Mike Schmidt and the Long Night

by RLeeSmith

Summary

After moving back to her hometown, Ana Stark finally has a job (for now), a home (with dark secrets of its own), friends (albeit animatronic ones) and one last chance at happiness. Until a phone call threatens to destroy what little peace she’s found. His name is Mike Schmidt and he has a story to tell about Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria…

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

Five Nights At Freddy’s is the creation of Scott Cawthon. The characters of Freddy, Bonnie, Chica, Foxy, Mangle, Toy Freddy, Toy Bonnie, Toy Chica, Mike Schmidt, Jeremy Fitzgerald, Fredbear, Springtrap, Plushtrap, the Puppet, Balloon Boy, and the Purple Guy, as well as Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria, belong to him. Everything else is a product of my own imagination and no similarity to actual events, locations, or people is intended or should be inferred. Do not reproduce, repost or copy any part of this story without my permission.

As always, a sincere thank you to all those who took the time to rate and review if you liked it (or even if you didn't like it). If you are interested in my non-fanfiction work, check out my blog at rleesmith.wordpress.com or look me up on Amazon.
EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT: A Five Nights at Freddy’s Fanfiction

PART TWO: MIKE SCHMIDT AND THE LONG NIGHT

By R. Lee Smith

Dedicated to Scott Cawthon with my sincerest gratitude (and apologies)

TRIGGER WARNING! This book contains strong adult themes, including adult language, drug and alcohol references, graphic depictions of child abduction, violence towards children and adults, graphic gore violence and explicit sexual content. I am not kidding. This book should probably not be read by anyone.

* * *

“Uh, hey, before I go, uh…I wanted to ease your mind about any rumors you might have heard lately. You know how these stories come and go and seldom mean anything. I can personally assure you that, whatever is going on out there, and however tragic it may be, it has nothing to do with our establishment. It’s just all rumor and speculation…”

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

July 4th, 1987

The sheets were white. The walls were white. The floor was white and shiny, even at night, because it was never really dark. Although the lights in the ceiling were off, there was enough of a glow coming from all the machines beside the bed for the little girl lying in it to clearly see the letters on the whiteboard hanging on the wall, although she could only read a few of the words and most of those were just names. CARRIE, the name of the nurse on d-u-t-y; that meant the one that kept coming in and out. Dr. HANSON, the name of the a-t-t-e-n-d-i-n-g doctor; that meant the one who wouldn’t let her go. STARK, Anastasia, the name of the p-a-t-i-e-n-t; that was her.

Outside the window that would not open, Ana could see stars and part of a moon and fireworks exploding over the park, because it was the Fourth of July. David and Aunt Easter had gone home a long time ago and although Ana had cried after they left, part of her hoped they had gone home and built the fire and had hotdogs outdoors and set off their own fireworks and made the same happy holiday for themselves that they were supposed to have, because otherwise, Ana had ruined it.

She had ruined it. It was all her fault. David tried to take the blame because it had been his idea,
but Ana knew better. It was summertime and Ana was supposed to stay at Aunt Easter’s. Mom
didn’t want her back yet. Just because Ana had forgot her swimsuit didn’t give her the right to go
home and get it. She deserved everything she got.

Her head hurt. Not her arm, which was funny because her arm was what broke. Her head was
swollen up pretty bad—she still couldn’t open her eye on that side—but it hadn’t broke. Ana
looked at the itchy, heavy cast that started growing just above her hand—still swollen, with her
purple fingers sticking out of the end, two of them in little casts of their own—all the way up her
arm until it joined up with the bigger cast wrapping the upper part of her chest. The doctors had cut
pieces away over the places that had stitches, so Ana could see the black thread zig-zagging over
the puffy red bulge that she guessed was her skin. That hurt, too, but not as much as her head.

There were big foam blocks with her in the bed to keep her from rolling over, but they weren’t
comfortable. Nothing Ana could do made her comfortable. She wiggled around for a while, but
couldn’t wiggle too much because the tube connecting the bag the nurse told her was her medicine
to the needle in her arm wasn’t very long. The needle had hurt when they first put it in, but now it
didn’t unless she touched it. Sometimes she forgot it was there and had to touch it to remind herself
it was real.

Ana looked at the needle in her arm and the wires that seemed to be growing out of her and up to
the funny TV full of colored lines and numbers that were always changing and letters that didn’t
spell words. The nurse had told her not to be scared of it; she wasn’t. It was just a machine. It
didn’t want to scare or hurt her. It didn’t even want to do the job it was doing. It could only do what
it had been built to do, unaware of itself or of her, thinking nothing as it measured the pain in her
body and printed it out in ways that could be read by nurses. Its wheezes, hums and tones were
neither sympathetic nor hostile. It felt nothing for her at all and would not, not even if she were to
die right now.

Ana found that comforting.

Another firework went off. She heard it before she saw it, filling up the sky with red and blue
flowers. Ana watched them bloom and die through the rails of her bed, shivering now and then
beneath the white sheet and the other white, slightly thicker sheet the nurse called a blanket. It was
as thin as the one she had at home and maybe would have been enough if she’d actually been at
home—it was a warm night—but not here. Here in the hospital, it was winter-cold. The nurse
came in a lot to push buttons and do things to Ana’s bandages and she always asked if Ana needed
anything before she left again. Ana always said she was fine if she couldn’t just pretend she was
asleep, but she was cold and wished she had a real blanket, like the ones on her bed at Aunt
Easter’s house. Where she’d be right now, if she hadn’t been bad, if she hadn’t tried to go home
and get her stupid swimsuit, which was too small now anyway.

Mom hadn’t been home when she and David got to the apartment. Ana had made sure of it,
looking all over the parking lot and not just in the space that was Mom’s to park in. She knew she
wasn’t supposed to be there. She knew, but she went in anyway, using the key that hung around her
neck on a string to unlock the door and go inside.

She was just going to grab her swimsuit and go. It should only have taken a minute, but she
couldn’t find it. She’d forgotten she’d taken it out of her trunk and put it in the closet last summer.
By the time she remembered, it was too late. She could hear Mom outside, swearing as she tripped
on the cracked walkway leading to their door, and then she heard David coughing and sputtering,
“Gross!”

Ana left her room at a run, clutching her swimsuit in one fist, and to her horror, saw David in the
kitchen with an open bottle in his hand.

“I thought it was root beer,” he was saying, holding the dark bottle out like it was a bug, his face screwed up, still scrubbing at his mouth with the back of his hand, and now Mom was opening the door and she’d find them there. Not just find them, but find David stealing food, stealing beer!

Ana did not hesitate. She bolted forward, snatching the bottle from startled David’s grasp, and took a big, long drink as Mom came in. The sour taste filled her mouth, but she was too scared to swallow. She didn’t have time anyway.

Even before David could cry out, Mom was on her, first grabbing the bottle—two chipped teeth, the first pain—then hitting her with it. Beer flew in frothy splashes all around the kitchen, hitting the walls and the fridge and David as he screamed. Ana screamed louder to cover the sound he made because she knew better, she knew even if he did not, and it was her fault because she hadn’t even warned him. She screamed and her Mom’s face twisted up as the bottle came at her, moaning its bottle-song, and there was a loud sound that seemed to come from everywhere, and then a ringing, then nothing for a while, and finally the noises came creeping back.

“Shut up!” Mom was shouting, but weirdly muffled, like Ana’s head was wrapped in towels. The bottle also sounded as if it were wrapped in towels when it hit her, but there were other noises, little ones Ana never should have heard over her mother’s shouts, like the cracking of an eggshell, soft but so clear in Ana’s ears. “You shut up! Not a fucking word! You shut the fuck up right now! Right! Now!”

The bottle did not break until it was empty and by then, Ana was on the floor, unable to move or even to cover her head. She lay, staring dully at the seashell pattern dancing over her stupid too-small swimsuit, and heard the final crack without any sense of what was coming. The bottle hit her again, now shattering, and again, breaking away in pieces like a dried stick bashed against a tree, burning at her back and side where the edges cut her.

At last Ana was still enough, silent enough, to satisfy her mother, who straightened up, red-faced and out of breath, to stomp on Ana’s outstretched hand several times in rapid succession, snarling, “Don’t! You! Touch! My! Fucking! Food!” Then the neck of the bottle hit Ana in the back of the head and bounced away across the linoleum and it was over. Her mother walked away, muttering, “You better clean this shit up,” as she headed for her room. A door slammed, echoing like thunder, and the sound of it broke the whole world open and suddenly she was not lying on the kitchen floor, but back in this white room, with fireworks outside her window.

She’d been sleeping again, she realized. She’d been sleeping all day, but it didn’t seem to matter. Every time she closed her eyes, she lost time. The dreams were memories and the memories were dreams, sometimes twisted up with stuff that never happened or that had happened some other place or time, so that none of it seemed real anymore, not even the stuff she knew had happened. Not even this moment, right here and now, with her eyes open, was really real. She could think about the kitchen, remember it, fall back into that body and live in it, and still be safe.

So she tried, but now the kitchen wouldn’t come back and all she could bring back clearly was the sound of David sobbing, ghostlike, unreal. He’d been trying to talk through his tears, screaming for his mother, and he must have been doing it into a phone because there was a short darkness and then Aunt Easter was there, and after her, the hospital and the doctors and the machines and the stitches and the needle in her arm and now this bed.

The doctors asked her what had happened, but Aunt Easter had already told her what to say, that she’d been roller-skating at the park and saw some big kids skate down the stairs, so she tried to do it too. The words got tangled up in Ana’s head even before they put the needles in her, and
afterwards, she was so confused, she thought she might have told them she fell off her bike, which was the lie her mom always told whenever someone asked how Ana got a bruise. But if she got her words mixed up, no one seemed to notice. The doctors just told her she shouldn’t have been there at all and she should never ever do that again. They told her she could have gotten hurt even worse. They told her she could have been killed.

They told David the same thing, but only once because he started crying and couldn’t stop. Aunt Easter had finally asked the doctors to leave so she could calm him down and then she’d immediately pulled out the mobile phone that practically no one else in town had but her and started pushing buttons. Ana had started crying too because she’d thought Aunt Easter was calling her mom. In that moment, confused, exhausted, she only knew she was in trouble and maybe she deserved to be, but she didn’t want to be in trouble anymore. She was sorry and said so, again and again, as Aunt Easter tried to comfort her and David and dial the phone, all at the same time.

“Ana’s in the hospital,” she had said without even saying hello first. And then she’d laughed, Ana’s mother’s laugh, angry. “Oh, what do you think happened? You’ve got to come get David. I can’t leave her…No, I don’t know. They want to keep her overnight…”

She had closed her eyes and the next time she’d opened them, David was gone and Aunt Easter was talking to the nurse. She’d closed them again and opened them to find herself alone and the room lit up in that rosy orange color that meant the sun was going down. She could remember wondering if David had ever gone swimming and then she’d wondered if she had, because that was what they were supposed to be doing today, wasn’t it? It was so hot and Aunt Easter had taken them to the park to play before it got too crowded with people coming to see the town fireworks.

There were lots of people there already, and lots of kids splashing around in the pond. David said they should go swimming. He was wearing shorts and shorts were fine for boys, but Ana hadn’t brought her swimsuit. David said they could go get it. The apartment where Ana and her mother lived was just two blocks away. They looked for Aunt Easter to ask, but couldn’t find her in the crowd. It didn’t matter, David told her. They could go and come back. She wouldn’t mind. She wouldn’t even know. It would only take a few minutes…

The empty parking slot. The frantic search. The sound of her mother’s voice swearing right outside the door. David choking and laughing as he discovered the dark bottles in the refrigerator were not root beer. The sour taste of it in her mouth and then the taste of blood. The bottle. Her back. Her head. Her arm. Sunlight shining through the window on the pieces of glass beside her hand, already turning purple. The floor was filthy, sticky. Her swimsuit had blue seashells on it and was too small anyway. She never should have gone home.

Fireworks woke her and again she was in the bed, alone. At some point during this tangled, confusing day, Ana had forgotten not to talk to strangers and asked one of the nurses where her aunt was. The nurse told her she had to go home and she’d be back, but Ana had waited and waited and they hadn’t come back. Now it was dark and there were fireworks, so she knew they weren’t coming. They had gone home without her. Ana was here in this big white bed and David was running alone through the yard with his hands full of sparklers and his tummy full of hotdogs.

For a moment, Ana thought she could see him, thought she was watching him in the window just like a picture on TV, and then another firework went off, waking her up before she’d even fallen asleep. The room spun, or maybe just her head, and suddenly she was outside and the sun was shining and David was there like nothing had ever happened.

She thought she was going swimming, and it seemed to her that the river was almost there while she was thinking it, but then her surroundings came in clearly and she wasn’t in the canyon at all. It
was last month now and she was out by the quarry with David and they were playing pirates. She could feel the sun warm on her skin and the sweat trickling down her back as they chased each other around the rocks. She could hear the slap of her shoes on the hard desert soil and each dull clack as her stick parried his wooden sword. Aunt Easter was here, somewhere. She could hear her laughing, cheering them on as battle raged between them.

This was the best part of playing pirates. David liked the sailing and exploring islands and magic spells and rescuing princesses; Ana liked the sea monsters and dragons and pirate hunters and especially the swordfights. David would win, of course. David always won because he knew all the stories, so he was always Foxy and Foxy always won. This meant Ana was Blackmane, and since today’s story wasn’t just any story, but The Wreck of the Pride, she knew she wasn’t just going to lose this fight. She was about to die.

She drew it out as long as she could, but when she saw David getting frustrated, she had to let him knock the stick from her hand. She could remember that Blackmane said something here, but she couldn’t remember what, so she dropped to her knees in silence. She bowed her head as David put the blunt edge of his toy cutlass up against her throat and then—

“What the hell was that?” a man asked, laughing. His voice was familiar, safe and full of smiles.

David and Ana both looked back. Ana could see them, but only sort of, like shadow puppets on the wall of the world, all their edges blurred and dark.

“They’re just playing,” said Aunt Easter’s voice and it came in clear enough, even if she did not.

“She let him win!”

“I’m Foxy!” David called.

Ana nodded, holding the sword to her neck to keep it and the story in place. “Foxy wins!”

The man muttered. He and Aunt Easter receded. David looked down at her and shrugged in that embarrassed way he had whenever grown-ups called too much attention to the serious business of children. Ana smiled back at him, then faced forward and the story resumed.

“Look there,” David growled, pointing into the sun.

One year later and miles away, older-Ana would turn her head obediently, her closed eyes dancing beneath their lids as she faced the window, and many more years later, grown-Ana would turn her head as well. In the hospital, the orderly who had just come in to empty her trash brushed the hair back from the sleeping child’s brow and left again; Ana never knew he’d been there. In the tent, the man who crouched beside her eating a candy bar and watching shadows dance on the walls picked up her hand and used it to give himself a comforting pat on the head, then tucked another candy bar in his shirt pocket and slipped away, zipping the tent shut behind him; Ana never knew he’d been there.

But in the dream, Ana looked and saw, as she had only pretended to see that day when all this was real, the black sails and gold trimming of the Lion’s Pride, floating in the desert hardpan like a blood-red sea.

“She’s a beauty, aye,” David growled. His boy’s voice made a ludicrous impression of a pirate, but in his own mind, he wasn’t just saying the words, he was Foxy, so as he spoke, he became Foxy for Ana, too. “She’s a rare thing and a true treasure and it’ll hurt me heart when I blast me cannons through her hull and sink her to the bottom of the seas. But don’t ye think on it. Ye just look. Look
on her and see she’s beautiful, for ye’ve been a worthy enemy these many years and if we’ve come to the end of it, I wants ye to be happy…all the rest of yer life.”

The wooden sword stabbed between Ana’s arm and chest. Its dull grey painted blade pushed out in front of her, golden in the sunlight. Ana gasped, grimaced—

“You deserve it,” said the man. His voice was still smiling, but smiles or not, he wasn’t teasing. He meant it.

“Honey.”

“She let him win,” said the man. “She deserves to die on her knees. And she doesn’t deserve to be happy about it.”

“It’s how the story goes,” called David, frowning back at them. “Captain Blackmane dies.”

“Foxy wins,” Ana agreed, also looking back.

“I know how the story goes.” The shadows separated, one of them growing tall, coming nearer, fading from black to purple and then taking on the vague impression of true form, even if his face was still hard to see. He walked across the desert toward her and hunkered down, and even here, right in front of her, all she could see was the shadow across his face cast by the brim of his purple hat, the flash of sunlight on his glasses and the white lie of his smile. “I know Foxy won,” he told her, only her. “And do you know what else I know?”

Ana stood her ground, because even then she knew not to run, but her stomach knotted. Was she being bad? This man had never hurt her before, but that didn’t mean he never would. The ways of grown-ups were not for a child’s understanding; there was no way to know when the slap was coming. Tense, confused, Ana shook her head.

“I know Blackmane didn’t let him win,” he said, still smiling but in a serious voice. “He fought like a lion. And if he were here right now to watch you get on your little knees and die in his name, do you know what he’d do?”

Ana shook her head again, still wary but curious.

Raising an arm—the sun glinted off the gold shield he wore on his shirt—he tapped a finger on the very tip of her nose and smiled wider at her uncertain giggle. “He would eat you up. You and David both. He would start with your lying little tongues.” He made tickle motions at her lips and Ana giggled again. As she twisted away, he caught her up between his hands and shook her gently back and forth, growling, “And he wouldn’t stop until he’d crunched your bones all up!”

