or maybe she woulda been a member of the Nerd Squad, that modern-day Clue Club that found clues in smears of dirt and blood.

Your ma didn't want you in there, either, and she shooed you out with her tears and her red, raw, grief-ravaged face. You never set foot in it again, and the next time you saw it, the mattress had been stripped and Diana's belongin's had been packed and delivered to Goodwill and the Salvation Army, her abbreviated life donated to the homeless and the down-and-outs.

The door to her room has remained closed ever since as far as you know, and you can't help but wonder if they've trapped her inside those four barren walls. You're tempted to find out, to slip into your parents' house while they're on their annual vacation to the Keys and break the seal on her room. It wouldn't be hard with your trainin'; hell, if push came to shove, you could hammer the hinges out and replace 'em when you were through with your pilgrimage. You could open the door, go inside and stand in the center of the room, and listen for the small, quiet voice of reunion.

You know how the room would feel because you've felt the same in hundreds of rooms devoted to memories of the dead. It doesn't matter that everything that identified the room as your sister's will be gone. Your memory will replace everything as it was, including her. You'll see her stretched across the bed like a contented cat, ankles crossed and raised behind her and fingers splayed over the pages of a book to keep it open. Maybe she'll be nibbling on her rosary while she reads, and when she looks up and sees you, she'll roll her eyes, but the corner of her mouth will twitch in secret happiness.

What d'you want, Donnie? she'll demand, but she'll roll onto her side in tacit invitation to join her.

Your sister's room is a shrine stripped of its idols and fetishes. This room will be a shrine, too, if your girl never comes back, only you won't strip it bare. You'll leave everything as it is, even if they find her floating in the muck and garbage of Long Island sound. Especially then. As painful as it would be to relive the memories it would inspire, it'd hurt a helluva lot more to be left with nothin' an empty room. If you leave it untouched, she might see fit to visit you now and then. You might look up from your DD-5s and see her sittin' at her whiteboard or awaken in the night to the sound of her peckin' at her keyboard in the throes of her latest stroke of genius. You'll never need to look for her like you do your sister 'cause you'll already know where she is.

The room was as he remembered it from the last time he had glanced into it. The desk was against the far wall, covered with papers and folders and geegaws he could not identify. Rebecca's laptop was in the center, closed, and a reading lap bowed over it like a penitent monk.

On the adjacent wall was her whiteboard, but it was not white today. It was covered in blue numbers, symbols, and lines, the secret language of his girl's mind. He had tried to understand that
language once upon a time, in the beginning of their courtship when he had wanted to impress her, but it had been too advanced, too thick inside his head. It was a language of unspeakable vowels and too few consonants, and he had surrendered quickly and left the task of translation to her infinitely capable hands. He wished that he could speak it now, or at least read it. Maybe it would tell him where she had gone.

Or why she went, added Gavin as he slipped into the room. Not just her body, but the rest of her, all the best parts. She can be sittin' right beside you, fingers threaded loosely through yours, and somehow you know she's a million miles away in a place you can't follow. Her voice and eyes are distant, adrift. She gets that way sometimes when she's gotten wind of a big idea or is hip-deep in a big project, and it never used to bother you because it was part of her genius, and besides, you get that way yourself when you're on a big case or gearin' up for a big raid.

But lately, it's been different. She's somewhere else almost all the time. She drinks her tea on autopilot and gets ready for bed the same way, with eyes wide shut. Sometimes, you wonder if she sees you at all, and you're tempted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her until the light comes on in her eyes and she acknowledges you as more than a fixture in the comfortable set of her life. You want to make her teeth rattle and her bones pop and grind in her unbalanced sockets until somethin' other than blankness fills her eyes. Even if that somethin' is anger.

It used'ta be easy to bring her back to herself and the present; a touch was all it took, or a gentle word. Her name. You could lift her from her chair and twirl her in your arms, and her smile'd light up the whole damn apartment. She'd fuckin' glow with happiness. Now the only time you glimpse that light is when you're hip to hip in bed, movin' together beneath the sheets in a sweaty tangle, and the glimpse lasts only as long as the last possessive, jerky surge of your hips. Then the light gutter and dies, and you're left gropin' in the dark for the girl you miss so fuckin' much, the beautiful, lively girl Lessing stole with his damn pussy bomb.

It all came back to Lessing and his bomb. There was life Before and life After. Before had been sure and steady and ever-treading the upward path. They'd had plans and a tentative roadmap of how to get there, but there hadn't been any hurry. They'd had time in the palms of their hands. The morning he'd left for a date with open guts, they'd shared a quick breakfast and broached the subject of starting a family. Nothing concrete, nothing serious. Just talk, a gentle dance around the subject that had made his heartbeat quicken in his chest.

I could have a family, he'd thought as he'd driven to the scene. Then he'd met Mac at the scene with the dead security guard, and everything had gone to hell.

Before had been obliterated in the explosion. He had tried to pick up the pieces, but they had cut his hands as they slipped through his fingers, and those he could hold on to refused to fit where they once had. Now there was only After, with its jagged edges and gaping holes. It was a limbo where nothing was quite as it should be, life in a funhouse mirror. He felt distorted and stretched inside his skin, and the edges of his world were warped. His job was too loud, and his wife was too quiet, and the idea of having a child was a joke. He and Rebecca were ghosts in this house, and ghosts had no right to make a life for anyone else.

He went to her desk and sorted through the papers scattered haphazardly over its surface. Post-It notes adorned her laptop, protruded from the sleek, black casing like lesions. OBGyn Appt. 1/03, read one. Another said simply, Bday for my prince. He peeled the note from the laptop and drew his thumb over the painful, determined scrawl of Rebecca's handwriting. They weren't even out of Christmas yet, and she was worried about his birthday; the faintest of signs that his girl was still alive beneath her scrim of bland indifference. He replaced the note and picked up a stack of pages from her printer bay. A cursory glance told him it was more of her secret language parsed into the
common tongue, a proposal for a ten-thousand-dollar research grant. He put it down. Student papers, lecture notes, pages torn from her day planner, grocery lists, geometric patterns scribbled on pages of a yellow pad. And at the bottom of one page, nearly lost in the clutter of her brilliance, four simple words: I love you, babe. He wondered how long ago she had written them and if she had intended him to see them.

He went into the living room and sat on the couch, and it was only when he saw the small Christmas tree in the corner that he realized it was Christmas Day. The presents settled underneath the tree like obedient, well-dressed children, and he found himself cataloguing the ones he remembered. A new pair of biking gloves for her hands. New tennis shoes with Velcro fasteners. Those were a custom job; Velcro was for children, not college professors. A new watch for formal occasions, a delicate golden band with diamond dust around the bezel. He had wound and set it before he wrapped it so she would not have to, and he imagined it ticking inexorably inside its velvet box, marking the seconds and wondering why it had not been unearthed from its temporary tomb.

There were other boxes and packages, too, and these he did not recognize. They were for him, he supposed, gifts from his mother and Rebecca. Shirts and suits and ties, maybe a new pair of dress shoes. Nothing special. Nothing dangerous. Nothing that would be crushed by the ravenous demands of the job. She had learned that lesson already. He wondered which of the pretty boxes would lead him back to Before if he pulled the ribbon and wished upon a star.

He reached for the telephone beside the couch and hit speed dial. Three rings later, Scagnetti picked up.

"Yeah, Detective Scagnetti," he grunted, and Flack could see him scratching his johnson as he spoke.

"Scagnetti, it's Flack," he said.

"Oh. Hey, Flack. What can I do for ya? Shouldn't you be bonin' the missus? Salutin' St. Nick with your hard, jolly dick?" He chuckled at his own wit. "How's she doin' anyways?"

"Listen, Scagnetti, I need you to put a BOLO on my girl. She wasn't in bed when I woke up last night, and she's still not here. It's probably nothin', but it ain't like her to be gone this long and not call. I just wanna make sure she didn't go off for some last-minute shoppin' and get hit by a cab or somethin', you know?"

"You checked the local hospitals?" All business now, and he thought he heard the click of a ballpoint pen, sharp and earnest as the cocking of a Glock.

"Naw, but I'm gonna start soon as I hang up."

Scagnetti grunted. "I'll call, too, if ya want. Go faster an' alla that."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem." A pause, and Flack could hear the gears grinding inside Sacagnetti's head as he struggled for something to say that would not be full of shit and empty platitudes. Finally, he said, "Anyways, I'll get that BOLO out. Half the PD'll be lookin' for her in five minutes. You call if she turns up?"

"Absolutely."

"Hang in there, kid," Scagnetti said, and hung up.
He hung up, scrubbed his face with one dry palm, and picked up the receiver again. The first hospital he called was Trinity, the hospital that had saved his life in return for three miserable weeks of it. There would be a bitter, poetic justice in it if she were there. They would be a matching set, Jack and his broken Jill, put together again by the same doctor. The idea made so much sense that he was stunned when the admissions nurse informed him that she was not there, so much so that he insisted that she check the list of recent admissions for Jane Does matching her description. But there were no blonde china dolls with broken wings and exposed hearts, and he hung up without saying thank you or goodbye.

Kings County, Coney Island Hospital, Jacobi, Queens, Bellevue. He dialed them all one by one, fingers growing more unsteady with every negative answer. He should be relieved; most people would be to know that their world was not lying shattered and bleeding on some trauma gurney while a surgeon sewed them back together with catgut and twelve years of training. But he knew better. In a hospital, at least someone was taking care of them. He knew all too well what could happen when no one was looking. He had cleaned it up too many times to count and delivered the sorry remains of the aftermath to the Nerd Squad.

His hands were shaking so badly by the time he dialed Woodhull Medical Center that he had to dial twice. The mechanical, disinterested voice of an automated system had just picked up and begun to recite a laundry list of departments and extensions when he heard the unmistakable scrape of a key in the lock of the front door.

"Shit." Muffled and irritated. Then the key slid home, and the door swung inward to reveal Rebecca, bundled against the cold and carrying a white, paper bag on her lap.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded. Too loud, too full of worry and adrenaline. The automated voice in his ear paused in its litany of grand high poobahs of medical miracle to tell him that that was not a recognized extension, please repeat the command. He slammed the receiver into its cradle hard enough to elicit a fearful bleep from the phone and stalked to the door, where Rebecca blinked at him in comical surprise.

She held up the paper bag. "Bagels," she announced uncertainly. "I thought you might want breakfast. I forgot that even the cradle of Scrooge celebrates Christmas." She pulled off her knit cap and shook snow from the ends of her hair.

His mouth worked. She was lovely with the dusting of snow in her hair and roses in her cheeks. "Bagels?" he repeated. "Do you have any fuckin' idea- I've got half the PD lookin' for you."

"Since three in the fuckin' mornin'?" he shouted. "Don't tell me it was just a bagel run, Rebecca, 'cause I'm not fuckin' stupid, just a hunk of fuckin' dick for you to play with."

"I never said you were," she shot back, and slapped her gloves onto her lap. "Ever."

"Yeah? Well, right now, you're actin' like it."

She let out a deep breath. "Because I brought you bagels?"

He fought the urge to swat the crumpled sack from her lap. "Fuck the bagels," he snapped. "This is about you bein' gone from my bed since three in the goddamn mornin'."

"Your bed?" she countered softly, and slipped her coat off her shoulders.

"Our bed," he corrected gently, and reached to help her with her coat. It was unthinking impulse.
"Our bed. But I ain't gonna stand here and play Pick That Adjective with you."

"So don't." She kissed his palm and nudged past him into the living room. "I got plain, sesame seed, cinnamon raisin, blueberry, and pumpernickel."

"I don't give a damn about the bagels. Where the hell were you?"

She turned to face him. "Obviously not where you think I was," she answered mildly.

"Oh, yeah? And where might that be?"

She approached him until her footplates scraped his bare shins, set her brakes, and opened her legrests. "With another man." She reached out and flattened her palm against his bare belly, splayed fingers spidering over his scar. She leaned forward and planted butterfly kisses in the cup of his navel.

"That's not going to work," he said, but he made no move to retreat from the contact. There had been too many nights of sleeping in the same bed miles apart. His hand dropped to cup the back of her head.

She laughed, and it vibrated over his skin in a warm rush of air. "I'm not, you know," she murmured. "With another man. There's never going to be anybody else." Muffled and vague with contentment. "Frankly, I'm surprised you noticed I was gone."

Irritation pricked his skin like nettles. "I ain't a dumbass." Then, more softly, "I always notice when you're gone."

She looked up at him, and her expression twisted his heart. It was mournful and adoring and tinged with inexplicable sorrow and longing. "Oh, love," she murmured, and wobbled to her feet with a startlingly serpentine undulation of her spine. She balanced herself with her hands on his shoulders and rested her head on his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her to support her. "Where you been goin', huh, doll?" he asked. "What's got you sneakin' out in the middle of the night if not some other guy?"

"A ghost. Or a spot of underdone potato if you prefer." She scratched his back in slow, lazy circles."

"What?" Befuddled and a trifle impatient.

"Nothing. It was a riff on A Christmas Carol." She mouthed the bony plate of his sternum, and her breath tickled the coarse hair there.

"Very nice; I know you're a genius, Rebecca. I don't need proof of your hundred-grand education. I need an answer as to where the fuck you've been for the last four hours."

"But it does answer your question-sort of," she countered defensively. "Just not directly."

"You know what gets me hard? A straight answer."

"Oh, I know all kinds of things that get you hard," she murmured wickedly. "But point taken." She planted a kiss on his sternum and made to sit.

He eased her into her chair, and she turned and rolled into the kitchen with the bag of bagels on her lap.
"I went to talk to someone," she said at length, and plugged in the coffeepot. "An old teacher. I needed advice."

"This teacher got a name?" He followed her into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

"He does. You wouldn't know it." She opened the bag of bagels, took out a blueberry one, and set it on a paper towel.