“But that’s how the story goes,” said David stubbornly.

The man looked at him as he hugged Ana in the trap of his arms and nibbled on her ear and shoulder, then suddenly released Ana and stood tall. “Let’s start a new one, then,” he said and put out his hand. “Give me your sword.”

David’s fist clenched on it, but only for a moment. He passed it over.

“Now David is my prisoner,” the man declared as, somewhere behind them, Aunt Easter loudly sighed and called them all silly. “I have him in a cage. David, go get in a cage.”

David looked around, then went to the big, flat rock that would not be Chateau d’If for three more years, when Aunt Easter gave Ana a copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* for her birthday. In three
years, Ana would read that book in a single afternoon, pulse pounding and head full of pictures, where the clearest of them all was that of the wronged young man (who was sometimes a young girl in Ana’s imagination) lying on the bare stone floor of his cell, there in the terrible prison built on a rock in the middle of the empty sea, a prisoner for now, soon to be a pirate and then to be a prince (the hierarchy of European nobility would remain incomprehensible to her for another few years). From that moment until the time of her taking, the quarry would be Ana’s favorite place to play, where she could imagine herself shut away in Chateau d’If, a captive on the eve of escape.

For now, it was just a rock. David climbed up and stood on it, arms folded, scowling.

“David’s cage is hanging over a pit,” said the man, pointing. “Can you see it?”

Ana nodded. In the hospital, in the tent, dreaming-Ana could see it open up, a miniature quarry, bottomless and stinking.

“Good.” The man hunkered down again and took something off his belt. A watch, the cartoon kind that didn’t have a band but had to be worn on a chain on a belt. He showed it to Ana as he moved the hands around. “This is a key. You have to take the key away from me before the time’s up and unlock David’s cage or he’ll die.”

“How much time?”

“Never enough,” he told her and pushed his thumb down on the knob at the top of the watch. One of the hands started moving rapidly around.

“I don’t know this story,” Ana said tentatively. “Who are you?”

“I’m me,” said the man, standing tall again and clipping the watch back on his belt. “And you’re you. And that’s the only story worth telling. Are you ready?”

He had raised his sword, so Ana stepped back and raised her stick.

“Don’t hurt her,” Aunt Easter called in her sighing way.

The man looked that way, then at Ana. “This is going to hurt,” he told her. “I’m not kidding. You can’t save David and stay safe at the same time. You have to be willing to bleed if you want him to live. The game doesn’t mean anything if you can’t lose. Understand?”

She nodded.

“Okay then.” He put a hand down on the watch, showing it to her once more before slipping it into his pocket on its chain. “Go.”

Ana lunged, swinging her stick at his sword.

He knocked it away in a sweep of his arm and smacked her across the back with the next. It startled her more than it hurt, but the pain came after, stinging and itching like the fresh scrapes on her knees and palms. “This sword isn’t trying to kill you,” he told her as she picked herself out of the dirt. “I am. Watch me, Ana. Hit me.”

Hit…for real? He was a grown-up. Grown-ups were always telling kids not to hit. Grown-ups were the only ones allowed to do that.

She hesitated.
He stopped smiling and struck her in the stomach with the hilt of David’s sword, knocking the breath out of her and sending her sprawling on the ground again. Her elbows scraped the ground, stinging, hot. She grabbed at one and stared wide-eyed at the smears of blood left on her palm. When she looked up, the man said, “I told you I wasn’t kidding.”

Ana closed her hand into a fist, hiding the red marks, silent.

“David’s running out of time,” he said. “I wasn’t kidding about that, either. So you can get up and try to save him or you can lie there and cry, but—”

Ana grabbed her stick and slammed it down with all her might on the man’s foot.

He leapt back, yelling first and then laughing, then kicked at her as she scrambled around him.

She hit him. Never mind kids and never mind grown-ups. She hit him in his shin just as hard as she could. It was not like hitting David’s sword. She felt the impact all the way up her shoulders, heard his shout and recognized, through the laughter, the sound of pain. It made her feel something, something hot and tight in the middle of her chest that made her head throb and her legs go watery. It was not fear, not anger, not joy, but all of them together. It made her feel…powerful.

He knocked her away in the next instant, but this time, she didn’t fall down. And as soon as she had her balance again, she swung, not for his sword but for the hand that held it. He yanked his arm up at the last second, taking the blow on his side instead, but she still hit him and she could tell it hurt.

“Good,” he said, circling around her and forcing her to turn, keeping him in sight. “That’s very good. Ask no quarter and give none, that’s what Foxy would say. Do you know what that means?”

A quarter was the big coin with the eagle on it, and even though Ana knew instinctively that was not what he meant this time, she nodded. “It means you play to win,” she said and stabbed her stick forward.

He caught it, which was cheating, and pushed it aside as he smacked her on the side of the head—left and right—quick and hard enough to leave her ears burning. “Only sort of. It also means you play so the other guy loses. There’s a difference. Do you see it?”

She nodded, stabbing at him again.

Again he caught her stick, this time giving it a little shake before shoving it away. “You are never going to run me through with this,” he told her. “If you hit me when you know it can’t hurt me, it’s just like not hitting me at all. Play to win, Ana.”

She nodded, stabbing at him again.

When he grabbed for the stick, she yanked it back and hit him in the side of the head. He darted away, not quite quick enough to avoid it altogether. Her stick was long and heavy, the bark still on and rough right up to the tip. There was blood along the edge of his ear. Not a lot. Not even enough to form a whole drop, but it was there and it left a visible smear when he rubbed and looked at them.

“Okay,” he said, laughing as he sucked the blood from his fingers. “Okay, we need to lay down some safety rules. Rule number one, no going for the eyes. What do you say?”

“No quarter,” said Ana.

Their eyes met; he smiled.
Ana would never know who moved first after that, only that the moment ended and they were at each other. The sound of them—stick and sword—bashing and battering at each other was tremendous, drowning out Ana’s own breath and the scuffling of their shoes on the hardpan, but somehow the ticking of the man’s watch stayed with her. She wasn’t sure how much time she had left, but she knew when it was gone, it was gone, and David would die.

She could not win. He was bigger and stronger and faster and he had a better sword. It wasn’t fair!

…It wasn’t fair.

And if he wasn’t going to play fair, Ana decided coldly, neither was she.

She jumped back and threw her stick straight at his face. As he was batting it aside in surprise, already laughing, she ran at him with her fist clenched and punched him in the No-No place boys had and girls didn’t.

She felt it. She felt the scrape of his zipper on her knuckles and the solid heat of meat and bone that was his body, but more than that, she felt the lumpy shadow-shape so dangerous it couldn’t be looked at or talked about or even named. She felt it, the Thing, and in all the six short years of her life, she would never feel anything as satisfying as that Thing under her fist as she punched it with all her strength.

The man let out a breath that was whistle and moan and woof, all at the same time, and fell on his knees, dropping David’s sword to grab between his legs. Ana snatched at the watch as he slumped onto his side, but couldn’t figure out how to take it off the belt. She pulled at it, seeing nothing but that clock-hand moving, then planted a foot on his chest and yanked until the little chain broke.

She ran to David, who was staring at her with his mouth open and his eyes wide all around, and pulled him down from the rock. Aunt Easter rushed over in the next instant, flying past Ana and David to kneel by the man, who had managed to roll all the way onto his back and was still gripping between his legs, with both hands now, his knees bent and wide apart, panting at the sky.

All sense of triumph died away, seeing him, seeing Aunt Easter. What had she done? There was no cage and no pit. The watch still ticked, solid but silly in her dirty fist, the little tail of its broken chain tapping at her thigh. That hot angry feeling that had made her feel so good, so…so strong now shriveled up and dropped down into her belly. She was in trouble now. She was in so much trouble.

But he was shaking his head at whatever Aunt Easter was saying, shaking his head and, yes, laughing as he let her help him sit up. “The lacerations aren’t that deep,” he told her. “I know the bruising is scary, but there’s no real damage to the eye or the socket.” He twisted around to look at Ana, breathing hard, then he reached out a beckoning arm.

She went, expecting the slap and knowing she deserved it, but he merely pulled her up against his purple shirt and hugged her tight. His stubble scraped her cheek as he kissed her. His fingers caught in her hair as he tousled it. “Good girl,” he panted, still with pain tight in his voice. “That’s my good girl.”

She wasn’t. Was she? But no, she knew she wasn’t. But he said she was. But she had the broken watch right in her hand.

She held it up, stammering sorrys through a throat gone small with the threat of tears, knowing it wouldn’t be enough, it never was, and now he’d hit her, now the yelling, now everything would be
all right, but again, he only hugged her.

“Things get broken,” he said, holding her hand as she held the watch. “Multiple fractures of the clavicle and scapula…three ribs…partially dislocated elbow. The only real breaks were her wrist and those two fingers. But do you know what we do when things get broken?”

Ana shook her head.

The man smiled, curling her fingers around the watch and holding her hands safe in his. “We fix them.”

Ana managed a small flinching smile.

“Now you hold on to that until we get home,” he told her, groaning as he rocked onto his knees and then to his feet. He took her hand and then took David’s and, with Aunt Easter behind them, headed toward the shiny place in this memory that was Aunt Easter’s car. “They’re hopeful she’ll be out of the cast by September, so she can start school right on time, and I’ll bet you can fix that old chain yourself if you had the right tools.”

David, walking backwards to see all of them at once as he pulled on the man’s hand, said, “She’s not going back,” in a deep, distorted voice that was so at odds with his excited seven-year-old face that it was that, and not the sudden boom of fireworks, that woke her.

* * *

The quarry melted away and little Ana was back in the white room, huddled under her white sheets.

There was a man at the foot of her bed. She saw him clearly even as she thought she must be dreaming. He was wearing a tall hat like the one Freddy wore in Aunt Easter’s tapes, and a long coat that took away the shape of his body and made him something that was just big and black. She saw him and thought for sure she was asleep, so she simply closed her eyes again and listened as another voice, the man from her dream still in shadows even when he was real and in the room, now said, “If it comes to a custody fight, I’ve got to stand up in court and tell the world just why I think I’m the father and you know Mellie will have plenty to say about how that happened. Don’t kid yourself, Freddy,” he said and so Ana knew for sure she was dreaming. It was not Freddy, it was just a man in a hat. “They may take her away from her, but they’ll never give her to me. Or to Marion. As long as we keep this private, just between us, we can do whatever we want, but if it ever comes out—”

“She’s so small,” said the man in the hat.

The other voice fell quiet. Footsteps brought him from someplace unseen behind Ana close to the foot of the bed.

“Look at her. She’s a baby. She never had a chance. How could this happen? How could anyone hurt someone so small, so perfectly helpless?”

The other voice did not answer.

“How do you do it?” the man in the hat asked.

The quiet thickened, sharpened. “What?”
“How do you keep someone you love safe from someone…someone you know wants to hurt them?”

A second silence, longer than the first. “Marion’s already told her if this happens again, she won’t get any more money.”

A sound, a breath, soft as the puff that blows the dry seeds of a dandelion into the wind. “Are you buying them now?”

“What are you talking about?” the other voice asked, no longer smiling, no longer safe.

The other man didn’t answer.

“Look, this was the deal,” said the other voice. “Mellie takes care of Ana until she’s eighteen, and we take care of Mellie, and as I recall, it was your idea, so I’d love to know just what the hell it is you’re implying now.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. I just…This can’t happen again. I don’t care what you have to do. Whatever you’re paying her, double it. Get her out of that apartment and buy her a house. Buy her a car. Buy her a pony! Bury the bitch in money, but you make it clear to her that this doesn’t happen again or I will take this child away from her. If she goes into foster care and ends up on the other side of the world, so be it, but I will take her away and no one, no one, will ever see her again, is that clear?”

Silence, the loudest of them all.

“I’m sorry,” the man in the hat said again, softly now. “I’m too upset over this and I…I don’t know why. I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“It’s fine. You’re fine. Have you eaten anything? You want me to run down to the automat and see if they’ve got a sandwich or something?”

“I’d like some coffee, please.”

“That won’t help you sleep,” said the voice, once more full of smiles. “You sure you don’t want anything to eat? I saw some cake at the nurse’s station. I could probably charm them out of a couple slices. What do you say?”

“Sure.”

“There’s my man.”

Footsteps receded.

Ana raised her head, but the man in the hat was still there and this time, he saw her eyes open. He smiled, but it wasn’t a happy smile.

“Are you awake?” he asked her.

Ana nodded.

“No,” said the man, coming around the side of the bed toward her. “No, you’re dreaming. I see you dreaming. Here.” He took the sheet out of her hands and tucked it in around her shoulders, then took the blanket, folded it over so it felt a little warmer, and draped that over her too. In a deep, soft, rumbling sort of voice that reminded her in a funny way of the real Freddy, he began to sing:
“Sleep now, baby, sleep. Night is calling, full of dreams. Slow the midnight hours are creeping. And I, my loved one’s watch am keeping. Cares are heavy, set them free. And sleep now, baby, sleep.”

Fireworks exploded right outside the window, lighting up the whole room in gold. Ana watched the fire fall, then closed her eyes and slept.
Ana wasn’t sure when she woke up. It was still dark, the perfect medium for blending dreams into reality. Further blurring the lines was one of Mammon’s summer storms, flickers of lightning and rolling thunder pouring through cracks in her sleep-wall and forming into fireworks on the other side. She’d been dreaming of the night she’d spent in the hospital, which actually might have been the Fourth of July for real, although she couldn’t be sure. It had been so long ago. Even if it hadn’t been for the accident that had smudged over so many of her childhood memories, she’d only been five or six years old at the time. Between that and taking a bottle to the head and the serious painkillers they’d put in the drip, she couldn’t trust any of her memories of that night even when she was awake, much less when she was dreaming.

Lightning danced, showing her a strobe-lit shadow-puppet show on the walls of her tent, giving her a tantalizing glimpse of lunging hands and distorted faces before throwing her back into perfect blackness. Rain slapped the tent just long enough for her to think the storm was moving off and then the thunder hit, so loud and so close that she sat bolt upright, wide awake in a split-second, hospital dreams forgotten, dead sure the house had collapsed.

Scrambling out of her old army-surplus sleeping bag, Ana splashed down into half an inch of warm rainwater that had seeped up through the bottom of the tent and collected in a puddle there at the mouth. It was weather-resistant, not water-proof. She knew it and it certainly wasn’t the first time it had leaked on her, but in the dark, with fragments of her dream choking out reason, the unexpected presence of that water inside her tent seemed too much like an omen of ruin, so much that when she fumbled the zipper open, she looked right at the house—standing immoveable against the fury of the storm—and did not believe it.

Lightning pulsed behind the clouds, outlining the house in silver thread and shining on the wet glass, especially the round attic window—with a white face at its center, looking down at her.

In the next instant, the sky was dark and Ana waited, hardly breathing, as the thunder boomed and rain hit her open eyes. When the lightning slashed through the clouds again, there was nothing in the window, nothing but a dazzle of reflected light.

No one was there. No one had ever been there. She did not believe in ghosts.

Damn it.

Ana crawled out into the storm and ran through the rain for the house. The wind caught the door, making her fight to get inside and then slamming it behind her. In the dark, she groped at the wall for the lightswitch, but finding it did nothing; the storm had knocked out the power. Ana retreated to the porch and to the boxes of tools she still kept there, locating a flashlight by touch before venturing back inside.

She stood on the threshold almost a minute, one hand on the latch, ready to bolt as she swept her flashlight around the parlor on the right and the less-formal living room on the left of the foyer, up
the stairs and down them again, lingering longest on the grandfather clock in the hall that led to the kitchen. She told herself it was just because she still wasn’t used to seeing it without the rolltop desk that had always been its companion piece throughout Ana’s childhood, but she knew she was lying. When she finally moved away from the door, it was to go to the clock, open it and make sure the secret door it stood against was still shut. Tonight it was, but sometimes it wasn’t and it never failed to freak her out when she found it open, even though she knew it was just her going in and out. Hell, she’d woken up in that creepy pirate-ship-shaped bed a few times after getting too high to remember doing it. She needed to lay off on those little pink pills. Which would be easy soon enough, since she was almost out of them.

But tonight, the door was shut. Ana wound the clock so she could pretend that was the only reason she was here, then reminded herself she was checking for storm damage and headed upstairs. There had been some windstorms over the past few weeks, but this was the first real rain since she’d reshingled the roof. Perhaps once she saw the attic was dry, she could convince herself it was safe to go back to sleep without giving in to that little voice in the back of her head and helping calm along with a vitamin. Or two. Or three.

Ana climbed the stairs, going slow and holding on to the bannister because her feet were wet. Safety first, as Chica would say. Once she reached the second floor, she turned immediately and shone her flashlight down the hall on her right, checking each bedroom door and finding them all closed. Of course. Then she turned the other way and aimed her flashlight down the hall on the left.

She did not scream, but only because she couldn’t. Her throat locked; her lungs were lead. She was as silent, as still, as the toy rabbit at the end of the hall.

It sat on one of the dining room chairs, one she had no memory of bringing upstairs, blocking the door to the narrow attic stairs. The window behind it was alive with lightning, throwing its shadow long before it, almost all the way to Ana’s own toes. Its head lolled, long ears flopping forward over its face and metal teeth gaping in a hungry grin.