"Enlighten me," he pressed.

She sighed and took a butter knife from the silverware drawer. "Professor Snape. You won't find him in any of your high-tech databases, so I wouldn't waste the time." She cut the bagel in half with laborious, choppy strokes. "He was my chemistry teacher while I studied abroad."

"You mean durin' those three years you don't talk about?"

"Yes. Bagel?"

"Sesame seed."

She rummaged in the bag, retrieved a sesame-seed bagel, and began to saw at it.

"So why this Snape guy? He a mentor of yours?"

She laughed, sultry and bitter, pebbles rolling down a quarry hill, and he swallowed a flicker of unease. She was suddenly hard underneath the skin, marble under crepe, and he thought that if she looked at him now, her gaze would be ancient and reptilian, a crocodile surveying a struggling wildebeest from the baking sanctuary of its mud flat.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

_All teeth and tongue now, muttered Gavin inside his head. Sure as shit. Bloodless and hard as iron and ready to tear the throat out of anything that moves. You didn't even know she had an expression like that until you woke up in the hospital and watched her strap it on with the nurses and Dr. Singh. Then she wore it all the time, a battle mask that never left her face 'cept when she looked at you. She caught the good doctor flat-footed more than once, and you, too. But you were too stoned to do anything but be grateful she was on your side. She strapped it on with the trainee nurse who hurt you while changin' your dressin's, and that girl left the room in tears and never came back. It's the face she wears when the gloves come off and the rules of civilized war don't apply. You don't like it much, and seeing it makes your balls retreat into your belly and your mouth go sour."

_She looked at Lessing that way, too, on the day he was remanded to his suite at the rubber-room Hilton. You sat beside her in the gallery and watched her track Lessing, a mongoose watching the hypnotic sway of a cobra. The only movement came from her eyes as they tracked his movement in the courtroom. Her only reaction when he rose and read his prepared statement of gratitude into the official record was a twitch of her upper lip that bared her teeth. It was a stark, gut-level act that raised the hackles on the nape of your neck, and for one crazy moment as the bailiffs were leadin' him away, you thought she was gonna drop from her chair and run him down on all fours. But she didn't. She just let you lead her outta the courtroom, and she burst into tears on the courthouse ramp. Her tear-stained face was on page A-3 of the Times the next mornin' with a caption 'bout victims reactin' to the sentence. You threw out every copy you found because her anguish cramped your gut."

'It's not fair.' That's what she said over and over again on the bench outside the courthouse while
tears ran down her face. You thought she was talkin' 'bout the sentence, the lifetime of state-paid care in exchange for six lives and your gut, but later you started to wonder. 'Specially on the days the rehab made your guts cramp and weep and the summer nights when the thunder rumbled and lightnin' cracked the sky and she lay on her side the bed with eyes wide open and didn't sleep. You turned that mornin' over in your head and asked yourself if she hadn't been talkin' 'bout somethin' else entirely. Somethin' like the chance to tear across that courtroom and fasten her teeth onto Lessing's throat. On nights like that, you'd pillow your head on your arm and watch the bony curve of her back for signs that it was changin', stretchin' and crackin' and becoming the framework for somethin' without a whole lotta give a damn in its eyes.

He watched Rebecca and waited for her to catch his eye. Part of him prayed that she wouldn't because he didn't want to see that terrible, shuttered blankness. But she did, and when their eyes met, his heart slowed because it was just her, tired and a little lost, but his girl nonetheless.

"I thought to follow in his footsteps for a time," she went on as she set the sliced bagels on the paper towel and rolled towards the refrigerator. "I idolized him."

"Chemistry teacher? Can't say I see it, doll."

She opened the refrigerator and searched the door for butter, strawberry jam, and honey. "Neither could he. As he put it, I was 'a rolling menace to civilized society, and should I attempt the fine art of chemistry, the resultant disaster would make the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem the aftereffects of bad curry.' If I wanted to blow myself up in the pursuit of the ridiculous and unattainable, I was welcome to do so, but not under his auspices, and not to the detriment of his profession. Cream cheese?"

He nodded. "Sounds like a charmer, this guy."

A snort from within the refrigerator, and then Rebecca backed away and closed the door. "The Professor was one of the most vicious, petty, gleefully savage pricks ever to walk the earth," she announced. It did not sound like condemnation.

"But," he prodded, mystified.

"But he was never a liar," she finished simply. "He was right; had I tried to pursue a career in chemistry, I would have hurt myself or someone else very badly. Probably look like Frankenstein by now."

She brought the bagels and assorted condiments to the table and then went back for his coffee. She set it in front of him and rolled into the space set aside for her.

"None for you?" he asked.

She shook her head and reached for the cream cheese. "You know tea is my drug of choice."

"Well, have a sip of this, and I'll make you some." He held his coffee cup to her lips and steadied it while she took a dainty sip.

He rose from the table and padded to the cupboard where she kept her tea. He brewed it in silence and carried to the table. She picked it up in both hands and took a careful sip.

"You're getting better," she mused. She set the cup on the table and pressed a lingering kiss to his temple.

Somethin's different about her, he thought as he turned into the kiss. For the first time in forever,
she's not wired and thrummin' with nervous energy, ready to snap or shatter at the slightest
provocation. She's my girl, like she used to be, when I could walk into the room where she was and
just let it all go. The dirt, the job, the dead bodies and the victims still breathin'. I could shut the
door and kiss her, and alla that faded into the background until I was ready to pick it up again.

He drew his lips down the slope of her nose and nuzzled her upper lip. He was tempted to kiss her,
forget this conversation and carry her to bed, but he sat back and reached for his coffee instead.
The easy way out was no longer an option. Not if he wanted her to stay this way.

"So you went to see this guy at three in the mornin'," he said.

She traced her finger around the rim of her mug. "Not the best timing," she agreed. "Not that he
had much choice. Besides, I couldn't do this anymore. Not one more day." She sipped her tea and
plucked a dried blueberry from her bagel.

"Do what anymore?" His throat was dry and painful.

"This." She gestured at the kitchen and living room. "I couldn't go another day pretending
everything was getting better. It's still fucked up, still blown to hell, and nothing I was doing was
making a difference."

He stared at her in disbelief. "But things are getting better, doll," he insisted. "I'm not hurtin'
anymore, and I'm back on the job. I mean, I know I wasn't the best husband for a while there, but-
",

She smiled and covered his hand with hers. "You are doing fine, babe. You did the best you could
under the circumstances, and I'm the luckiest woman in the world. It's me that's not getting any
better. You're at the top of the hill, and I'm still trying to get out of the starting gate."

He drew the ball of his thumb over her knuckles and waited. She would tell him, or she wouldn't.

She shrugged. "Maybe it's because you had a goal. Getting back to the job."

"And you," he added quietly. "Always you."