She knew what she was looking at, of course. The stuffed rabbit, the one that she’d found down in the secret basement playroom, the creepy twin of David’s Fredbear. She supposed that made it Bonbunny, but couldn’t bring herself to name it that. At the same time, it needed a name, because the unnameable fear always has more power and that fucking thing was scary enough. She’d started out calling it Fingertrap, in deference to the bite it had given her as thanks for discovering it, then Bunny Snapjaws, then Plushie Bun-Bun, then Plushie Snaptrap, and somehow that had devolved to Plushtrap. She didn’t really like the name, but she kept using it anyway, because she got the feeling it didn’t like it either.

Slowly, Ana moved toward it, keeping it frozen in the beam of her light as if that were all that were keeping it from leaping down from the tall chair and running at her. She could not remember bringing it upstairs. She could not imagine even wanting to, no matter how high she’d been. She kept putting this fucking thing in the secret playroom and kept finding it around the house when she least expected it, because stoned-Ana was apparently a sadistic bitch who hated sober-Ana and did not want her to sleep ever again.

Reaching Plushtrap, Ana steeled herself and gave it a testing poke to the nose. Its head rocked. Worn gears ground inside it as it struggled its jaws even wider apart, then suddenly snapped them shut. A few notes of some unrecognizable song plunked out of it as, with a wheeze of protest, it opened its mouth again.

“Missed me, missed me,” whispered Ana, waggling her fingers in front of its staring face. “Now
you got to kiss—"

It sagged forward and bit the air where her hand would have been, had she not yanked it back. It played a little more music, sinking down into its own lap, and fell silent.

Outside, lightning scattered across the sky, throwing shadows through the window that made the damn thing almost seem to breathe.

“Okay,” said Ana after a moment. “Funny joke, asshole. Now you’re going in the trash.”

Pinching the very tip of one ear between just two fingers, she picked the thing up—heavier than it looked—and threw it down the hall behind her. It hit the floor, bounced once, and slid to a stop just in front of David’s bedroom door. She waited, oddly reticent to take her light off it even now, but it did nothing and at last, she opened the door to the attic and backed through.

She closed the door on Plushtrap before she turned around and aimed her light up the stairs. She listened, but could hear nothing beyond the storm. She started up, hugging the wall to avoid creaking on the old steps, even as she told herself she was only going to check for leaks.

The attic had not suffered as much from the hoard that had filled the rest of the house. Ana had cleared it once all the way down to the bare walls and the boards on the floor, but it hadn’t stayed empty long. At the time, the basement had been pressed into service as containment for the remains of the hoard (and still held a shit-ton of boxes she had yet to go through, as well as all the furniture she hadn’t decided what to do with yet), and so the attic had seemed the logical place to put the pieces of her aunt’s life Ana had no use for and yet could not yet bear to part with: Christmas decorations, Halloween costumes, her aunt’s sewing machine and boxes of fabric, tax papers and other important-looking documents, years’ worth of David’s old science projects and report cards, baby stuff, clothes, toys, and of course, boxes and boxes and boxes full of home movies on VHS tapes, most of them unlabeled.

Looking at them now, knowing there would be more if she ever got around to cleaning David’s bedroom or the basement, it was easy to see how her aunt had turned into a hoarder.

Ana stood for a long time at the top of the stairs before remembering the roof. A cursory sweep along the rafters showed her no signs of leakage. She started forward, sweeping her flashlight left and right, searching the shadowed spaces between each stack of boxes until she reached the window at the far end of the attic.

The window was old and the glass had warped out of clarity, giving her a vantage of the desert that was blurred at best. With the lightning streaking in sheets across the sky, flashing off the rain and illuminating the clouds, everything she saw had achieved an unnerving sense of movement. The house, the garage, even her truck were fixed in place, but the trees and rocks and the quarry in the far distance seemed to sidestep or dart forward or back with each flicker of stormlight.

‘At least it’s all up there,’ thought Ana, and just as the last word slipped her mental lips, a white-blue bolt appeared, bridging the gap between heaven and earth with an intensity that scarred her eyes. By the time she shut them, the light was already gone, but its ghost burned on, brilliantly red behind her eyelids. Then came the boom, a solid hammer of sound that rattled the window and shook the boards beneath her feet. It seemed to last forever, ripping up the night as it rolled out in all directions, and when it was finally gone, even the fury of the rain seemed to fall a bit more timidly than before.

“Holy shit,” Ana whispered, still frozen with her hands half-raised…just in case the lightning tried to get in the house and she had to push it back out, she guessed. Belatedly, her fight-or-flight
instincts kicked in and she stepped back, just one step, her heart pounding all the way up in the back of her throat. Still, she felt better for talking, so she said it again: “Holy shit, that was close.”

And thought, so clearly she might as well have said that, too: That was Freddy’s.

At once, Ana pressed herself to the window again, cheek flat to the glass, straining at this impossible angle to try and see the distant flat outcrop where the restaurant should be. The sky’s flickering light showed her the shifting desert all the way to the Wasatch Mountains on the horizon, but of Freddy’s or even Edge of Nowhere, she couldn’t even catch a glimpse.

She was on the wrong side of the house. Abandoning her position at the window, Ana raced back across the attic and downstairs, leaping over Plushtrap in the hall, and then down the grand stairwell, straight out into the storm. The rain slapped her with its hundred hands at once, but she put her head down and fought through it to the rear of the house, through the trees and right up to the edge of the drop-off that overlooked the desert.

Raising her flashlight in the world’s least effective umbrella, Ana squinted into the stinging rain until she thought she could see Edge of Nowhere. Maybe. Even with the lightning going full force, she couldn’t be sure. But that was a good thing, wasn’t it? If lightning had really hit the restaurant, it would be on fire and easy to see at night. Then again, nothing could burn for long in this rain. And if the roof had collapsed—

Which it had. Of course it had. She couldn’t make out the restaurant, not because she was looking in the wrong place or the wind was in her eyes or the lightning was too uneven, but because Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria was presently several thousand tons of water-logged debris, burying the worn-out animatronics who had been forgotten there finally and forever.

It did not surprise her. The fall of Freddy’s had been inevitable, had been in fact years overdue. She was not surprised. What she felt instead as the rain lashed at her and the thunder laughed was a soul-deep denial that had nothing to do with logical thought. And it was in that mind that Ana turned and dashed away through the storm.

Rain had mixed with the loose mountain soil to become a thin, reddish-grey mud that was slick as oil where it lay over the stony ground and her bare feet skidded several times as she ran. She fell twice, reaching her tent with fresh blood dappling her knees and possibly a broken toe. The pain helped her focus. Rather than tear blindly through her tent, she searched through the rumpled heap of her cast-off clothes, shaking her jeans as she found them until she heard the jingle of keys. Once she had them in her hand, she was away again, this time to her truck.

She was calm, she told herself, navigating the hairpin turns of Coldslip Mountain dressed only in a t-shirt and panties. For the first time in at least fifteen years, she had left the house without her day pack, but she did not realize this yet. She was not rational and she could admit that readily enough as she threw herself into the storm, knowing she could do nothing to help if the worst had happened and nothing to prevent it if it hadn’t happened yet, but she was calm.

Soon enough, she’d reached the foot of the mountain and the long, flat stretch of Old Quarry Road, where she put the pedal to the mat and howled across the desert all the way to Edge of Nowhere. From half a mile back, she could finally see the pizzeria, but the sight brought no relief. The walls might be intact, but the roof was surely gone. So she thought and so she kept right on thinking, whispering it to herself as she drove, trying to brace herself against the wreckage she would undoubtedly find so it wouldn’t hurt as much when she had to accept the fact it was finally over.

Her headlights splashed across the bricks—fresh graffiti, Freddy Lives—as she drew close and parked beside the West Exit. Grabbing her flashlight, she threw herself into the pummeling fist of
the storm once more, but only for as long as it took to push the loose boards aside and crawl in through the door Bonnie had smashed for her.

The smell hit her first, exponentially worse in the wet, but it was a small comfort all the same. The smell had that special tang of mildew and rot that came with being closed-in. Likewise, the air felt thick, with the worst of the draft coming through the door she herself had come through.

Slowly, she stood, straining her ears even though destruction so rarely had a sound. She heard only the rain on the roof, which proved it was at least in part there. Switching on her flashlight, she aimed its beam at the ceiling and began to walk, guessing at the age of the damage she found as she followed it to the dining room.

The door at the end of the hall, which had always been ornery, had swelled in its frame and wouldn’t open at all. Ana struggled with it for a while, alternating between picking at the rusted hingepins with her useless bitten fingernails and kicking at it with her bare feet, then gave up on it. She started back up the hall, thinking to cut through Pirate Cove and come around by way of the East Hall, but stopped after just a few running steps and came back.

The Party Room was available by reservation only, or so Freddy had repeatedly told her on her previous visit whenever she tried to explore, and he’d kept too close an eye on her to let her steal more than a quick peek now and then. Still, those unsatisfying glances had left her with an impression of a room considerably more intact than any other in the restaurant. If there was anything sturdy enough to help her break the door down, she’d find it there.

She went in, sweeping her flashlight across the ceiling first and only moving on to explore the rest of the room when she was satisfied it wasn’t about to drop on her. She saw tables, two of them, and at first, she only saw that they were too unwieldy for her immediate purposes. She started forward, already shining her light toward the stage, and then suddenly turned and looked at the tables again. They were still in formation, in two straight rows at right angles to the stage. A few chairs had been upended and tossed around, but most were still in their proper place. An assortment of candy-striped party hats were lined up down the middle of each table, along with cups of crayons, only one of which had been spilled. The wall shared with the dining room had bubbled and grew mold in black patches, but the happy-birthday banner was still pinned up and crepe-paper streamers still criss crossed the room, broken in only two places. Half a dozen tin-toy arcade games were lined up against the wall, all with Freddyland themes, like Amelia’s Aeroplane Adventure or Whack-A-Yeti; all appeared intact. The stage lights were thickly cobwebbed, but still bolted securely to the water-stained ceiling. Behind the purple curtains that closed off the show stage, the fancifully carved doors of a wardrobe set into the back wall were wide open and canted on their hinges; the props it had once contained lay scattered. If she didn’t look too close, it could almost pass as the aftermath of any party before the janitor arrived to clean up and reset the room for the next birthday girl or boy.

Thunder boomed, scarcely registering through Ana’s fascination, but when one of the black tiles on the molding wall dislodged and fell, cracking apart on the floor, she jumped like she’d been shot. Once more focused on the problem of how to get the warped door unstuck, Ana climbed onstage and picked through the props until she found a sturdy piece of heavy-grade plastic in the shape of a hollow log. She wasn’t sure what it had been used for back when this room was being rented out, but it had handles for easy portage and felt good when she gave it a few practice swings.

Back she went to the end of the hall, where she put her flashlight on the ground, set her feet and squared her shoulders, then hauled back and swung that piece of plastic like a battering ram, straight out from the center of her body with every ounce of her weight behind it.
The door did not open as much as explode out of its frame, throwing splinters out into the dining room, some of which hit Freddy directly in the face. He put up his arms in a reflexive manner and kept them there, his head cocked and ears twitching, as Ana grabbed her flashlight again and ran out of the hall.

Her feet splashed down in several inches of warm stormwater and promptly went out from under her. She dropped on her ass, legs painfully V’d out to either side, and for a while, just sat there, shining her light around the ceiling and the floor and the ceiling again.

The first night she’d spent in this building, it had been raining much harder than it was tonight, and there had been a few deep puddles here and there, most notably up next to the stage and over by the barricaded opening to the lobby. Now there was a lake, filling three-quarters of the room, with so many leaks in the ceiling above that they could not be counted. It might as well be raining indoors.

“Freddy-dy-dy?” Bonnie’s voice, still deep in the East Hall, but coming closer. “Chica’s d-d-d—DOWN IN THE VALLEY—down. I c-c-can’t pick her up and she’s losing-ing-ing it, fast. Where are you?”

Freddy glanced back, looked at Ana, then lowered his arms and turned all the way around so that he was facing Bonnie fully just as soon as he appeared. “GO. BACK,” he said, even as Bonnie’s ears snapped up at the sight of Ana, still sitting in the dark water that covered the floor and staring at the ceiling. “BONNIE. GO.”

“Ana? What are you…you…you’re not-t-t wearing any pants.”

Ana tore her gaze off the ceiling and looked at him, her breath ragged and too loud in her ears.

“You’re not wearing-ing-ing any shoes,” he said, moving his plasticly consternated gaze from her bare legs to her bare feet.

Incredulity bubbled up and popped as a laugh. “I’m not wearing a kilt, a corset or a fucking pair of earmuffs, either! So what?” Ana started to pick herself up, but her feet slipped on the submerged tiles and she dropped on her ass once more.

Bonnie started for her right away, but Freddy held up his hand to stop him.


“What-t-t—DO YOU CALL A BEAR WITH NO TEETH?—are you t-t-talking about? Can’t what?” Again, Bonnie limped toward her, but Freddy moved to block him after just a few steps. “Let me t-t-talk to her.”

“NO. I. TOLD. YOU. THE. LAST. TIME. THIS. WAS. THE. END.” Freddy’s head bent and he stayed that way while Ana picked herself up and waded further into the room. Finally, he raised his head and said, “IT’S TIME TO SAY GOODBYE.”

Bonnie stared, twitching. “No,” he said at last. “No, F-Fr-Freddy, p-p-p—PLEASE AND THANK YOU—please! Please d-d-don’t. P-P-Please don’t-t-t!”

“SAY GOODBYE. AND. GO. TO. THE. QUIET. ROOM.”

“No! Fred-d-dy, no! You c-c-can’t! Please!”
GO. TO. THE. QUIET. ROOM. OR. I’LL. PUT. YOU. IN. THE. KITCHEN.”

Ana’s foot came down on a chunk of broken ceramic tile. She stepped back, then bent and groped around in the water until she found a hand-sized piece. The argument developing between Freddy and Bonnie evaporated at once when she threw it. Freddy looked at her, then followed her staring eyes up at the ceiling, where the piece of tile was stuck. Bonnie came rapidly across the room, ignored by Freddy and Ana both.

The tile came loose and dropped back to the floor. A few greyish blobs of rotten sheetrock fell with it, releasing a deluge of dirty water that gradually slackened to a steady drip.

Bonnie reached Ana and took her arm. “You have to g-g-get out of here, now.”

“No,” she said numbly. “No, you have to get out of here. Now. Where’s Chica? Freddy!”

Freddy looked at her, at the ceiling, and at her again.

She beckoned to him, trying to push Bonnie out the door as he tried to do the same thing to her. “Where’s Chica?” she asked again, urgently. “Bonnie, quit it! Let go! Get out of here! I mean it, go!”

Bonnie released his bruising grip on her arm, but only took one step back. “Go wh-wh— WHERE’S MY GUITAR?—where?”

With effort, she tore her eyes off the hole in the ceiling and looked at Bonnie. Could they even leave the restaurant? No, of course not. Otherwise, one of them would have wandered off down the road by now, looking for someone to entertain. Then again, they hadn’t been built here, so there had to be some protocol for moving them on- and off-site…but she didn’t know what it was.

“We need to go,” said Ana with a sinking sense of hopelessness, knowing it couldn’t be this easy. “My truck is right outside. I need you—”

“NO,” said Freddy.

“All of you!” she said desperately. “I need you all to come with me right now—”

“IT IS UNLAWFUL TO REMOVE FAZBEAR ENTERTAINMENT PROPERTY FROM THE PREMISES.”

“Freddy, listen to me!”

But the storm spoke for her, booming and roaring directly overhead. More pieces of the ceiling broke off and fell into Lake Dining Room. She couldn’t even tell what they were, just that they were the color of crocodile hide and the consistency of cottage cheese. The sound of rain falling inside the building briefly took on a bathroom resonance as chunks of this unnamable debris fell with the grey water that had collected between the roof and the ceiling.

“We have got to go,” Ana said once the flow had slackened. “Right now, okay? Right now!”

“Why?” asked Bonnie.

Freddy grunted and said, “WHERE?”

“I don’t…I…Backstage!” Shaking off Bonnie’s hand, she waded toward the show stage, only to have Freddy move to block her way.
“ONLY BAND MEMBERS ARE ALLOWED—”

“Then go without me! Just go!”

“There’s no p-p-power,” said Bonnie. “The d-d-doors don’t work.”

She stared at him, fighting waves of dismay, incomprehension and manic laughter. She was panicking. She didn’t feel like she was, but she was. Nothing had changed from five minutes ago, when she’d known there was still no way to open that door, no way to actually access the vault that was only maybe sturdy enough to withstand the inevitable collapse that was coming.

“THE RESTAURANT IS CLOSED.”

“I know, I know, now shut up, Freddy, please. Let me think.” Ana turned around, biting at her thumbnail and spitting the sliver she gnawed off into the water. Her thumb hurt. Bleeding. She had to stop biting them. Was there time to go home and get the generator?

“Sure, dipshit,” she muttered. “Then electrocute your stupid self wiring it up in all this water.” Not to mention talking the pass-code out of Freddy. What did that leave?

Her thoughts whirled, only to settle in the exact same place they’d started. The only safe place in this whole building was out of it. And they wouldn’t leave, couldn’t leave. Wait, no. Bonnie and Freddy had gone outside, at least as far as the loading dock. But no further, she reminded herself. Still, it was out from under this roof.