She took a ragged breath, and he thought he saw the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes, but her
voice was steady when she spoke. "All I had, all I could do was sit and hold your hand and pray
that you'd come through. I don't think I've ever felt so useless in my life. The doctors and nurses
and Mac were all taking care of you-,"

"Mac didn't take care of shit, Rebecca," he said firmly. "He got me to the hospital, but the rest was
all you. Did me wonders to wake up and see you sittin' there. You were beautiful."

"And you were stoned," she said fondly. Then she grew serious again. "What happened to you and
the rehab after were your road, but the eight days between were mine, and I...lost it. I'd always
understood I could lose you to the badge, but understanding and knowing are worlds apart, and I
just...couldn't handle it. I just got so fucking pissed."

"At me."

She looked at him as though he'd proclaimed himself Ghandi. "You were the only person in the
universe I wasn't pissed at. I was pissed at Lessing for the bomb, at your job for putting you in that
building that morning, at the asshole with the Ipod. At your friends for being fine when you
weren't. At myself for not being able to wave a magic wand and make it all go away. Hell, I was
mad at the nurses for laughing when the world had so obviously come unglued."
"And my mother?"

"What about her?" Wary surprise.

"I know what she asked of you. I know about the papers."

Her eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed. "Hawkes," she said shrewdly.

"No, my father."

She uttered a short, ugly bark of laughter. "I'll be damned." She took an indelicate gulp of tea. "Narced by the elder."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? That your mother wanted to harvest your semen and sell her grandchildren to the most acceptable applicant? God. You were in critical condition in the ICU with your guts held together by surgical stitching. I wasn't about to dump that in your lap, wasn't about to make you choose."

She thought she'd lose. She thought that if push came to shove, you'd choose blood over weddin' lace. That's why she kept her mouth shut.

The epiphany made his chest hurt. "You didn't tell me 'cause you thought you'd lose, didn't you?" It was a whisper.

She didn't look at him, and that was answer enough. He seized the armrest of her chair and jerked it until they were face to face, nose to nose and footplate to shin. He cupped her face in his hands. "You will never lose, do you understand?" Low, a whisper in the dark. "Rebecca Olivia Stanhope Flack, look at me. Do. You. Understand?"

"I-,"

"My mother had no right to do that to you. She was a bitch, and she's never gonna behave that way again. Not to you." He traced her cheekbones, fragile as china beneath his hands. Her eyes were wide and bewildered. She wanted to believe him, but she didn't quite dare; her vicious instinct for self-preservation would not allow it.

"But she's your mother." Plaintive.

"And I love her. But you're my wife, my girl, and when I married you, I gave you everythin'. It wasn't just a fuck-a piece of paper and a name change, doll. You won it all. The only babies I'm ever gonna make in this lifetime are gonna come from you, and if she doesn't like that, then that's too damn bad."

She curled her cool hands around his wrists and sat with her forehead pressed lightly to his. He could hear her swallowing against a hot, tight knot of emotions in her throat, and he dropped a comforting kiss on the crown of her head. When her labored breathing had eased, he lifted her chin so that their eyes met.

"Drink the rest of your tea before it gets cold," he said, and sat back. He handed her the half-full mug. "So, you see this Snape guy at three o'clock in the mornin' 'cause you needed advice. What'd you ask him?"

"I thought that when Lessing was sentenced, it would go away." She lifted her mug to her lips, and
her hand trembled.

"What would?"

"The anger, the nightmares, the feeling of wanting to wet my pants and curl into a little ball every time you holstered up and went on shift. But it didn't. The anger only got worse. Hell, at the sentencing hearing, I wanted to rip his throat out and leave it bleeding on the courthouse floor. Sometimes, I feel like I'm choking on it. I'm afraid to touch you because I don't want to get it on you."

He thought of the sentencing hearing and that feral, furious curl of lip, and of last night, when she had burst into tears on her way down to glory. It had scared the shit out of him, the sudden reversal of fortune, and knowing the reason behind it made him no less uneasy.

And guilty, of course. The guilt was worst of all. He had tried his damndest not to hurt her with the sharp edges of his shield, not to crush her with the weight of his oath. He had separated her from it as best he could by leaving the worst of the job at the precinct doors and bringing home only the rare funny story of mistaken identity or bumbling crook. He had made sure to shower three times in the precinct shower with Irish Spring soap before he went home to her, to leave the grit of the streets and the filth of murderers in the drain trap of the stationhouse shower where they belonged. He had gone through bars of soap faster than the water poured from the showerhead, and in the end, it hadn't been enough. She'd still been blighted by the gleam of his badge. The proof was right in front of him.

He searched his memories in an attempt to pinpoint the moment of contamination. Maybe it had happened while he was sleeping, transferred by the brush of her hand over his bare back, or maybe it had been passed in a good-morning kiss before Crest and Listerine could sterilized his sleep-gummy mouth. Maybe it had happened while she was sucking him off with feverish abandon in the middle of the living room; maybe it was too deep in him to come out. Or maybe it had happened while she was cleaning his guts out of the crevices of his badge.

Or maybe it happened on the day Lessing laid your guts wide open and delivered her to a hospital waitin' room, his father grunted, and he saw him in his mind's eye, pouring Beam into a coffee cup and pushing the contents across the table. Maybe for all their scrubbin' and sterilizin', they missed a speck of dust from the buildin' and stirred it into the air like a blown kiss. Maybe it drifted on the stale currents of the buildin' and landed on her arm while she slumped in her chair and prayed to ten gods and thirteen demons that you wouldn't leave the hospital toes-up, or maybe you passed it to her on that first kiss after you returned to the land of the livin'. However she came by it, it's all your fault, and the damage has been done. Consider it a lawman's legacy.

"I couldn't go the rest of my life being afraid to love you, so I went to him because he doesn't lie."

"What did you ask him?"

"How to live with it. The hate. The fear like sugared pennies in my mouth."

"What did he say?"

"To live with the truth or die."

"That's it? It's that simple?"

She nodded. "That simple. He doesn't lie."

"So, what're you gonna do?" He swallowed a mouthful of lukewarm coffee to moisten his throat.
She smiled at him, an impish, radiant smile that warmed her eyes and made her lovely and impossibly young. "I'm going to live, babe. It's the only choice there is."

He blinked at her, suddenly giddy. "Just like that?"

Her smile widened. "Just like that." She picked up her tea and drained it.

He wanted to believe her, but there had been too many false starts, too many returns to midnight. It wasn't until three days later, when she laughed as he entwined their bodies after a shower, that he accepted the gift from an anonymous donor. It was bright, brilliant, living laughter, not a remembered echo of happier days. She was still broken, still fragile, and there was still work to be done, but this time when he reached for a piece of her that had fallen away, it was to create something new, something beautiful untarnished by yesterday's sorrow. As he arched his back and dipped his head to kiss her laughing lips, he spared a thought for Professor Snape, the chemistry professor who could not tell a lie. He thanked him for a miracle smooth and warm beneath his hands, and promised himself that if they ever met, he'd buy the man a pint in gratitude for each of his tomorrows.
Seamus Finnegan was bloody well knackered and more than a little tempted to kip a biliwig from the illegal shipment he and his men had seized earlier in the day when his bollocks had not been dragging the dusty, pocked floor of the squad room. Instead, he settled for pouring himself a cup of lukewarm tea from the pot that squatted on a table near the entrance like a bellicose, gouty pensioner. A drizzle of milk, four sugars, and a bitter-tongued swallow, and he shambled back to his desk and plopped disconsolately into his chair.