Could she get all the animatronics outside on the loading dock? And even if she could, did she really want to be that close to the building, actually leaning up against it, if it fell? Buildings didn’t just fall down, she knew that. They fell in, out, sideways, all ways. Things snapped, exploded, flew. Rebar became javelins; windows became knives; everything she was looking at now was shrapnel waiting to happen.

No. No, backstage was definitely the place to be, and if she couldn’t get the animatronics inside, at least she could get them as close to its support as possible. If and when the dining room caved in, the vault backstage might be enough to prevent the total collapse of the building. All she had to do was get the animatronics on the other side of it, and that meant—

“Pirate Cove,” she said. “Everybody to Pirate Cove. Where’s Chica?”

“She was in the arc-c-cade,” said Bonnie. “But you c-c-can’t—Ana! Chi-Chi—CHICA THE CHICKEN!—Chica’s d-down!”

“I can get her up,” Ana promised, already wading toward the East Hall. “Go on!”

“Oh G-God, no! Freddy, Chica’s g-g-g—GOING ON A BEAR HUNT—gone b-b-black! Ana, st-st—STOP DROP AND ROLL!”

“I got this, Bon, just go to Pirate Cove!” Ana called.

“NO!” Bonnie roared, really roared, actually hurting her ears even as big as this space was.

Ana staggered, clapping at her ears, then swung around to yell back at him and found Freddy right behind her, reaching for her. Before she could react, he had caught her by the arm, still walking but now dragging her with him.

“BONNIE. GO. TO. PIRATE COVE,” he ordered, pointing to the West Hall door with his free
hand and switching on the lights of his eyes. The Toreador March began to play, madly cheerful, 
echoing off the walls and the water, sputtering twice before it died away.

“Freddy, p-p-please!”

“ENOUGH. I. SAID. GO. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

Bonnie jerked and turned at once, like a puppet in the hands of an inept puppeteer, crashing into 
the door and convulsing there several seconds before pushing it open. He left without speaking, but 
Ana could hear sporadic blats of static receding as he lurched away.

“Go with him, damn you! Freddy, stop! Don’t move! Go back! The fucking roof is about to fall on 
you, you giant fucking fuckhole!” she shouted. “Let go of me!”

Freddy’s speaker spat out a few more notes of the Toreador March. “WATCH. YOUR. 
LANGUAGE,” he grumbled, pulling her with him into the East Hall at his same lurching pace. His 
hand was a vise, unbreakable, painful. His feet squished comically on the tiles between puddles. 
His eyelids slanted downward, unblinking, furious.

“I can get her up without you!”

“NO. YOU. CAN’T.”

“Freddy, damn it—”

“SHUT. UP.”

It was the second time he’d said that to her and it still worked, clearing her mind like a slap.

He didn’t even look at her, just kept dragging her along, so Ana shut up and walked.

They reached the signpost and Freddy stopped, his ears rotating. Beneath the deafening rain and 
the crash of thunder was another sound, one Ana first tried to hear as a part of the storm even as 
she recognized the elements of static and electronic feedback threading through it. It was similar 
enough to the screeching roar she had occasionally heard out of the other animatronics that she 
knew it had to be Chica, and judging from the banging racket accompanying it, it was as much a 
scream of frustration as a sign of her glitching out.

Ana started forward. Freddy dragged her back, still listening.

“She’s in there,” said Ana impatiently, pointing up the back hall toward the arcade.

“I. KNOW. WHERE. SHE. IS.” He glanced at Ana, grunted, then swung her around and pushed 
her hard up against the wall. He released her to point at her instead, saying, “STAY. BACK.”

“Yeah, whatever, just go already!”

He started for the arcade. Ana followed. He looked back after several steps, saw her, and stopped 
short with a scowl.

“Go!” she shouted. “I’m back, I’m back, just go, for the love of God! We haven’t got time for 
this!”

He went, grumbling without words through his speaker until he reached the mouth of the arcade, 
when he stopped again. He put out his hand, patting the air in a sit-stay gesture without looking to 
see if Ana obeyed, then switched on his eyes. A few notes of the Toreador March played as he
scanned the room, eyelight splashing off broken machines, cracked walls and graffiti, sputtering to a stop when he found Chica.

She was lying on her back in front of some old skee-ball game, her head twisted all the way around to stare back at him, although her own eyes were dark, the lenses too big to show colors or light. Within the beakless hole in the middle of her face, her metal teeth were chattering away like a set of wind-up novelty chompers, only these never wound down. When Freddy took a step toward her, Chica’s body twisted and bucked in a broken lunge. Her first bite met only air, but her second writhing strike bumped her up against a fallen pinball machine and almost faster than Ana’s eyes could process, Chica had snapped around and bit it half a dozen times, shattering glass and ripping away wire in great mouthfuls, shaking her head like a terrier so that pieces of plastic and metal flew even as far as Ana. She did not break the machine; she disemboweled it.

“STAY. BACK,” Freddy said again, unnecessarily since Ana’s feet were as good as nailed to the spot. He took another careful step into the arcade, both hands out and fingers slightly flexing as he studied the space between him and Chica. “LOOK. AT. ME. CHICA. OPEN. YOUR. EYES.”

Chica spat pieces of the machine and thrashed, screaming.

“What’s wrong with her?” Ana asked.

Chica’s wildly flailing arm hit the wall and suddenly she rolled, slamming down onto her belly and scrabbling at the floor as she bit it until two of her fingers snapped off. Then she looked up. The tiny points of silver shining back far back, miles back in her eye sockets locked on Ana.

Her thrashing, biting, squealing—all stopped. She twitched.

“RUN,” said Freddy.

Chica shrieked and pitched forward, bashing arcade machines out of her way in a lurching, clanking, relentless scuttle, metal teeth already chewing and all her mechanical parts grinding like something out of a nightmare. Freddy went to meet her, eyes flashing and arms swinging wide at his sides, but Chica didn’t even seem to see him.

Ana backed up, looked around, then ran, but only down the hall and around the corner to the theater. It was small, intended to seat maybe twenty kids between four benches arranged in descending steps, like a miniature version of the amphitheater in Pirate Cove. And just like Pirate Cove, there was a stage at the bottom. The small screen where cartoons or Fazbear music videos or whatever kid-friendly entertainment used to be projected had been slashed to ribbons and spray-painted over, but it wasn’t the screen she wanted. There were curtains, or had been once, and although vandals had pulled them down long ago, they were still here.

Ana pulled one up. It was no bigger than a bedsheets, slimy from years of undisturbed mildew, but not rotted apart. Heavy, in other words. Heavy and thick and dark. Pulling it into a clumsy bundle, she bounded up the steps and ran back to the arcade, where Freddy was now on the floor with Chica, grappling with her and calling her name, telling her to open her eyes and listen to his voice. Chica had chewed through the casing on his upper arm and was grinding her teeth on his metal bones, but when she saw Ana, her struggles violently renewed. Freddy didn’t look for the reason, just adjusted his grip and told her again to be calm. He didn’t seem to be aware Ana was even there, right up until she dropped onto Chica’s back and wrapped the curtain around her head.

Freddy’s eyes snapped wide, briefly opening up all-black, like a blink inside a blink. In the same instant, the Toreador March boomed out of him at full volume and he roared, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” right in her face. Then it was “HEY KIDS!” and then “TIME TO PLAY!” He
clicked, laughed through a furious plastic scowl, clicked again, then spat out a string of random sound-bites—“HEY NOW TIME TO TIME TO WATCH ME PULL A SLICE OF SODA POP A BALLOON BOY AND GIRLS”—all the while struggling with Chica, but as her thrashing slowed and those awful metallic screams began to break down and finally go quiet, he seemed to get himself under control as well. At least, the Toreador March stopped playing.

For a long time, it was just the rain, Freddy’s fan, Ana’s breath, and Chica’s slackening, spastic writhing. The next time thunder crashed overhead, Ana looked up and when she looked down again, Freddy was staring at her instead of Chica’s curtain-wrapped head.

Ana rolled one shoulder. “You know. She’s a chicken. I used to work at a chicken farm. Cover their heads and they go right to sleep.”

“HI FREDDY,” said Chica, her voice somewhat muffled but hers again. “IT’S SO GREAT TO SEE YOU.” She clicked a few times, the surviving fingers of one hand flexing weakly on the floor. “I THINK I NEED HELP.”

Freddy grunted, ordering Ana back with a point and a toss of his head. She got up and moved away to give him room to stand, then came back to take one of Chica’s arms. Freddy, on Chica’s other side, gave her a hell of a glare and said, “YOU. DON’T. LISTEN.”

“I listen, I just don’t obey. Say when, big bear.”

“WHEN PICKING UP HEAVY OBJECTS, ALWAYS KEEP YOUR BACK STRAIGHT AND LIFT WITH YOUR LEGS,” Chica chirped anxiously.

“Yeah, yeah. I know how to lift. Freddy?”

“ON THREE,” he ordered, setting his feet and bending at the waist in direct defiance of Chica’s warning. “ONE, TWO, THREE!”

They lifted, although it was admittedly more accurate to say he lifted and Ana just kept the weight off Chica’s left side until she was fully upright.

“UH OH, IT’S GETTING DARK,” said Chica, feeling at her face. “NICE HAT! IN MY EASTER BONNET WITH ALL THE FRILLS UPON IT…WHAT IS THIS?”

Ana helped unwind the curtain and pull it away while Freddy continued to hold and steady her. Freed, Chica blinked at Ana, then looked around at the arcade as her features took on a stricken expression.

“I MADE A MESS. IS EVERYTHING OKAY?” She paused, clicking, then finally pointed at Ana. “NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SERVICE.”

“I have a shirt on.”

Chica looked at Freddy, still pointing at Ana. Her head cocked.

“I DON’T KNOW,” said Freddy, covering his eyes. His internal fan revved, mimicking a sigh. “I. JUST. DON’T. KNOW. ANY. MORE.”

“We need to go,” Ana told them, tossing the curtain aside. “Right now. Can you walk?”

“MAKE EXERCISE AND ACTIVE PLAY A PART OF EACH AND EVERY DAY. HEALTHY HABITS LAST A LIFETIME.” Chica clicked a few times, and finally said, “WHY?”
“We’re going to Pirate Cove. Come on.”

“WHY?” Chica persisted, now looking at Freddy.

Freddy began to click, but Ana pushed herself between them and got up in Chica’s beakless face, saying loudly and speaking clearly, “Listen close. Give me your hand. It’s time to make a safety plan.”

Chica twitched hard and joined right in as Freddy cocked his head and watched. “IF THERE’S A FIRE, DON’T RUN AND HIDE. GET OUT AND DON’T GO BACK INSIDE.”

“Go fast as you can,” they said together. “No time to waste. Meet me at the safety place. If you don’t see me, don’t be afraid. Just meet me at the place we made.” Ana waited a second after the chant came to an end, making sure she had Chica’s full attention before she said, “Our safety place is Pirate Cove. Okay? We need to go there right now.”

“OKAY.” Chica took Freddy’s hand, who recaptured Ana’s arm, much to her annoyance.

They went, Freddy setting a maddening pace to match Chica’s waddle, with Ana forced to creep along with them, trapped in Freddy’s bruising grip. Only when they had come out of the back hall to the signpost again did he release her to dash ahead.

She pushed the door to the Cove open and promptly slipped on the wet floor. She fell and, because God hated her, skidded just far enough to hit the top of the wheelchair ramp, where a healthy growth of mildew, freshly watered down, had lubed up the high-traffic carpet like a porn star. She didn’t realize that at the time; all she knew was that the floor suddenly angled downward and she was sliding, but by the time she knew she was going, she was already gone.

Ana zipped away to the bottom and across the slick, slanted floor, sluicing through a deep puddle of reeking water to smack up against the stage. She hit headfirst, hearing the thump on the inside of her skull rather than outside her ears, and feeling it all the way down to her knees. She did not black out, but things did go a bit reddish-grey as she pushed herself groggily into a sitting position. For the moment, she just leaned up against the stage, one hand pressed to the throb of her head, waiting for her brain to reboot.

Her first thought as the haze faded was, ‘It could have been worse.’

“How?” she muttered.

‘There are stairs on the other side of the amphitheater,’ her brain replied.

True. She looked at them, then swept her flashlight around the room first to find Bonnie—he had been pacing back and forth in front of the prop barrels and other cargo in the far corner of the room, but was already limping toward her now—and then to inspect the ceiling. It was leaking, but only in a few places. Just her luck the biggest puddle was right there in front of the door.

“Are you ok-k-kay?” Bonnie asked, lurching unexpectedly into the beam of her light. “Where are th-th-they?”

“HI BONNIE!” called Chica, waving.

“HI CHICA!” he sputtered back, twitching, then shook his head hard and stepped in front of the ramp with his arms out as Freddy led Chica into the room. “I w-w-won’t let-t-t you. I won’t-t-t. I-I—I CAN DRESS MYSELF—I’ll stop-p-p—STOP DROP AND ROLL—you. I will.”
“Careful. The floor’s really wet right there,” Ana said, picking herself up and rubbing at the back of her head.

“I. SEE. IT,” said Freddy, maneuvering out into the puddle first and guiding Chica after him. “ARE YOU OKAY?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Bonnie’s ears drooped slightly, seemingly nonplussed by this response. “Um…We’re fighting-ing, right-t-t?”

“NOT. NOW. BONNIE.” Freddy made an impatient shooing motion and as soon as Bonnie had shuffled uncertainly aside, locked eyes with Ana. “THE GANG’S ALL HERE. WHAT. NOW.”

“Come down here,” she said, trying to sound more certain than she felt. “As close to the stage as you can get. All the way on it, if you can.”

Freddy grunted and nodded, guiding Chica toward the ramp.

“Not that way,” Ana said quickly and pointed. “The stairs.”

Bonnie turned his head to follow her finger. “You’ll never g-g-get her down those.”

“You’d better try, my man, because the only way you’re getting her down that ramp is to lie her on her back and use her like a log flume.”

“THAT SOUNDS LIKE FUN!” Chica said, shaking her head frantically.

“Trust me, it’s not.”

On the other side of the curtain, a door creaked open. “Th-The hell is going on out-t-t there?” Foxy called.

“YOU CAN DO ANYTHING WITH HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS,” said Chica, clutching Freddy’s arm tighter as she peeked over the safety rails into the amphitheater.

Freddy patted her, nodding grimly. “I’VE. GOT. YOU.”

Metal feet thumped across wooden boards—one, two, three—and then whumped heavily onto the padded stage right behind her. The purple curtain billowed, then swept aside on Foxy’s hook. He peered out, his mismatched eyes unsteady as they lit and swept across the auditorium. Their yellow/white glow made it easy to see where his gaze went—right over the top of Ana to the upper level, looking at Chica first, then to Freddy, then back down to Ana again.

“What—” he started, then shut his mouth with a snap. His ears came up even as his gaze moved down, all the way to her bare toes and back up again, lingering in one or two predictable places along the way.

Ana glanced down at herself with a scowl and a blush. The rain had soaked her tee, which hugged her body like a second skin, all but transparent. Stop staring at my Tits, said the stark black letters on top, with smaller playfully pink text beneath adding, and touch them. Her panties, nearly matching, were also pink, with black bouncy letters spelling out Wanna Pet My over a cartoon cat in a punny place.

“What are you looking at?” she asked crossly, tugging ineffectually at the bottom of her shirt,
which not only didn’t cover her underwear, but also pulled the wet fabric tighter over her chest.

Foxy leaned back slowly and scratched his hook over the back of his neck. “Tell ye the t-t-truth, lass, I ain’t sure where I should-d-d be looking.”

“I’m the still the most overdressed person in this room,” she snapped. “Half of you are bare-ass naked.”

Freddy glanced at her.


He returned his gaze to Chica, shaking his head very slightly and grunting to recapture Bonnie’s attention and direct him under Chica’s other wing.

“Careful with th-th—THAR SHE BLOWS!—that talk,” Foxy remarked, a smile in his voice as he found a leaning place against the frame of the stage. “Freddy don’t-t-t like having his dignity impugned.”

“I’m not impugning anything,” Ana insisted, jogging over to aim her flashlight at the stairs in the hopes that Chica would feel better if she could see better. “The bear has some nice junk in his trunk. It’s a compliment.”

Foxy followed her along the edge of the stage, one thumb hooked through a crack in the casing on his hip like it was a belt. “Coo, ye got some jiggle in yer jello yerself, luv.”

Ana whirled around, yanking the back of her t-shirt down, then turned just as fast and caught Freddy giving her a knowing glance.

Caught between them, she could say nothing for a while, but eventually managed a tight-jawed, “Thank you…for the lovely…compliment.”

Freddy grunted.

Foxy laughed.

“IT LOOKS DANGEROUS,” said Chica, testing her footing on the top stair only to draw back again. “SAFETY FIRST! IT’S OKAY TO SAY NO.”

“I’M. HERE,” Freddy assured her. “BONNIE. IS. HERE. YOU’RE OKAY.”

“IT’S A BEAUTIFUL FALL DAY,” Chica chirped anxiously, looking from one to the other of them and making absolutely no effort to go any further. “ALL THE LEAVES ARE TURNING RED AND FALLING. LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN, FALLING DOWN, FALLING DOWN. I DON’T THINK THAT’S A GOOD IDEA, BONNIE. SAFETY FIRST! I THINK I’LL JUST WATCH.”

“Have you got her?” Ana asked.

“Yeah. C-C—COME ON, CHICA, LET’S SING A SONG!—Come on,” Bonnie coaxed. “One f-f-foot in front of the other. Take all the t-t—TIME TO ROCK!—time you need.”

“Just take it fast and get the hell down there as quick as you can,” Ana agreed.

“Don’t-t-t take me wrong, lass,” drawled Foxy, now leaning up against the other side of the stage. “I’m glad to see ye…and so much of ye at-t-t that, but what are ye doing here?”
His answer was a boom of thunder, rattling the glass floats on the wall and making the seagulls dance on their wires. One of the cables attached to the prop ship sticking out of the back wall snapped, spinning the mast it supported wildly around and into the stacks of prop cargo. They smashed apart, scattering foam peanuts and splinters explosively out into the room, and Ana thought, too calmly, ‘Here we go,’ and waited for the roof to drop.

It didn’t. It opened up a new leak, vomited a building-sized bellyful of brown water down over the plastic tables on the upper level before settling back to drip, and that was all.

That was all.

For now.

Ana’s heart belatedly slammed into her ribs and her caught breath released in whistling pants. “Get,” she rasped and clutched at her stupid throat, willing it to open. She sucked in a painful blast of air and shouted, “Get her the hell down here now! Now!”

Freddy turned Chica bodily around, bent, and over her startled squawks, picked her up in that familiar fireman’s carry, slinging her over his shoulder as easily as he’d done with Ana the last time she’d been here. Chica took it with more good grace than Ana had, although she babbled out cheerful nonsense heavily sprinkled with apologies all the way down. When they reached the bottom, Freddy set her on her feet again and headed back up to Bonnie, who was having trouble with his leg.

Ana went over to offer a hand, since the floor was slanted and although it had mostly puddled up against the stage, it was wet pretty much everywhere. “You all right?”

Chica looked at her hand, wheezed through her fans and took it with an expression of chagrin. “IT’S HARD TO ASK FOR HELP SOMETIMES,” she chirped, waddling carefully away from the stairs. “EVEN WHEN YOU KNOW YOU REALLY NEED IT.”

Foxy hunkered down at the edge of the stage, arms out, and after a brief hesitation, Chica ducked her head and went to him. He lifted her as easily as Freddy had, despite the disadvantage of having only one hand and a hook to do it with, and set her on the stage beside him. He held her until she nodded, then let her go, glanced at Ana, and hunkered again, extending his open hand.

“No stowaways on the Flying Fox,” she reminded him, not moving.

He shrugged, arm still out. “Tell me it’s yer birthday. I got to let ye up-p-p then.”

“Really?”

“Aye. And once yer up, I can’t-t-t throw ye off.”

“Good to know,” said Ana and went back to the stairs to wait for Bonnie, reaching for him as he came unsteadily off the last step on his bad leg.

He looked at her hand, revved his fans in a dry laugh, and said, “You’re k-k-kidding, right?”

“You’re seriously going to pass up the chance to put your arm around me?” she countered.

Bonnie blinked, his ears twitching up. He let go of Freddy, who was already rolling his eyes, and held his arm out for her to come in under. His fingers skittered around her shoulder for a few seconds before he carefully let his arm rest. “Is this…Is this okay?”
“Yeah, yeah, you’re fine. Let’s go.”

“Would-d-d you tell me if it wasn’t?”

Thunder crashed. A seagull snapped its anchoring wire and fell, bouncing off the amphitheater benches and splashing down into the puddle at the bottom.

Ana froze, waiting for the rest of it, but again, it was having too much fun making her wait. She came out of it with a shiver, then a too-shrill, “Bonnie, for Christ’s sake, you’re fine! Move!”

He started walking and at his first limping stride, his foot skidded over the wet floor. He caught himself right away, but in the process, his hand slipped from its perching place and dropped to her boob. He didn’t notice and Ana didn’t care, both of them focused on just getting him over the slick, slanted floor to the stage, but Foxy saw it and his mouth dropped open immediately in a tooth-lined grin.

“What?” Bonnie asked, sounding annoyed and self-conscious as he tested his footing.

“Nothing,” said Ana. “Forget him, you’re doing fine.”

“Why are you—you look pretty today, chica!”

“Thanks! I just had my feathers done!”

“Why are you staring-ing-ing at me?” Bonnie finished, his ears folding back and flattening. “This is—is—is one of my favorite—is harder than it looks, okay? I can’t feel my f-f-feet.”

“Ain’t yer feet-t-t I’m looking at, mate,” Foxy replied, raising his hand and flexing the fingers.

“You’re fine,” Ana said again. “Keep moving.”

Bonnie did not keep moving. He stopped cold in the middle of the puddle. His head turned while his eyes stayed fixed on Foxy, so that his gaze fell to his hand only at the last possible second.

It was very quiet. Not silent, it couldn’t be silent with all Bonnie’s mechanisms working away just under his plastic skin, but it was quiet enough that Ana could hear the rain plinking away on all the empty tables and forgotten props, quiet enough that she imagined she could hear the specific whirring as Foxy’s eyes shifted from Bonnie to her and the little whizz-click as he winked.

She got half a sigh out before Bonnie yanked his arm off her in a wide sweep that not only ripped out a few stray strands of her hair but then delivered a mighty backhanded slap to Freddy, who had just limped up behind them, knocking the muzzle clean off his face and sending it clattering away into the benches. “Oh my G-G-G—Great job!—God! I d-d-didn’t kn-kn—no way to replicate his process—know!”

“Don’t hit,” Chica chirped as Foxy threw back his head and howled laughter.

“Why d-d-didn’t you t-t-tell me?” Bonnie stammered, both hands up now like he thought he was being mugged. “Oh my God, I am so-so-so sorry! I didn’t-t-t mean it!”

“Oh for—” Ana grabbed his wrists and yanked his arms down, clamping his hands to her boobs and holding them there.

Foxy stopped laughing.

Bonnie’s ears snapped straight up and stayed there, quivering, as his eyes dropped. He stared right
through her hands to his own, but, she thought, no further.

“You can touch me anywhere you want, my man,” she told Bonnie. “Anywhere you want. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said in an odd, distant voice.

“But right now, I need you to get up on that stage, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” she pressed.

“Yeah.”

She let go of him. He took his hands back and turned them over, staring into his palms.

“Go on now,” she told him and went to Freddy, bending herself over the lowest bench (onstage, Foxy uttered a low and lipless whistle, but she grit her teeth and ignored him) and reaching under the next one for Freddy’s muzzle. She handed it to him and turned around to find Bonnie walking aimlessly away in the general direction of the Treasure Cave, still staring into his palms.

“Bonnie,” she sighed.

“Yeah.”

“Other way.”

“Yeah.” Bonnie shuffled around and faced the stage. After a moment, he raised his head and then his eyes until he was looking at Foxy. “What just-t-t happened?”

“Ye scraped her bow for barnacles, mate,” Foxy answered, extending a hand.

“I d-d-did?”

“Aye.”

Bonnie went back to staring at his palms. “That was amazing-ing-ing.”

“Aye, I’ll bet. Get yer leg up, loverboy, and g-g-give me yer mit. Told ye she’d b-b-be back. Oi, Ana, ye coming?”

“From a bunt to second base? Please.”

“THAT’S ENOUGH,” growled Freddy, fitting his wayward muzzle back on as he stomped over to the stage. He gave Bonnie a boost first, then seized Ana impersonally around the waist and passed her up too, only joining them after he obviously took a quick headcount and one last look around the empty amphitheater. “BACK,” he ordered, pulling the curtain open.

“All the way to the wall,” Ana amplified.

“Still waiting for that explanation,” Foxy remarked, taking Chica’s wing.

“MEET ME AT THE SAFETY PLACE,” she chirped.

“Eh?”

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO MAKE A PLAN AHEAD OF TIME SO EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT
Freddy growled.

“Not you,” she sighed.

“RULE NUMBER TWO, DON’T YELL,” said Chica, shooting him nervous little glances.

“Ye all right-t-t?” Foxy asked.

“Yes,” Ana groaned, still with the heel of her hand pressing hard on her eyes. “I left my pack at home.”

“That ain’t-t-t all ye left, lass.”

“What are you—oh. Yeah.” Ana raised a foot off the ground, wiggling her muddy toes with a wince and let it drop again. “Well, if I had my pack, I could put some clothes on. And I could really use a smoke.”
“SMOKING STINKS,” said Chica solemnly. “IT DOESN’T MAKE YOU LOOK COOL OR TOUGH. IT JUST GIVES YOU BAD BREATH.”

“It relaxes me.”

“IT’S SUPER-UNHEALTHY.”

“Yeah, not like all this black mold I’m breathing in, right?”

“THERE IS NO SMOKING ALLOWED ON THE PREMISES,” Freddy said, glaring at her.

“You guys must really want to play Simon Says. Did you not just hear me say I don’t have my pack? It’s a moot point.”

“THAT’S A COMMON MISCONCEPTION,” chirped Chica, grabbing at the hole in her face where her beak ought to be, her wide eyes at odds with her cheerful tone as she went on to say, “MOOT ACTUALLY MEANS SOMETHING IS OPEN TO DEBATE OR MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS, NOT THAT SOMETHING IS IRRELEVANT.”

Ana stared at her.

“VOCABULARY POWER,” Chica said through her fingers.

Bonnie looked at Ana. “Do I have to p-p-play Simon Says? I’ve been quiet.”

“Look, guys, it’s either going to be a really long night or—” Ana interrupted herself with a dry, humorless laugh. “—or a really short one, and despite my cool exterior, I am freaking the fuck out right now, so can we just…just not? Please?”

Foxy pushed himself off the side of the ship and went up the gangplank and into his cabin without a word. A few seconds later, as Ana was pacing, trying not to feel too self-conscious about being in her underwear with the other three animatronics watching her, he came out again. “Oi,” he said and tossed something small and light.

She caught it in a clapping motion before she’d quite processed the fact that it was a baggie with a tiny wad of dry leaves, a couple stained papers and a cheap plastic lighter in it. Even after she blinked, the vision remained. Opening the baggie for a cautious whiff told her the stuff was stale as hell, too brown and full of seeds, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

The next thing she saw was Freddy’s massive paw as he plucked the bag out of her hands, and although he let her snatch it back after only a cursory examination, he did not look happy as he turned to Foxy.

“Eh, she g-g-gave me a doubloon, didn’t she? And since ye g-g-gave it up so willingly, ye get a d-d-dip in the birthday booty chest,” Foxy added, snapping his eyepatch down as he leaned on the rails of the deck above her. “G-G-Got a slightly better class o’ cheap shit these d-d-days, don’t I?”
Ana somehow managed to roll herself two joints from the scruff in the bag. She took the first one on her feet, pacing from the back of the stage to the front two hundred and fourteen times—Foxy counted—as she waited for the building to fall in on itself. Her anxiety visibly rose with each roll of thunder and every step one of the others took away from the back wall, but faded with each puff, although Foxy was sure that was a result of the ritual of smoking more than anything else. He lacked certain essential biological attributes to be an expert, but fifty years of watching kids break into his house and get high meant that he was no slouch on the subject either; he knew dudbud when he saw it.

And Freddy could give him all the dirty looks he wanted, it did her good. Before the joint was half-gone, her restless pacing had slowed until she was only going to peek through the curtains when the thunder crashed and not as part of an endless circuit of nerves. As she lit the new one from the butt of the old, she actually found a space against the back wall next to Bonnie and sat down. Even after it was gone, she continued to sit, one knee drawn up for her arm to hug and the other leg stretched out, watching her toes as she flexed them.

“How ye holding up-p-p?” Foxy asked at last.

She glanced left at Chica, right at Bonnie, then up at him. “You talking to me?”

“Aye.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ye sure? Ye look…tired.”

“I know what you’re thinking, but the only thing I got out of that bag was a sore throat.” She was quiet a moment, then laughed a little. “I’ve been smoking the good stuff for so long, I’ve forgotten what total dicks dealers can be, especially when they’re rooking money out of backwater dumbasses who don’t know real weed from pencil shavings.” She motioned toward the baggie lying out in the middle of the stage. “Rider would shoot the man who brought him a bag of that and called it pot. He’d probably shoot me just for smoking it, especially when I’ve got plenty of prime Black Diamond sitting back at the—fuck me!” she finished with a groan, smacking both hands over her face. She breathed quietly for a while, then let out a snarling, simply adorable human scream into her palms. She breathed again.

“Are you ok-k-kay?” Bonnie asked, reaching timidly down to tap her shoulder.

She scowled up at him, covered her face for another second or two, then let her arms drop, relaxing her knees so that her hands could dangle hopelessly between them and giving Foxy just one hell of a view of that cartoon kitty on the front of her panties. “Yeah,” she grumbled. “I just realized I left my tent open. Every fucking thing I own is now soaked. Not to mention scattered over the entire fucking yard.”

“GO. HOME,” said Freddy.

“No.”
“WHEN YOU MAKE A MESS, CLEAN IT UP,” Chica agreed.

Bonnie glared at her. “It’s d-d-dark. Wait until morn-ing-ing.”

“Aye, no hurry,” said Foxy.

Bonnie looked sharply around, justifiably suspicious of support, but it was Freddy who tracked Foxy’s gaze.

“THE RESTAURANT IS CLOSED,” he said again, stepping away from the wall to put himself between Foxy and the point of his present interest. “YOU SHOULD LEAVE.”

“No,” said Ana again, patting Bonnie’s leg first and then pointing. “Step it back, big bear. No one told you to move.”

Freddy looked at her while Chica tapped her fingers and Bonnie fidgeted, but Foxy just grinned, enjoying the show. It had been a hell of a long time since anyone had told Freddy what to do, but in the end, he just moved back against the wall and folded his arms. His eyes weren’t lit and his music wasn’t playing. If he was annoyed, and he surely was, he kept it quiet.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ana was saying now. “It can just wait. My wallet and my phone are in the front and still buckled down, so they’re okay, and my stash is all in bottles and probably fine. If not, fuck it, I have to refill my prescriptions pretty soon anyway.”

Freddy grunted.

“No one asked you,” Ana replied, then glanced up at Foxy. “Where’d you get that stuff anyway?”

“Found-d-d it.”

“Well, I didn’t think you bought it and I guess I can understand why no one would come back for it, even if they could remember where they’d dropped it, but why’d you keep it?”

Because tossing it out on the floor in front of the stage was a surer way of bringing the sons of bitches that made a habit of breaking in close enough to catch with one jump, rather than chasing them through the whole bloody building. Foxy wasn’t as fast as he used to be, and more, now that both casings from the knees down were gone and his bare bones were exposed, his feet were apt to go skidding out from under him at a run.

All of this wound lazily through Foxy’s mind, but what he said was, “Found it. Kept-t-t it.”

“I guess pirates don’t turn things in at the Lost and Found, huh? On an entirely unrelated note, you seen my lantern around, Captain?”

“No idea what-t-t yer talking about, lass,” Foxy said. The lantern was hanging in his cabin, above his bunk. He used it sometimes.

“Yeah, right.” She flexed her toes some more, then gave his cabin door a speculative stare. “What else have you got in there?”

“Ye want-t-t to know, ye’ll have to come on up-p-p and see.”

Bonnie fidgeted again, actually putting one foot out in half a step before taking it back, which Ana didn’t see, being fully occupied in a bone-cracking yawn at the moment.

“But ye ain’t-t-t tired,” Foxy said at the end of it.
“Of course I’m tired. It’s…What time is it?”

The simple question kicked Foxy straight in the brain, and he spat out a stuttering, “YAR, IT’S TIME TO SAIL!” along with Chica’s, “IT’S TIME TO EAT!” and Bonnie’s, “IT’S TIME TO ROCK!” Freddy, caught by surprise with the rest of them, let out one of his booming laughs and chimed in, “IT’S TIME TO PLAY!” before shaking it off, growling and spilling out half a bar of the March.

Ana waited.

“It’s a qu—QUARTER ASKED AND NONE GIVEN!—quarter o’ three,” Foxy answered, rubbing at the back of his head like the damned triggers were an itch he could scratch away.

“Okay, so it’s three in the morning. I’ve got every right to be tired, is my point.”

Foxy gave Freddy an assessing sidelong glance and, with surprisingly genuine regret, said, “G-Go home and go to sleep—p-p, then.”

“No. Hell, even if I did go home, it’s so late, I might as well stay up.” She shifted, drawing up both legs now and resting her chin on her folded arms. Her eyes slid shut. She mumbled, “I got work in the morning and not a damn thing to wear.”

“Go home and st—STEER HARD TO PORT—stay up, then. Reckon I don’t c-c-care what ye do, as long as ye do it at home.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“Caught on, d-did ye? Here I thought I was b-b-being so subtle.”

“Subtlety isn’t your strong suit, Captain.”

Foxy chuckled, but Freddy’s dark mood only darkened further, so he cut it off short. “Lass, I’m g-g-going to say this as gently as I know how. Get the fuck out o’ here.”

“Wow, gentle isn’t your strong suit either.”

“I weren’t made to b-b-be a gentleman. I were made to be a pirate. Besides.” He winked, more at Bonnie than at Ana. “Some lasses like it-t-t rough.”