There was an untidy jumble of parchments piled atop his desk like sloughed skin, and he knew he should see about setting them in order, but it was easier to let them be, and so he did, slumping in his chair and taking a slow, slurring sip from his teacup. Odds were that the Ministry clerks would not even begin to process the assorted writs of arrest, writs of search and seizure, and evidentiary declaration until mid-week at the earliest; the machinery of justice, torpid under the best of conditions, grew more lethargic still when the men charged with its due administration were logy with the memory of roasted geese, rich puddings and toffees, and mulled wine from the New Year's revels. The writs would wait, either here in the relative safety of his desk or stuffed unceremoniously into the tray of a post-pissed MLE bureaucrat. He was in no hurry.

In truth, his mind was far removed from the papers on his desk. It was back in the Shrieking Shack, watching the unspeakable handiwork of the woman Dean Thomas had called Lucifer's whore. It had been nine days since he had stumbled upon her madness by the silver light of the bloated moon, and the vision of her unleashed and unrepentant fury had consumed his mind. It found him in dreams and superimposed itself over the landscape of his waking consciousness with ruthless, throttling efficiency. Sometimes he passed the wizards and witches locked in the various holding cells, and it was his face that he saw, fleshless and lidless and frozen in an eternal scream. It was worse when they smiled; the exposure of tooth and gum only made them look more like anguished, grinning skulls. After a few days, he had stopped peering into the cells when he passed. Now he pretended to read the Prophet and inspected his wand holster in a fit of paranoid vigilance that would have done old Alastor Moody proud.

The smell of him had stayed on his hands for days, and the robes he had worn that night had been consigned to the licking flames of a char pit he had hastily dug behind the Shack. He had been tempted to set the Shack and the atrocity in it alight as well, but that would have prompted uncomfortable questions he could ill-afford. The Ministry was oddly attached to the ruined pile of wood and stone and counted it as a treasure of local lore. Even wizards delighted in a shiver or two beside the warm hearthstone, and he supposed that the Shack's preservation was the Ministry's bumbling atonement, an attempt to salvage something for the children who had lost mothers and fathers and entire family trees. They might not be able or willing to resurrect the dead, but they could offer them empty tales of rattling ghosties like sugarless sweets. So he had simply reinstated Rebecca's concealment wards and left the Shack undisturbed.

He should have killed him, should have burned his body like a living wick and granted him the mercy of death. But Rebecca Stanhope was and ever had been an incubus, and she had sapped him of both conscience and mercy with her bloodless, wise, pitiless face. Each time he had raised his wand to set the wreck that had once been a man named Lessing ablaze, he had seen her face, pinched and wan and wet with furious tears. He blew him up, and the cold got into him, too.

_I fixed it._ As though flaying a man alive were the most logical act in the world. To her, mayhap it was. The outside to match the inside, remember, and Rebecca Stanhope was as raw as scraped beef.
Not Stanhope. Not these days. It's Flack now, if you'll recall, and she bears the burden of it with teetering grace. It's the delirious weight of her new name that tipped her into madness in the first place.

Stanhope or Flack, the woman behind the name was as he had remembered her, china and ivory and intoxicating madness. She rendered cruelty a perverse, compelling justice. It was because of her that he had withheld his mercy and left Lessing to hang on the tenterhooks she had laid so carefully for him. She did nothing without forethought, and he had wanted to be sure that he would not upset the sensitive scales of greater justice by releasing the guilty before due had been tendered.

He had gone back to his flat that night and drunk himself into a blissful stupor, watching the flames of his tapers dance as the flames of the char pit where he had burned his robes had done, and when they had doubled and trebled in his vision, he had snuffed them with numb, careless fingers. The next morning, their ashes had coated his mouth in a bitter paste, and he had still been scouring it away with the probing tip of his tongue when he had Flooed the Aurory in New York to ask about a Muggle named Don Flack. Off the record, naturally. That had cost him a few pretty favors, and his coin purse wept at the thought of how many pints he now owed to his more libatious counterparts, but he had to be sure.

If no evidence of an explosion involving a Muggle police officer named Flack existed, then there would be no choice. He would go to the Chief Auror and confess everything. He would turn in his wand and his embossed and crested robes, and he would lead them to Rebecca. He would be an Auror for the last time, and then he would walk with his friend for the last time, side by side to the gallows, where his former superior would kill them softly with two words and six syllables like shifting shale on the tongue and throat.

That's rich now, isn't it? His inner voice suddenly reminded him of Snape, a silky, baritone sneer that reverberated in his solar plexus, the warm tickle of croup before fever set in. Last week, you were only too happy to harangue her for using you as her means of escape, but now you're only too happy to turn the tables. Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. Gryffindor opportunism has always masqueraded as morality when it suits. After all, the vicars can hardly proselytize to their fearful, obedient flock if they're caught with their rods of life plunged into the fertile valleys of whores. If you wish to leave the drudgery of moral rectitude, Mr. Finnegan, turn in your robes and totter to the nearest pub that calls to your shanty blood. Why take her with you?

"Bugger off, Snape, you miserable sod," he muttered under his breath, and drowned the disagreeable, needling voice into silence with a gulping swallow of tea.

It was just like the sour, soulless twat to stir up trouble where there was none, he thought as he got up to refill his teacup. His black eyes were so jaundiced that he could find the darkest of motives in the purest of intentions. The bastard could think as he liked, but his decision to investigate Rebecca's story was nothing more than the fulfillment of his duty as required by magical law.

Rubbish, Mr. Finnegan, snorted Snape, obviously none the worse for wear from his drenching in
cheap tea. Such pretentious, self-serving twaddle might satisfy that insufferable tartan baggage, McGonagall, but we both know that duty is a convenient shield for the conduct of selfish, unpleasant business. Your conscience is as callused as the palms of a bricklayer's hands, but your fear of dying alone is raw and undiluted. You would fashion her noose along with yours so as not to die alone.

All who might have noticed and mourned your absence from the world are gone. Your mother disappeared into the Irish mist, and Merlin knows what ground she treads now. Maybe she stumbled onto a faery wrath and was swallowed up. Your father retreated to the Muggle world to soothe his wounded pride with ale and wine and Merlin knows what or who else. Maybe he is dead, pushing up poppies in some ill-tended and forgotten potter's field. Dean Thomas left his brains smeared on the end of a troll's indifferent club, and you are not at all certain where you will spend your eternity. Maybe you'll ascend to heaven and indulge in spirits with him and the others you've lost, but there exists the greater possibility that you'll roast in Hades-Hell, if it appeals to your Muggleborn sensibilities—until time itself unravels.