She laughed.

Bonnie’s ears rotated around and lay flat.

“But suit yerself,” said Foxy. “Stay if ye want-t-t. Just g-g-get some sleep.”

“No.”

“Yer just-t-t being stubborn now. Come on, lass, I got-t-t a bunk up here where ye can lay yer b-b—BONES TO DAVY JONES—bones down.”

Bonnie took that half-step again, this time stopped by Freddy’s hand on his shoulder and a grunt. His hands clenched and opened, mirroring the lenses of his eyes irising big and small, seeming to shift from black to green and back to black.

“It ain’t very b-b-big, but it’s dry,” Foxy continued, eyeing Bonnie with amusement. “I’ll even t-t-tuck ye in.”
“I’ll bet.”

“I’ll be on me best b-b-behavior, I promise,” he said, tracing an X in the air over his chest casing with the point of his hook.

She gave him a quizzical look, the effectiveness of which was somewhat spoiled by her crooked smile. “This would be your best pirating behavior when I’m alone with you, half-naked in your cabin? Why am I not convinced?”

“Hell, g-g-girl, it’s been so long since I had-d-d a skirt hung up in me berth, I wouldn’t know what-t-t to do with ye.”

“I’m not wearing a skirt.”

“We’ll just-t-t have to make do without one,” he told her gravely. “They usually d-d-does, in me cabin.”

“Not that you can remember that, it being so long ago.”

“It’s all c-c-coming back to me, luv.”

She laughed as Bonnie glared and Freddy pressed the heel of one hand into his forehead and sighed.

“Thanks anyway, but I’ll pass,” Ana said and yawned again. “When I said I had work in the morning, I meant five in the morning.”

“Better than nothing, ain’t it?”

“I don’t drop off that easy. Not when I’m sober, at any rate.”

“Oh, if that’s all that’s b-b-bothering ye, I know a sure-fire way to relax ye.”

Still holding one hand over his eyes, Freddy swung the other out and gave Bonnie a staying check to the chest even before he’d taken a full step forward.

This finally succeeded in getting Ana’s attention, although her frown as she looked up at Bonnie was more puzzled than anything. “What’s wrong?”

Bonnie did not answer for a long time, keeping his eyes locked on Foxy and his hands in fists, but at last grumbled, “Nothing-ing-ing.”

“Is it your leg?” she asked, now leaning over to run her hands over the visibly battered joint and providing Foxy with a whole new angle to admire.

“My leg-g-g is fine,” said Bonnie’s mouth while his eyes said, ‘You’re lucky my girl’s here.’

Foxy laughed.

Ana looked at him, distracted, then got up and fetched her flashlight. “Stay here,” she ordered, pointing it at them one by one. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back. Stay.”

They all nodded, except for Freddy, whose fingers flexed once on his plastic bicep. This was agreement enough for Ana, who turned and jogged out, all the right bits of her jiggling and all the others firm.
Freddy waited until the sound of her footsteps had entirely gone, then went to the curtain and looked out.

“I swear to G-G-God, I will kick your ass,” Bonnie snarled.

“RULE NUMBER SEVEN,” Chica said, her eyes darting anxiously between them. “DON’T HIT.”

“I don’t c-c-c—CARING MEANS SHARING!—care about the fucking-ing-ing rules!”

“I. DO,” said Freddy. He let the curtain drop and turned around. “BONNIE. CALM. DOWN. FOXY. MIND YOUR MANNERS.”

“Ain’t-t-t the one making threats, am I?” Foxy settled himself on the rails and propped his chin up on his hook, gazing off at the backs of his stage curtains as if he could still see the girl there. It occurred to him for possibly the first time in his life that it had been a long time since he’d been with a woman. Years. Decades, maybe. It wasn’t quite the same as, say, wanting to alter the situation, but he was definitely aware of it. “She c-c-coming back, ye reckon? Or has she g-g-gone home?”

Freddy grunted and lifted the curtain again, his ears rotating on their wheezing pins. “I. DON’T. HEAR. THE.” He stopped there, clicking as he tried to find a word approaching ‘truck’ and finally settled on. “CLUCK.”

“Can’t hear anything over this r-r-rain,” Foxy remarked, politely ignoring Chica as she stuttered through some cluck-clucks here and cluck-clucks there down where Brewster Rooster apparently had a farm. “I didn’t even know she were here until ye all c-c-came barging in. And why did ye d-d-do that again? I never got-t-t a clear—SKIES AND WESTERLY WINDS—answer.”

“IT’S. RAINING.”

“Aye, I got-t-t that bit, but—”

“She thinks the roof is going to come d-d-down,” Bonnie said, still scowling, but at least attempting to be civil, although more for Freddy’s benefit than Foxy’s own, he was sure.

Foxy took that in with an admirable display of outward calm, while inwardly, his mind was alive with thoughts of Mangle…Foxanne…crawling out of the rubble and into the world. Freddy was no doubt thinking of the Purple Man and those who served him, but they’d be all right. Hell, buried under a broken building was even better than locked up in a standing one, as far as Foxy was concerned. At least until someone noticed the building had fallen down and sent someone to scrape it up, he supposed. And dug him out.

Foxy mused on this until every possible scenario had played itself out, before he finally looked at Freddy. “Is it?”

“NO.”

“Ye sure?”

“YES,” said Freddy, but there was half a pause before he said it. He knew it and scowled, coming away from the curtain.

“What-t-t do ye reckon makes her so sure th-th-then?”

“She. WANTS. TO. BE. HERE. SHE’S. LOOKING. FOR. A. REASON.” Freddy gestured
vaguely at the ceiling as he settled himself against the wall. “MAYBE. SHE’S. SCARED. OF. THUNDER.”

Foxy snorted. “Aye, that’s it,” he drawled. “Wee mouse of a thing, she is. Always fetching up-p-p the frights and flitting off at every bump-p-p and bang. She were p-p-probably hiding under her b-b-bed a goodish hour before she run off here to hug-g-g on yer hip, mate.”

Freddy glared at him, said, “THE. WOOF. IS. FINE,” and folded his arms again.

“Ana d-d-doesn’t think so,” Bonnie muttered, patting Chica’s shoulder as she fell back into the farm routine.

“THE. WOOF. IS. FINE.”

“It’s g-g-gotten a lot worse in just this last year,” Bonnie argued, even turning to include Foxy. “You should-d-d see the dining-ing room right-t-t now. It’s ankle-deep from the kitchen to the lobby, I kid-d-d you not.”

“THE. WOOF. IS. FINE.”

“Ye know, ye c-c-can say that all night, but saying it-t-t don’t make it true,” Foxy pointed out. “We all got eyes.”

“IT’S. WET,” Freddy said crossly. “BUT. THE. WOOF. IS. FINE.”

“WITH A WOOF-WOOF HERE AND A WOOF-WOOF THERE—”

“SORRY, CHICA,” said Freddy, not sounding the least bit sorry as he glared at Foxy. “IT’S. FINE.”

“Fred,” Foxy began, laughing.

Freddy, not laughing, suddenly started up the Toreador March and spat, “IT’S. FINE,” loudly enough that his speakers squealed out feedback, and now Foxy finally understood. Freddy wasn’t saying it was fine because he believed it. It was fine because it wasn’t fine and there was nothing Freddy could do about it. He wasn’t angry; he was scared.

“IT’S. SUMMER,” Freddy said as Foxy stood silent, frowning. “IT. WILL. ALL. DRY. OUT. AND. EVERYTHING. WILL. BE. ALL. RIGHT.”

Somewhere in the hall outside the Cove came a crash, not of the roof putting a hilarious exclamation point on the end of Freddy’s sentence, but more like someone dropping a tray full of silverware, followed by the rain-muffled and somewhat distant sound of Ana cursing up a blue streak.

“This isn’t-t-t over,” Bonnie muttered, moving back into position on the wall.

“YES. IT. IS. NOW. HUSH.”

They waited. Through the rain, Foxy could eventually make out Ana’s little bare feet coming down the amphitheater steps and then splashing through the puddle that had collected at the foot of the stage. The curtain billowed, then opened up as she pushed something through. Metal box. Toolbox.

Freddy’s head cocked.
Ana climbed onstage with it and stood up. Her shirt, freshly watered down, was nigh-on invisible and deeply distracting from the far more significant fact of the toolbox as Ana picked it up and brought it over to Bonnie. She knelt down.

“What are you d-d-doing?” Bonnie asked, ears up.

“Nothing, probably, so don’t get your hopes up,” she answered and opened up his thigh, knee, and shin casings, one at a time.

She just looked at it for a while, moving her flashlight up and down along the bones and paying particular attention to the mechanisms affixed to his endoskeleton. It didn’t take her long to home in on the knee, but the part she kept coming back to was the external piston that plugged into his bones above and below the joint.

“Well, you’ve good and fucked that,” she said finally.

Bonnie’s ears lowered sheepishly. “I tried to fix it.”

“You hit it.” Ana touched one of the more obviously dented pieces of the piston. “A lot.”

“That’s…how I fix things.”

“Uh huh. Freddy, I need you to come around to this side and hold him up.”

Freddy’s grunt held just a tinge of nobody-tells-me-what-to-do, but he obeyed and Chica waddled gamefully closer on the other side and offered her shoulders up as well.

Without taking her eyes off Bonnie’s knee, Ana opened her toolbox, found one of those modern motorized screwdrivers, then changed out the head, all by feel. “Captain, can you come down—”

Foxy hopped the rails and hit the stage right next to her.

“And hold a light for me,” she concluded, amused. “Do you have any idea how unnerving it is when you do that?”

“Why do ye think-k-k I do it, luv?” He took her flashlight and aimed it at Bonnie’s knee, allowing Ana to correct the angle of the beam by moving his hand.

“That’s good,” she murmured, frowning at the piston. “Huh.”

“That’s an uncomforting sound-d-d,” Bonnie remarked.

“I’ve never seen one like this before. How is it…? It almost looks like it’s…Is it plugged into you?”

“Yeah.” Bonnie bent, moving her hand aside to tap at a recessed and heavily grimed button on the bottom end. “You p-p-push that in and hold it until you hear th-th—THE BAND!—the beep. Then it’s safe to d-d-disconnect. What-t-t?” he said defensively, glaring at Freddy, who was glaring at him.

“If I take it off, are you going to shut down?” Ana asked.

“What-t-t do you mean?”

“You know, like on Christmas lights.” She shrugged. “One bulb goes out and they all go out. If I unplug that—”
“My knee will quic—quic—ing, but I’ll be fine.”

“Will it hurt?”


“Pain isn’t-t-t really a thing for us,” said Bonnie. “I’ll b-b-be fine.”

“Okay. Well, I think I can do this with what I’ve got, but I warn you, you won’t be trying out for the Fazbear Track Team anytime soon. Maybe once I’ve got my precision tools, I’ll take another crack at it, but for tonight, all I can do is clean you up and put some stuff back into alignment.” She looked up, one hand on his thigh-bone and the screwdriver right up snug against the first screw holding the piston on. “I really feel like we ought to have a safe-word, just in case I hurt you.”

“Sure. How about I flail around-d-d a lot and scream?”

She grinned. “That’ll do.”

“Hold up,” said Foxy as her thumb moved to the switch on her gadget. “Yer not-t-t really letting her do this, are ye?” When Bonnie just looked at him, he turned the question on Freddy, not quite laughing because it was not quite funny. “Well, are ye?”

Freddy frowned, but didn’t answer. There stood Bonnie, leg open to the air, about to be dis-a-fucking-sembled, and Freddy wasn’t lifting a finger to stop it.

“What’s the problem, Captain?” Ana asked, seemingly genuinely confused.

“The p-p-problem? Lass, do ye have even the foggiest notion what yer looking at?”

She looked at the piston, then up at him again. “Nope.”

He spread his arms, inviting the obvious.

“But I can see how it works,” Ana said. “Keep the light on my hands, Captain. Hold it steady.” As Foxy grumblingly obeyed, she patted the bone beneath her hand and smiled up at Bonnie. “Find your happy place, my man.”

Bonnie, staring down at that smile, said, “I’m there.”

Foxy and Freddy exchanged a glance. Foxy rolled his eye slightly. Freddy gave his head a minute shake.

Chica did nothing.

“Here we go,” said Ana, and turned her gadget on.

In one minute and thirty-eight seconds, she had the piston laid out in pieces on the stage beside her. One-thirty-eight. A better time than the man who’d designed them. Of course, she had the advantage of that motorized gadget with all them adjustable heads, but still.

Once she had the knee exposed, Ana sat back with a different motorized gadget and in two minutes stripped away years of accumulated gunk, restoring each part to a near-pristine shine. Then she changed out the head and started teasing it back into shape where hard use and Bonnie’s propensity to punch it until it worked had worn it down. Now and then, her eyes shifted from her hands to Bonnie’s other knee, also exposed now that he’d broken off his right shin casing, but she never needed more than a glance before she was back at work, grinding and picking and polishing. That
part took a while, but by God, she did it and she did it having never seen the bloody thing before.

“Ye g-g-got a real knack for that,” Foxy remarked and Freddy grunted agreement.

She laughed, lifting the spinning bit of her tool until she’d stopped before making contact again. “Yeah, so I’ve been told.”

“Can I ask ye something?”

“Sure.”

“What are ye d-d-doing here?”

“Christ, can’t this be a math question?”

“I mean it,” said Foxy, ignoring Bonnie’s glare. “Ye g-g-got nothing better to do with yerself that ye got to keep coming here?”

“I like it here.”

“No, ye d-d-don’t. No one does. Look around.” He gestured with his hook, keeping the flashlight steady on her hands. “This p-p-place be fucking awful.”

She laughed again.

“Go home, lass,” he said, ignoring Bonnie’s glare. “Go home and st-st-stay there, for the l-l—LOVE O’ THE SEA!—love o’ God. This ain’t-t-t no place for ye.”

“You have no idea the kinds of places I’ve been in my life, Captain. Being here is practically coming up in the world. But I’ll tell you what,” she went on with a bitter lightness to her tone. “I’ll go home if you all come with me. Deal?”

“IT IS UNLAWFUL TO REMOVE FAZBEAR ENTERTAINMENT PROPERTY FROM THE PREMISES.”

“We are home,” said Foxy when Freddy finished. “Ye ain’t-t-t. Go home, girl.”

“No.”

“Ye think we c-c-can’t throw ye out?”

“I’m sure you can, I just don’t think you will.”

“Ye don’t know us like ye think ye do.”

“That’s for d-d-damn sure,” Bonnie muttered, now glaring at Freddy, who gazed back at him coolly and without apology.

There was a story there, one for later telling. For now, Foxy merely marked it, then looked back at Ana and said, “Why are ye so set-t-t—SET SAIL FOR ADVENTURE—and determined to be here, lass? Tonight-t-t of all nights. It ain’t-t-t fit out for man nor beast, and here ye are, practically in yer altogether, letting the weather g-g-get in on yer goods back home while ye sit up with us.”

“I love it when you talk like a pirate.”

“Never ye mind-d-d how I talk,” Foxy said as Bonnie scowled. “What have ye g-g-got to say for
yerself?"

She shrugged. “I make bad decisions.”

“Go home!”

“No. Keep the light steady.”

Foxy adjusted the flashlight. “I can appreciate ye d-dr-dr—DROVE HIM BACK, STEP BY STEP, TO THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF—drove all the way out here to see us safe, although I would-d-d love to know just what ye thought-t-t ye could have done to stop it if the place dropped-d-d on yer wee fool head, but never ye mind-d-d that. Storm’s over and the roof ain’t-t-t going nowhere.”

She laughed. “How do you arrive at that ass-headed conclusion, Captain?”

“It b-b-be—A GREAT DAY TO BE A PIRATE—summer,” he shot back with a wave in Freddy’s direction that, in retrospect, could have made no sense to her even if she’d seen it. “This here could-d-d be the last storm we have for a three-month or so, and in the meantime, it’ll all d-d-dry out, won’t it?”

“Wow.” She shook her head without looking up from her hands. “That is so not how it works, Captain.”

Foxy’s smile went crooked as his lower jaw slipped its left pin. He snapped it back into place and said, “Ye don’t-t-t need to tell any of us how b-br-breaking down works.”

“Buildings are different.” She dislodged a largish chunk of dried mud from Bonnie’s knee, shook it out, blew on the joint to clear it of dust, and resumed cleaning. “Okay, for the purposes of this explanation, let’s pretend you’ve got a roof that weighs ten tons and a building that can support fifteen tons. That’s considered the standard safety cushion for weather. So it rains. Rain slides off the shingles. Building stays safe and dry. All is well.”

“THIS IS MY FAVORITE STORY,” said Chica, flashing her eyes at Foxy. When he looked at her inquiringly, she shifted her gaze pointedly to that chunk of ‘mud’, now lying on the stage floor. There was a pale sort of nobby thing sticking out of it.

It was a toe.

Foxy looked at Bonnie, but the damn fool was swimming in Ana’s eyes and hadn’t even noticed he was dropping bits of human-bleeding-remains all over the bleeding stage for his lady-love to spy. He looked at Freddy, but Freddy was just as lost, in her words if not her eyes.


Freddy shrugged himself abruptly out from under Bonnie’s arm and limped away without a word, all the way over to the edge of the stage. He opened the curtain, turned his eyes on and looked out, looked up.

“Seasons keep changing,” Ana continued, turning her head to watch him. Only for a second, which was time enough for Foxy to snap the toe up and toss it to Chica. She caught it, looked frantically left and right, then popped it into her mouth as Ana turned back around and resumed working on
Bonnie’s knee. The sound of it tumbling down her throat-sac into her stomach seemed bloody loud to Foxy, but Ana didn’t seem to notice as she picked up her gadget and the threads of her story. “Shingles get hot, get soft, expand. A little more weather gets in, bringing mold spores, still dry, still safe. Winter. Shingles get cold, get hard, crack wider. More snow gets in. Mold gets wet and holds on to the water. Roof gets heavier and nobody sees it. Weather gets warmer. Mold starts to grow, drinking in more and more water, eating at the lumber, rusting out the hardware and breaking down the sheetrock. Years pass, hot and cold and rainy, hot and cold and rainy, mold and rust and rot.”

Freddy dropped the curtain and just stood there, staring at the back of it.

Ana’s voice rolled on, unconcerned, just loud enough to be heard over the whining of her little motorized cleaning toy. “Now you got a roof that weighs twelve tons sitting on a building that can now only support maybe ten, and that’s when it’s dry and the sun is shining. When it rains, that roof will swell out to eighteen tons, easy, and when winter rolls around, you can start factoring in the weight of ice and snow. It doesn’t have to be raining at this point, just a shiver in the right place and everything lets go. It’s the thunder that scares me,” she said, her hands as steady as a surgeon’s, she was so scared. “This whole building is no better than a house of cards at the moment, and that thunder is shaking the table.”

“Storm’s over,” Foxy pointed out. “So I reckon ye c-c-could go home.”

“You’re starting to hurt my feelings, Captain.”

“Come on now, luv,” said Foxy in his most cajoling voice, the success of which was nicely measured not by Ana’s complete indifference, but by Bonnie’s flat ears. “Ye d-d-don’t want to be under this roof when it falls, do ye?”

“Do you?” she countered.

“ENOUGH.”

Foxy and Ana both looked back at Freddy as he turned away from the curtains at last and made his laboring way back to the wall. It wasn’t clear which of them his command had been intended for and he could tell Ana wasn’t sure either, but he was willing to drop it and so, it seemed, was she.

In silence, she finished cleaning the knee and moved on to the piston. Her little gadget alternately whined and grated, filling up the awkward quiet with noise other than Freddy’s intermittent pacing. With a few squirts of WD-40, she put the whole thing together again. It only took her fifty-two seconds that time. She plugged it in, put her ear right up against Bonnie’s knee to listen as it presumably powered up and reintegrated, then screwed it down tight and wiped it off.

“How’s that feel?” she asked, scooting back to give him room to try it out.

Bonnie flexed his leg one joint at a time. “No friction errors. No integrity alerts or balance corrections.” Tentatively, he pulled his arm back from Chica and stood on his own two feet. He took a step, clicked through an internal diagnostic, and took another.

“You’re still limping,” observed Ana.

“Yeah, but I’m not dragging it.” Bonnie headed across the stage, his left leg stiff but lifting clear off the ground with each step. When he reached the curtain, he turned around and came back, walking even faster, almost normally. “GREAT JOB! Goddamnmit, I mean…uh…”

“Great job?” Ana suggested, moving on her knees over to Chica and settling again.
“What do ye think-k-k yer doing?” Foxy asked.

“Not in love with your tone, Captain,” she replied, trying to open Chica’s thigh casing. It appeared to be stuck. “I can appreciate this is your Cove and all, but it’s not your building and you’re not the boss of me.”


Ana sat for a moment or two, then looked up at Freddy.

He waited, arms folded.

“Look,” she said finally. “I might as well, right? I’m here, Chica’s here, the tools are here…it’s a long night. Let’s just make the most of it!”

“NO. IT’S TIME TO SAY GOODBYE. LEAVE.” He opened his mouth as if to continue, closed it, shook his head, then said, “I. DON’T. HAVE. TO—”

“—let me leave,” she finished for him, like it was just something Freddy said, like it was a chance he gave to everyone. “Yeah, yeah. I remember. Give it a rest, would you?”

“GO. HOME. THE RESTAURANT IS CLOSED. YOU SHOULDN’T BE HERE. GO. HOME. IT’S TIME TO SAY GOODBYE.”

“If that didn’t work the first thousand times you said it, why would it work now?”


“No. Sheesh, this is really stuck good, isn’t it?”

The Toreador March began to play. “I. DON’T. WANT. YOU. HERE.”

Ana’s hands stilled, but only for a moment. She smiled, just a little, and resumed prying at Chica’s leg. “I know.”

Freddy bent over, thrusting one arm out in a furious point, and boomed, “GO. HOME,” right in her face to the tune of the Toreador March.

She looked at him, then at the gadget in her right hand and Chica’s thigh-casing under her left, and finally up at him again. “Are you serious? That’s what you really want?”

He nodded once, grunting angrily, still pointing and still playing the March.

She held the gadget up between them, never blinking, never flinching, and actually moved her face even closer to Freddy’s teeth. “You had to pick her off the floor, you remember that? You had to carry her down the stairs.”

Freddy’s pointing finger wilted slightly. The music died. He blinked.

“You just watched me clean out Bonnie’s knee. You just watched him walk across the fucking stage. But you’re sending me home. You won’t even let me look at her much less try to help her out and why? Because I’m trespassing? Smoking? Not wearing pants? What? Seriously, what am I doing that’s so much worse than your friend not being able to walk?”

Freddy straightened and stepped back. His arms twitched out once, palms up, imploring, and then
mutely let them drop. He looked at Chica.

“IT’S OKAY, FREDDY,” Chica said.

“No, it’s not okay. What’s wrong with you?” Ana demanded. “You ought to be kidnapping me and forcing me to do this, not throwing me out! Where the fuck are your priorities at?”

Freddy glanced down, through the stage and through the floor, to the basement where he kept his priorities. He took off his hat, started to rub his head, then just turned the hat over and stared into it for a while. Over the years, he’d pulled hundreds of paper bouquets out of that hat, thousands of plushie Bonnies, even live doves and birthday cupcakes with lit candles, but it was empty now.

Bonnie at once took Ana’s arm, watching Freddy too closely as he tried to pull her away. “Please,” he said, not to Ana. “P-Please d-d-don’t.”

Oh, there was a story there, all right, and Foxy was beginning to catch a glimmer of just what it was. Moving fast, he gathered her kit, plucked the gadget out of Ana’s hand and dropped it all in her toolbox. “Ye said-d-d yer piece,” he said, pushing it into her arms over her angrily confused protests. “Now ye need-d-d to go.”

“No.”

“Freddy.” Bonnie released Ana and stepped in front of her, hands up and useless before him. “C-C-Come on. Just…Just-t-let her go.”

“No,” Freddy said again. He put his hat on and looked at Ana. “AND ONE DAY,” he said haltingly, paused to click through some sound files, and said, “YOU. LOOK UP. AND. REAL. EYES.” Another pause, longer, but he wasn’t searching for words this time. “IT’S ME.”

Foxy, baffled, tried to catch Bonnie’s or Chica’s eyes, but they were both staring at Freddy. Chica’s hands were pressed over the hole in the middle of her face, still cupped in the shape of the beak she’d lost years ago. Bonnie’s ears were low and his shoulders slightly hunched. Whatever this story was, they both knew it.

He really ought to be leaving the Cove more often.

“No,” said Ana, almost to herself. And then said it again, moaning it louder and louder: “No, no, no, no!”

“IT’S ME,” said Freddy, watching her with a deeply unnerving lack of expression. “I’M. THE. MONSTER.”

“No, you’re not. No, you are not!” Ana shoved her toolbox back at Foxy, stepped around Bonnie and marched boldly right up to Freddy, and it suddenly struck Foxy just how small she really was, so much smaller than Freddy. A child, full-grown or not, standing in her underwear, alone in a dark place where no one knew to look for her and no human ear would ever hear her scream, looking up into the face of the monster looking down. “No, you’re not and you do not need to be absorbing that into your files or whatever it is you do. I know who you are. You know who you are. Everyone knows who you are!”

“WHO?”

Ana made a few empty sounds, plainly at a loss, then said, “You’re Freddy Fazbear.”

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”
“Wow.” She raked a hand through her hair until it knotted up in her braid, muttering, “I am way too sober to be fielding the existential crises of an animatronic bear,” but then she looked right at him and said, “You don’t like me, do you?”

Bonnie reached out for her. Foxy caught his arm and Chica shook her head. This moment belonged to Ana and Freddy.

The rain fell on the roof and through it, onto the floor. In the distance, thunder grumbled.

Freddy said, “NO.”

It was a blow, much as she tried to mask it, but she took it on the chin and simply said, “That’s fine. You shouldn’t. I am, without a doubt, the very definition of the kind of person you should be keeping out. I’m just a mess.” She faltered, looking down at herself, then shook it off and looked at Freddy again. “But when I got sick and crawled into your house to die, you took care of me anyway. I hit you and yelled at you and called you names and you gave me a drink and put me to bed and didn’t let me leave until you knew I’d be all right. That’s who you are. Got that? That’s what you remember here. You can take that other shit out and dump it in your recycling bin right now. You are Freddy Fazbear. You’re still not the boss of me—”

He grunted, almost but not quite a laughing sound-bite.

“—but you’re not a monster. Certainly not for wanting to keep half-naked, pot-smoking riff-raff like me out of your house in the middle of the night. But look.” She heaved a sigh, flung out her arms and said, “I’m leaving, aren’t I? I’ve got work in the morning and I’ve already decided that’s where my priorities are at, so just…just give me a little more time, okay? I’m not ready. Please.”

Freddy gazed at her without speaking, clicking, or even blinking. When his arm moved at last, Foxy had just enough time to know—not think, know—he was about to snap her neck, and then Freddy’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. He gave her a pat and let his arm drop again. “STAY. AS. LONG. AS. YOU. WANT,” he said, already moving away. He went to Chica, got up under her arm as she stared at him, shock-eyed, and nodded at Ana’s toolbox.

Ana, either unaware that the Earth had shifted on its axis or pretending to be, found her screwdriver again and got back to work prying open Chica’s leg casing.

For a while, the sounds of metal scraping on plastic and the rain were all the sounds to hear.

“Really?” said Bonnie.

“YES.”

“No, b-b-but I mean—”

“I. KNOW. WHAT. YOU. MEAN.” Freddy’s fans wheezed out a sigh as he shook his head. “AN-N-A.”

“Yeah?”

“WILL. YOU. FOLLOW. THE. RULES.”

“All except the one about leaving before dark. And no trespassing, obviously,” she said, giving up on the thigh and moving on to the shin. “And the one about yelling, probably. And I’m sure others will come up. You know what, let’s just say no, but I’ll break them with the best of intentions.”
“GOOD. ENOUGH,” said Freddy.

Bonnie stared. “Really?”

Freddy sighed again and after a long silence, opened his mouth to speak, but they’d never know what he meant to say, because at that precise moment, Chica’s shin-casing popped open, releasing an avalanche of what appeared at first glance to be pills, all brown and black and white, but which on second sighting were merely thousands upon thousands of maggot husks, presently spilled across Ana’s bare legs.

Astonishingly, Ana didn’t even appear to notice right away as she was already heaving herself aside, one hand clamped over her mouth and nose, visibly blanching out in that peculiar yellowish-green color that meant the sick was like to follow. She crawled away on all fours, scattering the dead maggots or crunching them under her hands and knees, made it almost to the gangplank, then said, cheerfully, “Nope,” and chummed the deck.

She didn’t have much in her and Lord knew there’d been worse sprayed over the stage in its time, but while she was thus occupied, Foxy picked up the flashlight and hunkered down in front of Chica to have a look at what the buggies had been living in. And on.

Filling the cavity within Chica’s leg were a hopelessly-tangled thicket of pale wormy-looking stems and thick clotted-blood-colored blobs. Some sort of fungus, he guessed. It was everywhere, grown together until Chica’s endoskeleton and other parts couldn’t even be seen, much less assessed for damage. The buggies had filled what little space was left between the mushrooms, forming a single spongy mass that, now that their confines had opened out, was slowly expanding, bent stems uncurling and compressed wads of maggot bodies breaking apart before dribbling onto the stage.

“Don’t touch it!” Ana called, spitting and hiccoughing in a manner that suggested she wasn’t quite done yet.

“I ain’t-t-t,” said Foxy, reaching into the clotted soup of all that lovely gunk. Rule Number Twenty-Two said no animatronic could fix another, but this wasn’t fixing. His probing fingers tapped against Chica’s endoskeleton, followed it down, and bumped something that should not be there. Something firm, but yielding.

“I said, don’t…don’t…Oh Jesus Christ, what is on me?”

As the less than musical sounds of Ana slapping at herself and choking on curses filled his ears, Foxy found a careful gripping place and pulled. The thing came up and out with a thick sucking sound. A shoe, the sort called ‘sneakers’, high-topped, once white and trimmed out in neon colors, with a fat tongue sticking up between the sparkly laces and the sock holding what was left of the foot. Bits of mushroom and dead maggots filled the sock, but there was no way to shake them out without tumbling the bones out with them, so Foxy simply folded the sock around the lot of it and tucked it down snugly into the shoe.

Freddy put his hand out.

Foxy gave the shoe up and stood, turning to keep an eye on Ana as he listened to Freddy open his abdomen and put the shoe inside. Ana, recovering, gained her feet also and wiped her mouth, motioning at Chica with the same broad gesture she used to knock the last maggots from her knees and thighs.

“Well, I think I found the problem,” she said, returning. She crouched, not too close this time, and
peered into Chica’s leg. “God almighty, what a mess.”

“GOSH, I’M SORRY,” said Chica, head down.

Freddy put his arm around her, but kept his other hand over his stomach.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about. You’re fine.” Ana prodded at the very edges of the mushroom forest, wiped her finger on her shirt, and shook her head. “The thing is...that stuff is almost certainly eating holes into your works. And by the same token, it’s plugging those holes. Now, from what I’ve seen, you move mainly by way of pneumatic pumps. If I clear that shit out, I’m going to open those holes, and if those pumps lose pressure, they stop working. I mean stop,” she stressed, not that any of them needed further explanation. “I saw a pneumatic lift blow a tube once. It collapsed before the fucking tube hit the floor, I shit you not.” She paused, looking away indistinctly at the wall. “There was a guy under it at the time.” After a while, she looked back at Chica. “I’m not done. Okay? I’m not. But I can’t help you with what I’ve got here now. So, here’s what we’re going to do. You listening?”

Chica nodded.

“YES,” said Freddy.

“First off, you’re going to leave that alone. Okay? You don’t open it, you don’t clean it out, you don’t touch it. Absolutely alone. And try not to move around too much.”

Chica looked at her helplessly. Leg or no leg, at six, they would have to be on stage. At eleven, the first set would open the restaurant and at nine, it would close, and in between, Chica would have to climb up or down the stage steps twenty times. In between, she’d also have ten dances, two parades, five trips to the kitchen for her Chica Loves To Cook routine, and five trips to the reading room for storytime.

Ana looked at Freddy. “Can you keep her still?”

“NO.”

Ana nodded, shook her head, then closed Chica’s shin-casing and straightened up. “Do your best,” she said.

“JUST DO YOUR BEST,” Chica agreed, nodding. “YOU’LL NEVER KNOW UNLESS YOU TRY!”

“Right. So, I’m going to go now, like, three minutes after that great speech and all,” she added in a mutter and shook her head some more as she closed up her toolbox and took her flashlight back from Foxy. “But I’ll be back tonight and maybe I’ll think of something.”

“BYE BYE! COME BACK SOON.”

“Yeah.” Ana headed out, but stopped at the curtain and looked back. Her eyes went to each of them in turn and by the time she got all the way around to Chica again, there was no more hope in them. She turned away, opened the curtain, stood some more. Then she let the curtain drop, put the toolbox down and came back, walking fast and sure and straight to Bonnie.

He opened his arms and she got right up in them with Foxy and Freddy and Chica all looking on. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled his head down and put her mouth close to the base of his ear. She whispered, breathed, whispered again.
Bonnie’s eyes turned briefly pained, then closed. “Okay,” he whispered back.

She kissed him, once on the smooth side of his cheek and once, fiercely, on the mouth, then walked out again and this time, did not look back.

It was still raining and between the water hitting the roof and hitting the floor, nothing of her truck’s engine could be heard, but Foxy knew when she was gone all the same. The life just went out of the building.

Freddy, never one for sentiment, went over to Chica and knelt with considerable effort in front of her. “FOXY. HELP. ME. OPEN. THIS.”

On edge and for no good reason, Foxy went and used his hook to scrape out the gummed-up seam of Chica’s leg casings, then pried her shin carefully open so Freddy could feel around inside.

Chica shut her eyes and kept them shut while Freddy found the other sneaker, then went on to methodically examine the rest of her. Not even he could access an animatronic’s console, but he checked it as best he could through her neck and abdominal cavities. All in all, he found and removed several tatters of fabric, a half-dozen suspect chunks of material which could as easily be time-hardened machine grease as bits of flesh, a rainbow barrette, and a medical alert bracelet with a broken clasp.

Freddy read the name on this last, then tucked it into his abdomen without speaking and moved on to the next section of Chica’s casing. When he satisfied himself she was clean, he got to his feet and just looked at her for a while.