Rebecca Stanhope is all you have left, and never mind the name she has taken. She is the last remnant of the days when you still believed in the ridiculous myth of truth, justice, and the Gryffindor way, and for all the damage the tenderest of poisons has wrought in her small, translucent veins, she is the most unchanged. She lives her life with stiff-necked, pop-eyed resolve, and she marches on even as her wounds grow deeper. She loved you, then, and she loves you now. She said so herself on that night you caught her out. Gryffindor vainglory demands a witness to its noble sacrifice, someone to mourn its passing, and you know that she will mourn you, even if only in the fleeting seconds before judgment comes in a brilliant flash of green. Maybe so, but such ruthless conjecture was a moot point. He was sure to his marrow that there had been an explosion involving the near-death of a Muggle police officer named Flack, and if so, he would leave Lessing where he was, trapped in a hell of his own making and consider it a favor repaid. Rebecca had guided him through the nightmare of war, and though he could not properly call himself unscathed (there were too many nightmares and too many breaks beneath the skin), he still possessed his bollocks and all of his limbs. He numbered among the fortunate. The thought made him laugh.

He stood from his desk with the intention of calling it a day and drowning his sorrows in a draught of Dreamless Sleep, the better to escape the restless ghost of memory. He had just fetched his heavy traveling cloak from the back of his chair when a scruffy, nondescript owl landed atop the jumble of parchments on his desk and thrust a scaly talon at him with a desultory hoot.

"Yeah? Well, I'm not fond of my job, either," he muttered, and unlaced the loosely rolled parchment from the creature's leg. The leg was dry and warm to the touch, elephant hide and old book leather, and he frowned.

He conjured a biscuit and cup of water and nudged them toward the owl, who gave a grateful, weary hoot and hopped forward with the papery scrabble of claws. He sat on the edge of his desk, unfurled the thin parchment, and read the straggling, laborious lines.

The poetry left by spiders' legs in the dust, he thought nonsensically, and swallowed a tight knot of apprehension. He recognized the writing at once. He had seen it before in the Gryffindor common room, watched as Rebecca had wrenched each line from palsied fingers because Snape had forbidden the use of a Dicta-Quill on his essays.

Seamus,
Forgive me for the lack of endearments. After our last meeting, I am unsure as to their propriety. As per our agreement, I will not speak of what happened (and Merlin’s bollocks, isn’t that an irony? For years, we lived in the shadow of He Who Must Not Be Named, and now we live with That of Which We Must Not Speak. Life is a circle at its great and terrible heart, a serpent that forever swallows its tail but never throttles on it as it decently fucking ought.)

You allowed me my peace, and for that, you have my most profound and undying gratitude. But then, you had that already just by having the unabashed balls to befriend me back then. However, your kindness has left me with a debt, and like the man who shaped me in his pitiless forge, I am loath to carry it any further than I must. Unpaid debts are heavy and only grow heavier with time, and I am too tired and too damn selfish to live with them. So, allow me to return the favor.

The fleshless Madonna sleeps in a bower of green, unknowing of her lost time. She waits to be found where stone meets wood and leafy shadow. Travelers pass her without seeing, and children have stood upon her shoulders and laughed. She is a mother still and always. Her little shadow must venture into the faery wraths whereupon his dreams were built when the sun was warm upon his back. He will find her sundered from herself and ever reaching, and when he does, she will speak to him with her fleshless, soil tongue and bear witness against him who sent her to her slumber. The man whose face holds only eyes.

I rolled the bones for you, my friend, the first time I have done so since I kicked the dust of the wizarding world from my bruised heels and fled to what would become my Gotham paradise. I will not do it again. It was too fraught with old, deep temptations and the pungent, earthy taste of shame, like the first time you put your hands between your legs and felt want flutter beneath your exploring fingers. Of course, maybe it’s different for you; I don’t have the same equipment, after all, and I’m not inclined to press my dearest upon the matter. He would think me lewd, not too mention a trifle mad, and on both counts, he would be correct.

I have a good life now, a safe life. In truth, I’ve come closer to the fairytale life I once dreamed of than most girls, and certainly closer than most with whom we learned, revised, and killed. But if I have learned anything in recent days and months, it is that my precious fairytale is fragile, that everything I love can be stolen from me by a shrug from God’s mighty, indifferent shoulders. I no longer have the recklessness and blind courage of my youth, and most of my convictions have withered and died. Only one remains to me now, and I cling to it with bared fangs of the asp and the tenacity of the lioness the Headmaster so dearly hoped me to be: I fought hard for the happiness I have found with my Muggle love, and I will surrender it for neither ideal nor man. He knows nothing of Hogwarts or magic, and I intend to keep it that way. For him, ignorance is surely bliss.

The bones have chattered their last. Make of their words what you will. Use them to find your peace or your vengeance or cast them aside as the ravings of a lunatic whose bones have grown brittle. I can be of no more help.

I doubt that our paths will cross again in this lifetime. That is one of my sincerest regrets about the choice I have made, maybe the only one. I loved you, Seamus Finnegan, and there is no fiercer and hotter a love than that found in childhood. It burns white and clean and forever, and you will have it as long as I draw breath. Know that even if you never hear another word from me. I never lied to you, not even when you needed me to. My way of paying it forward.

I miss you, Seamus, and I’ll go on missing you.

R.
Little shadow, he thought numbly as he turned the letter in his hands. That's what my mam called me. How would she know that?

That's simple enough. The bones told her.

He examined the letter in his hand. The margins were covered in patterns and shapes and doodles. One of them featured a skull in a nun's habit, and beneath the drawing was his mother's name.

Bone Madonna. Oh, God in his heaven.

Snape inside his head again, but this time, there was no sneering mockery, only bland statement of fact. You gave her her peace. Now she gives you your truth. A Slytherin always pays her debts.

He folded the parchment and stuffed it into the pocket of his robes. The delivery owl, feather-fluffed and contented as it nibbled on the conjured biscuit, paused in its feast to offer an inquisitive hoot. He absently scratched beneath its damp beak and was rewarded with an affectionate nip.

"Safe journey back," he said, and Disapparated.

It was two days before he deciphered the clues left in Rebecca's riddle and found himself standing in a heather field ten minutes outside Cork. It was dark and cold, and his fingers throbbed inside the snug fit of his dragonhide gloves. His left hand was stuffed into the deep pocket of his overrobe, the fingers curled around the polished shaft of his wand. His right held the shaft of a long-handled spade.

Your left hand belongs to the Devil, he thought, and your right to God. The thought fled through his parted lips, scouring them as it went. Later, he would taste blood on his teeth, and it would be the taste of gall and vengeance.

He should have waited until daybreak to come, but once the answer had come to him, he had needed to see it, to be absolutely sure. He had dressed without lighting the candles in his room, retrieved the spade from the vestibule wardrobe, and Apparated as fast as he dared and faster than was prudent. He suspected he had left a few toenails behind in his haste, and maybe even part of a toe, but they hardly mattered. Not now, when he was so close.

Despite his eagerness, he sat down, wrapped his cloak more snugly around his shoulders and throat, and cast a Warming Charm. It was folly to blunder about these heaths in the dark, more so when the circulation in his feet was dubious at best. He would wind up tripping over some blasted snake den and snapping his idiot neck. His mother would rot here, unfound and unmourned, and his fellow Aurors would chuck him into the ground with due pomp and ceremony and then squabble over who got his desk.

He stamped his feet to keep the blood flowing and set the spade across his knees. It was heavy and slumberous, his wand magnified. Magic coursed through the thick shaft, and he wondered if it was coming from him or was part of the spade's manufacture, an enchantment to help it cut through hard, flinty soil like that found in cemeteries. The soil of a hard, Irish winter.

He made ghosts with his breath with every exhalation and watched them drift towards the horizon. He had come here often as a boy, first with his mam, who took him to romp and pluck fistfuls of heather with his chubby, toddler's fists, and later with Dean during the Christmas and summer hols. He had played hide-and-seek with his mam and footie and Quidditch with Dean, and with the
latter, he had dreamed of glory on the pitch with the Kenmare Kestrels, or better yet, the Irish national team. After both were gone, Dean to his grave and his mam to Neverwhere, he had come here alone and played a child's game with an old man's body, pushing off from the dead earth and pretending that Dean Thomas was behind him with Beater's club in hand. He had stopped coming not long after completion of Auror training, when the evil that men did swallowed him whole.

*Her little shadow must venture into the faery wraths whereupon his dreams were built when the sun was warm upon his back.*

It was mention of the faery wraths that had thrown him at first. There were no wraths here, and never had been. No sane Irish parent ever let their child wander near faery wraths, lest they be snatched and replaced by a changeling. Most people with a shred of sanity refused to live in the line of a faery wrath. The faeries were powerful and not inclined to share their magic or their land with either wizard or Muggle. Faeries were best left alone.

So, no, there were no faery wraths here, of that he was sure. Now, any road. But he had *thought* there were, once upon a time. He had gone to his cradle and cot lulled by stories of the faery folk, and he had been enamored of them as a boy, had looked for them with avid, hopeful eyes everywhere he went. Each hummock or straggly copse of trees was a faery wrath, and he had announced its discovery with glee. To his mind, the hills and lumps of earth that rippled through this heather field had represented the great faery kingdom. His mam had laughed and run her fingers through his hair, and his da had chuckled and reminded him that there were no such things as faeries. He had been a good boy and nodded his head dutifully when his da had asked him if he understood that, but in his heart of hearts, he had *believed*, and when he was ten years old, his mam had rewarded his unwavering faith by taking him to see a real faery wrath.

Eventually, stamping was not enough to stave off the looming threat of frostbite, and so he set his spade aside, stood up, and began to stomp and flap to and fro like a house elf in the throes of a contrition fit. For some reason, that made him think of Rebecca, his sibyl of china and bone, and he pushed the thought aside.

**Best not to wake the faeries,** he thought with stupid, feverish glee, and stomped and flapped with stubborn abandon.

He was still stomping and flapping when a seam of light appeared on the horizon, Helios thrusting his lance of fire into the belly of the sky. The wound bled pale green at first, the death of night, and then a deep, weeping red that ebbed to rosy pink. He turned his head before pink faded to grey. It reminded him too much of Dean Thomas' brains on the end of a troll's club.

Helios' crown rose majestically over the horizon, but the old god was tired after millennia of battle, and his light was weak and gave little warmth, smothered by thick, leaden clouds. It was enough to see, though, and though he had lived here all his life with the exception of his seven years at Hogwarts, he never failed to be amazed by its harsh beauty. He stood on a hillock that had once held the loftier title of faery wrath and surveyed the field whereupon his dreams had been built.

Demeter had come in the night as she had for most of the past four months and seeded the ground with snow. It blanketed the earth in a thick, billowing sheet and covered the denuded branches of the oak tree at mid-field and the ranks of trees that comprised the woods across the way. Some of the oak tree's sturdiest branches sported icicles that refracted the sunlight and cast tiny, faint rainbows that danced in the snow.

It was to the oak tree that he went, spade held at his side like a spear. The riddle had said that his mother would be found where wood met stone and leafy shadow. There were no leaves now, but in the spring and summer, they would make the ancient branches droop and creak with their weight
and provide enough shade for two boys to lie on the heather with their heads pillowed on their hands and build impossible futures in the passing clouds. Or at least they had once upon a time. Maybe it was dead like so much else of his past. He wondered if any boys came here any more to play Quidditch and dream of firm breasts and everlasting glory, or if he and Dean were the only ghosts to walk its desolate borders.

Wind soughed through the barren branches as he approached, and the tree waggled its immense fingers in gruff greeting.

"Hello, Dean," he murmured without realizing that he had spoken, and circled the tree. Spent breath coiled around the tree, the herald of incipient flame, and his gloved fingers brushed the frozen bark of the tree as he made his lumbering, contemplative circuit.

He sank the blade into the unforgiving earth beside a smooth, grey stone the size of a bludger. The ground was entrenched and loath to cede its measure of centuries. It resisted fiercely, and within two minutes, his heavy woolen robes warmed and clung to his back. He swore and dug on, gloved fingers slipping over the shaft of the spade. Within three minutes, steam rose from his body, and in four, his heart was a dull hammer inside his chest. Spittle flew from his mouth as the soil flew from the end of his spade. As the hole grew, so did his urgency, and so he was panting, a ragged, frantic gulping that rasped his throat and the insides of his cheeks like sandpaper.

At ten minutes, his arms throbbed with liquid fire beneath stiff, cold skin, and he was tempted to give it up as a bad job and chalk the entire affair up to a wild goose chase orchestrated by a woman who had spent her life walking the knife-edge of lunacy with feline grace. But each time the shovel went slack in his grip, an image arose in his mind of his mother's fleshless fingers clawing at the earth from the inside out, reaching for her little shadow and looking for him with eyeless sockets. The thought crushed his burning chest, made him keen and bleat and sweat from the eyes, and he kept digging, relentless and desperate.

A meter into the earth, the blade of the spade struck something solid. He crouched over the gash he had made and peered into it, and then he reached out with trembling fingers to stroke the rounded curve of what he had found.

A stone, he told himself. Just another bludger stone like the one that lured me to this buggerated nest of roots in the first place.

But sometimes the body knew what the mind refused to accept, and he prised the object free of its resting place with scrabbling fingers. It came loose with the release of a long-held breath, his mother sighing for the earth that had held her to its bosom for so long. He sat back hard upon the ground, the skull cradled in his lap in the basket formed by the fabric of his robes.

"Hunh hunh hunh." He fumbled with its hard smoothness and turned it with clumsy fingers, and when he saw its face, the sound became a single syllable of understanding. "Hunnnnnnhhh."

The tooth was chipped.

"You bitch," he said. He wasn't sure if he meant his mother or Rebecca, who had stolen his dead but tenacious hope. "Oh, you bitch."

He cradled her to his chest and rocked to and fro. "You bitch, youbitchyoubitchyou-," He chanted it and sang it and sobbed it between thick gobbets of ropy snot when the tears finally came in wrenching, ululating sobs that tore him open and emptied him onto the pristine whiteness of Demeter's blanket.
"I'm a virgin no more, mam," he thought stupidly, and laughed. He had not been a virgin since he was sixteen. He spat green phlegm into the snow and sat with his mother's disarticulated head in his lap. It was a long time before the crying stopped, and even longer before he staggered to his feet, picked up his shovel, and began the search for the rest of her.

She came up in the end-most of her, anyway-wrested piece by piece from her unmarked tomb to be re-interred in a small plot he paid for. That it was her was beyond dispute. Her kinked finger had turned up shortly after her skull, and if that were not proof enough, her wand quashed the last doubts. Members of the Aurory who examined it said she had gone down fighting, but would elaborate no further, and part of him was glad. She had died trying to shield herself from Dark magic, and that told him enough. Too much.

Her memorial service was sparsely attended, a fact which surprised him not at all. She had been ten years dead in the minds of those few who had remembered her at all, and they had already said their goodbyes. Tonks came, though, for which he was grateful. His father, whom he had owled the day after his mother's remains were identified, did not, and that did not surprise him, either. Tonks was indignant enough for both of them, and after she got him good and drunk in his dismal living room, she took him to his equally squalid bedroom and fucked him until he could not feel. She was gone the next morning, not even a note, and though he had slept twelve hours, he was too tired to care.

The last answer to the riddle came to him three weeks after he had Apparated into the Aurory precinct house with his fingers torn to ribbons and his mother's skull clutched in his bloody hands. His mother's was not the only body to be found after a long disappearance, and he was paging through moldering editions of the Prophet in a futile effort to match a name with the pile of brown bones lying in the cool damp of the Ministry vaults. Ten years in the ground at least, according to the harried, disinterested Healer from St. Mungo's who had examined them. Probably more.

He was thirteen years into the archives when he saw the picture, grainy and stuttering and torpid in its dotage. His fingers clutched the yellowed page in a convulsive, white-knuckled grip as he stared at the scene before him with eyeballs too hot for their sockets. He was dimly aware that he had torn the page, and that his carelessness would be summarily docked from his wages by the stub-nosed, bandy-legged curator of the Ministry archives who made Madam Pince seem the paragon of forgiveness, but he was transfixed by the face captured by the photograph.

Walden Macnair stood in the center of the picture, double-bladed axe slung over one beefy shoulder. Lucius Malfoy stood beside him, and between them, he spied the podgy, squat bulk of Hagrid's pumpkins. Lucius was smiling his thin-lipped, aristocratic smile, obnoxious, serpent-headed cane held in one hand. Walden Macnair had no expression because he had no face. It was obscured by the black fabric of his executioner's mask.

Except for his eyes, which peered from ragged, uneven holes in the cheap fabric. They were piggish and beady and filled with the perverse delight of the impending kill. Minutes after that photo had been taken, Buckbeak the hippogriff's head had rolled merrily into Hagrid's compost heap with the final thwock of descending steel.

"The man whose face holds only eyes," he murmured, and Augie Babcock, a rookie who still thought truth shone out of the Minister for Magic's arse, looked up from his desk across the aisle. "All right there, Mr. Finnegan?" he inquired brightly, poised to leap out of his seat were he required.

Seamus found himself thinking of Colin Creevey, bright and eager and dead as shite with his arm blown off. "Hmm? Yeah, I'm good, mate. Just thinking."
As he stared at the picture of Walden Macnair, he understood two things. The first was why Rebecca Stanhope cum Flack had lost her mind and sought her vengeance on the Muggle who had tried to shatter world. The second was that she had spread her madness to him like contagion, Typhoid Mary with her bone mask and her rage. He sat back in his chair and began to make plans.

While Seamus Finnegan sat at his desk and made plans to pay the darkness forward, orderly Jack Stanton trudged down the hall of Bellevue in his rumpled whites and crepe-sole sneakers. It wasn't supposed to be his shift, but that jaking little dickbag, Crandall, had called in sick, and as usual, it was Jack Stanton who got boned in the ass. Good thing he hadn't had a date, or the waterheads and mooners would've been shit out of luck.

His mood was not improved by the fact that he was being dispatched to Lessing’s room. A freak, that guy. He'd seemed okay when they'd first hauled him in for killing six people and blowing up a cop. He'd been polite, hadn't tried to shit on his shoes or jizz on the walls, and he'd never had to rattle his head for screaming in the middle of the night and stirring up the rest of the crazies. The only thing he'd ever asked for was a pen and a postcard so he could write his wife and kid. He'd gotten a postcard and a soft-tipped pencil instead and never complained.

But that was before his nocturnal excursion outside the hospital. The brass still hadn't figured that one out, and he doubted they ever would. Fuckers couldn't find their asses with both hands and a flashlight. Him, he had his theories. He was fairly certain that the cops who'd "found" Lessing outside the hospital had worked him over, gotten a little back for one of their own. Sure, there hadn't been a mark on him when they'd stripped him bareass and inspected him for injuries, but cops knew how to beat your ass with impunity; he'd seen those Charles Bronson movies where the cops kicked the shit out of some poor bastard in an interrogation room until he copped to murder. They always came out as sweet as you pleased. So, yeah, he figured they'd gone in for some five-fingered payback and hit him once too often.

Ever since his jaunt, Lessing had been a living ghost, slack and quiet and unresponsive. He ate when ordered to eat, but he sat like a lump under the shower spray and left a film of grit over everything when he got out. Occasionally, he pissed in the shower, and the urine was dark brown and smelled like river mud. The muckety-mucks had checked him out eight ways from Sunday, but every test came back clean as a whistle. Lessing was fine except for the fact that he wasn't.

He stopped in front of the door to Lessing's cell and peered through the square pane of double-sided plastic. Lessing stood in the center of the room, slack-jawed, and between his feet was a pile of shit. It was soft and dark brown, and he knew how it would smell. Like river mud. His nose wrinkled in disgusted anticipation as he unclipped the key from his belt loop, fitted it into the lock, and opened the door.

"Dammit, Lessing," he muttered as he stepped inside. "I ought'a make you fuckin' eat it." He unclipped his walkie talkie and radioed Janitorial for a mop and bucket.

Lessing said nothing. He just stood astride his puddle of shit and swayed drunkenly, shit coating his thighs and ass like runny greasepaint. The smell was deep and rich, and Stanton breathed through his nose to keep from puking on his shoes.

"C'mon, asshole," he barked, and seized Lessing's wrist to pull him out of the mess.

And then he stopped. Dust rose from Lessing's skin with every undulating current of air and danced in the air before settling over the floor and the pile of shit in a fine layer of dust.
Jack Stanton shivered and waited for Janitorial to turn up with the mop and bucket.

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