“YOU. NEVER. TOLD. ME. HE. MADE. YOU. HOLD. ONE,” he said at last.

“I’M SORRY, FREDDY.”

He shook his head, touching her shoulder, then moved all the way in for one of his increasingly rare hugs. “IT’S OKAY,” he told her, rubbing her back so that she could hear it even if she couldn’t feel it. “I’M SORRY. YOU. HAD. TO. CARRY. HER. ALL. THIS. TIME. THAT’S ALL.” Gently, he released her and looked back at the others.

“I had one, too,” Bonnie admitted. “I’m p-pretty sure he st-st—STAY AND PLAY—stayed in one piece, though.”

“Think again, mate.” Foxy nodded toward Chica, who opened her abdomen and found the plug on her stomach. With a little work, she squeezed the toe out and handed it over.

Bonnie looked at his leg in alarm, as if expecting nine more to tumble out, then started opening casings and probing at his joints. Almost immediately, he had pulled a scrap of fabric out from his elbow, something that could not be a towel or cleaning rag or anything but what it was—a piece of someone’s bloody shirt.

Freddy took it, then turned Bonnie bodily around and started checking for himself. “FOXY. WHAT. ABOUT. YOU.”

“No.”

“ARE. YOU. SURE.”

“Aye.” Foxy’s jaw creaked; he was clenching it. “He were using me for other things that-t-t night. Ain’t c-c-carried one since Circle Drive. Ye?”
“NO. I. SHOULD. BE. CLEAN.” Freddy found and removed another scrap of shirt, shut Bonnie’s arm and opened his shoulder. “WHEN. I’M. DONE. HERE. YOU. AND. I. ARE. GOING. THROUGH. EVERY. ROOM. AND. MAKE. SURE. THERE. IS. NOTHING. HERE. FOR. AN-N-A. TO. FIND. WHEN. SHE. COMES. BACK.”

“You really meant-t-t it when you said-d-d she could?” Bonnie pressed.


“Yeah, b-b-but…what if…”

“I’M. HAPPY. FOR. YOU,” interrupted Freddy, turning Bonnie to the wall so he could open his back. “I’M. HAPPY. YOU. HAVE. SOMEONE. YOU. CAN. LOVE. MORE. THAN. ANYTHING. SOMEONE. WHO. MAKES. YOU. FEEL. LIKE. NOTHING. ELSE. MATTERS. I. DON’T. I. NEVER. CAN. I. HAVE. TO. CHOOSE. HIM. EVERY. TIME.”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie, ears low.

“IF. SHE. CAN. FOLLOW. THE RULES. MAYBE. IT. WON’T. COME. TO. THAT.”

That was a hell of a big ‘if’ and they all knew it. Bonnie did not answer.

“UNTIL. THEN. YOU. CAN. HAVE. HER. I. HOPE. THAT’S. GOOD. ENOUGH. FOR. YOU. BECAUSE. IT’S. ALL. I. HAVE. TO. GIVE.” Freddy finished picking what appeared to be a shriveled-up mouse out of Bonnie’s body and closed him up. “STAY. HERE. WITH. CHICA,” he ordered, beckoning to Foxy.

Foxy nodded, but didn’t immediately set off. Instead, he looked at Bonnie, who was staring at the stage floor in front of him. “There at the end-d-d, mate…What’d she tell ye?”

None of his business. He knew it and he wouldn’t have been surprised to hear it, but Bonnie just said, “She said-d-d she lost everyone she ever loved-d-d when she wasn’t looking-ing-ing. She said she wouldn’t let it happen to me. She’d be b-b-back for me. Even if she had-d-d to dig me out.”

Foxy knew Ana had meant all of them when she’d said, ‘I’ll be back for you,’ but he couldn’t feel even a twinge when Bonnie took it all for himself. So he told himself and he truly thought he believed it, and yet something sure put an edge on his tone when he snapped, “And ye said-d-d okay? She p-p-pours her bleeding heart out and ye say okay?”

“What the hel-l-l—HELLO THERE! WELCOME TO—hell am I suppo-o-osed to say to that?”

Foxy had no answer.

Surprisingly, Freddy did.

“YOU. TELL. HER. YOU. LOVE. HER,” he grumbled, heading out. “YOU. TELL. HER. LIKE. IT’S. THE. LAST. TIME. YOU. EVER. WILL. SOME. DAY. YOU. WILL. BE. RIGHT.” He didn’t look to see what effect his words had, just slapped the damp curtains aside and growled, “FOXY. LET’S GO.”
CHAPTER FOUR

The storm might have been over, but the rain didn’t stop. It hit the windshield like bullets as she drove, hiding the hairpin turns that climbed Coldslip Mountain and giving her something else to concentrate on other than the futility of Freddy’s. Once home, she discovered she had indeed left the tent wide open, but even that wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Her day pack had been tucked into a more or less protected corner, leaving only the top-most layer of the central pocket to take the brunt of the weather. The important stuff—phone, tablet, wallet, unpaid bills—was fine. The rain had soaked into everything else, which turned out to be a good thing, since wet clothes were too heavy for the wind to take.

The first thing Ana did was put on a pair of jeans and a less vulgar shirt. Both started out damp and only got wetter as she gathered what few things had blown out into the yard. She didn’t have enough time or light to make a thorough search, so she just grabbed what she saw and dumped it in the back of the truck. The only thing she bothered to take inside was her sleeping bag, and that only as far as the foyer. She spread it out over the bannister of the grand stairwell to dry, made sure she shut the front door this time, and got back on the road, cursing herself under her breath for putting off the simple purchase of a washer and dryer.

“I’m not going to be here that long,” she muttered, heading back up the boggy driveway. “I can make do with the laundromat. It’s not like I’m ever going to have a laundry-related emergency, right? Right. Dipshit.”

Mammon’s laundromat would not open for several hours, but what was one more pain in the ass after the night she’d had? If she didn’t want to drive sixteen miles to Hurricane at half-past three in the morning, she should have bought a damn washing machine. She had no one to blame but herself.

Her first stop in Hurricane was at the Walmart, where she bought a full set of dry clothes and a laundry basket. She changed in the restroom and went on to her next stop, which was the all-night laundromat. There, she managed to catch an hour of sleep in between transferring loads from washer to dryer before she headed out again. She made one more impulse-stop at the Krispy Kreme on her way out of town, where she bought the biggest cup of coffee they sold and a couple dozen donuts before she hit the road again, returning to Mammon as the sun was just peeking over the horizon.

“Going for the popularity prize, are you?” Shelly asked when she walked in, boxes in arms. Then he took another look at her and said, “Late night?”

“Storm woke me up.”

“Better get used to that, missy. ‘Bout the only thing the weather’s guaranteed to do around here is change.” He came around the side of the counter and she stopped, expecting him to do the gentlemanly thing and take the doughnuts. Instead, he opened the top box, helped himself to a glazed round and shut it again. “Can’t understand the fuss people make over these machine-made things. The Donut Hole right here in town makes ‘em by hand from the family recipe book, and better than that, you will not find anywhere on Earth. You want to make us some coffee?” he asked, moseying away. “I got some announcements this morning and as soon as the boys are all
Ana indulged herself in a pleasant little fantasy that began with inserting that glazed doughnut into an orifice other than Shelly’s big mouth and ended with setting the building on fire, then put the boxes down on the counter and went to make the coffee.

The ‘boys’ began to trickle in soon afterwards, the first of them a few minutes before five and the last twenty minutes after, with Shelly scowling pointedly at his watch as the two of them slunk in and were directed to chairs. The reception area was too small to hold the full crew—eleven men, Shelly behind the counter, and Ana made lucky thirteen—but since it had been remodeled, it had become the unofficial break room while the real break room filled up with equipment and gradually turned into a second workshop. So it took too long for everyone settle in, since all the chairs and most of the walls were already occupied, but as soon as territories were claimed and men were contentedly chewing doughnuts and muttering about sports, Shelly cleared his throat.

“Some of you may be aware we had us a little storm last night,” he began. “And as a result, I got three new jobs to pass out this morning. First things first. I got a call from sweet old Bob Bean at three-thirty this morning advising me that the downtown area was flooding out, on account of how the storm drains were backing up from Majestic all the way to Broadmoor. A little pre-dawn investigation showed me the culverts out on Canyon Road had completely collapsed. Now, this confused me,” he went on, leaning over the counter to fix two men among the many gathered there with a steely eye. “On account of how this office changed out every culvert on that end of town not three years back. Them pipes should have been good at least another twenty years. Hell, the last batch went thirty. So three represents one hell of a downshift and being as concerned as I naturally was, I took a drive around town to make sure them others we installed at the same time were holding up all right. And wouldn’t you know it? I found two washed out, two more rusted out, and six, six,” he emphasized, driving his thick finger down on the countertop like a judge’s gavel, “blocked solid. Any guesses on how that happened?”

The two men who seemed to be the focus of his question shifted a bit in their chairs, but did not offer up any answers. The rest of the room stayed quiet. Ana, who did not consider herself at risk for scolding, seeing as how she’d been in another part of the country three years ago and shouldered zero percent of the blame for this fuck-up, poured herself the last of the coffee and started another pot brewing.

“Now, I spun the city a crock about how it must have been a bad batch at the manufacturer’s end,” Shelton went on, “but just because they bought it does not mean I’m passing the savings on to you. Slater. Wyborn.”

Both men groaned and Slater followed up with a sullen, “Why is it always us?”

“I been wondering that myself lately,” Shelly countered with a meaningful belt-hitch. “In fact, I got to wondering so much that the first thing I did when I got here was look up who changed out those culverts, and wouldn’t you know it? Not only was it only those culverts the two of you changed out, not only that, but it was all of them. Every single culvert I got the two of you boys down for is presently tits up today. What are the odds?”

Wyborn was sitting up very straight and quiet in his chair now while Slater slouched lower.

“Now I will do you the courtesy of not asking what in the hell happened to those culverts, but you are going to change them out and do it for real this time, and just to make sure the job gets done right, I’m going to go with you for observational purposes.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Shelly!”
“You think I’m happy about this? I got other jobs demanding my attention right now. I do not have time to waste watching you sweep your fuck-ups under the city’s rug. As it stands, noise ordinances and traffic and whatnot means you can only work from noon until three, and until this mess is sorted out, those are your only hours out of me.”


Gone in an instant was the good-ol-boy bossman Ana was familiar with. Here in his place was a man who had dug ditches in the rain, spread tar in the sun, and ground dirt so deep into the cracks of his calluses that no amount of soap would ever wash it out. It was this Shelly who said, “Boy, you already been paid for this job once. That I’m paying you at all is an act of Christian charity toward your little boy, on the off-chance he doesn’t yet know what a shiftless jackass his daddy is. I hear another ungrateful word come out of your mouth and you can forget all about that part-time pay and start looking for another job.”

Slater, flushed and scowling, shut up.

Shelly made himself comfortable against the countertop once more and had another bite of donut. “Now that’s the first problem and I consider it dealt with,” he went on, brushing at the crumbs on his shirt. “Here’s the second. Apparently, we had a tree land on the restrooms down at Jewel Lake. Smashed it flat. So not only do we need the tree cleared away, but we need a new shitter put up ASAP. Volunteers?”

Sighing, Ana raised her hand.

“Don’t be so hasty there, little miss. I do believe I saw Bisano, Taylor and Wright put their paws up ahead of you.”

The three named, hands in pockets or arms folded, frowned around at each other as the realization that they had volunteered slowly dawned on them.

‘He puts me on phones and I’m walking,’ thought Ana, knowing damned well she wouldn’t.

“The third call I got this morning comes to me from the good folks down at the town history museum, who discovered they have a leaky roof.”

Ana, who had spent the night under the mother of all leaky roofs, could not stop herself from snorting. That earned her a hard stare, but then Shelly went on without further comment.

“Now this is not a dire situation, seeing as the museum will be relocating next year, but between now and then, it’s likely to rain, so, Hageman and Collins, the two of you are going out today and slapping up some new paper and shingles.”

Nods.

“Last item,” Shelly continued. “The old mall. Now boys, that thing came down last week and as of this morning, that site is still asshole deep in debris. This is unacceptable, so from now on, every available man will be on that job under Big Paulie’s whip. Based on his recommendations, I will hand-pick a crew of six to continue work when the build starts in August. The rest of you, I’m sorry to say, are just going to have to catch whatever comes down the pike between now and Labor Day.”

Eleven men, all of whom presumably had bills to pay, exchanged glances ranging from the merely concerned to the cut-throat and every shade in between.
“All right,” said Shelly, after a suitable pause for questions had played itself out in silence. “You all got your assignments. Get to it. Stark. Stick around.”

‘Here we go,’ thought Ana. She waited for the room to clear and then said, “Can I help you, boss?”

“Well now, I do hope so, little miss.” Shelly came around the counter just to lean on it, giving her his most serious belt-hitch. “You may have noticed that Wyborn, Hageman and Wright being elsewhere today leaves their job unmanned.”

“That’s…” Her sleep-deprived brain shut down and slowly rebooted. “That’s the remodel at the day care center, right?”

“All the real work’s done, they tell me,” he said with a nod. “It’s plumbed and rewired, floors are finished, windows in.”

‘It’s about time,’ thought Ana, but said only, “What’s left?”

“Fresh paint, molding, a good cleaning…be nice if you could knock up some shelves and storage for them. Nothing special,” he said quickly. “Just if you happen to have any materials laying around and you got no other use for them. Mrs. Pickett, that would be the lady who runs the place, happens to be on the committee that’ll be deciding who gets the library job next year and that pain in my ass, Villart, is underbidding me. I seen those shelves you put up in the Kellar house and if anyone can knock that old biddy’s socks off, it’s you, little miss.”

“No problem.”

“How long will it take you, do you think?”

“I haven’t seen it yet,” she reminded him. “But one room? I can’t see it taking longer than tomorrow, maybe not even that.”

“You’re a hard little worker, I’ll give you that. Them other boys have been dicking around that simple job running on three weeks now, when I told Mrs. Pickett it wouldn’t take more’n two. I’m counting on you to make me look good without,” he stressed, “making my crew look bad.”

“Check. Anything else?”

He glanced behind him, but the room was empty. Slater and Wyborn were in back, getting into their reflective vests, and everyone else had left for their respective sites. They were alone. No witnesses. He thought about his next move. She could see him thinking and she could tell those thoughts had nothing to do with business.

Ana stifled a sigh, suppressed the urge to cross her arms and cover her chest, and just waited.

“Well now, there is something else I want to run past you,” he began, speaking slowly, letting his words feel at the air as a man feels his footing when he ventures out on ice. “Unrelated to this business, so to speak. What would you say…”

There he faltered. Under ordinary circumstances, Ana would wait him out, but she hadn’t slept and wasn’t in the mood.

“To what?” she asked, staring him down.

He chickened out and pretended to check his watch. “When I have the time. Tell you what. You get this mess sorted out at the daycare and let me mop up Slater’s mess and we’ll talk again.” He
hitched at his belt and turned away, waving her off with one hand. “Go on now. Get to work.”

Ana went home, since she didn’t know what kind of materials might be ‘laying around’ the day care, but she knew what she had in the garage and she already knew she could get some decent kid-sized shelves and cupboards out of it. While she was there, she dropped the laundry basket off in the foyer, flipped the sleeping bag so it would dry faster, and then picked up her tablet, because even if she didn’t need it for a simple job like that, the roombuilder might still come in handy.

Sure enough, someone was waiting for her when Ana rolled up to the Duckling Day Care. She was a short woman, broad-bosomed, with a round face made for smiles and eyes that said she took no shit from anyone over four.

“You must be Mrs. Pickett,” said Ana, putting out her hand to shake.

She indeed was, and although she was quick to explain that she was only there to collect some toys and other materials for the little ducklings temporarily being penned at the library, she had plenty to say about the rate at which the job was proceeding. Seeing Ana alone instead of the three she’d been expecting only exacerbated her existing frustrations, but being allowed to play with the roombuilder brought out the duckling in her and soon the two of them were perched on diminutive plastic chairs, talking cubby holes and book nooks.

Eventually, Mrs. Pickett gathered up a box of snacks for her charges, left Ana a cheese sandwich cut into triangles, a shortbread cookie and a half-pint carton of 2% milk, and disappeared so Ana could get some damn work done. She slapped up two coats of paint and cut shelves in the yard while it dried, but she had only just started putting it all together when Mrs. Pickett returned, along with two other women and a dozen ducklings, for an impromptu seminar on women in the workplace, which Ana was only too, too fucking thrilled to participate in.

Still, she made it through, channeling her inner Chica as she talked to the kids about safety and showed them her equipment, and even let a few ‘help’ her run the sander. Her tattooed arm was, of course, the biggest draw of the day, but after they’d all seen it and touched it, they focused their youthful enthusiasm back on the power tools. In a desperate effort to keep their grubby little goddamn hands off her shit, Ana grabbed a bucket of crayons and a stack of paper and ordered them to color, promising Mrs. Pickett she had a great idea.

An hour later, a happy Mrs. Pickett put her ducks in a row and waddled out, and Ana had two more hours to put shelves up before she had to stop, clean her space, throw the stack of scribbles in the truck, and go home.

The truck was down to a quarter-tank, so she stopped by the station, where, because it was that sort of day, she ended up sharing a pump with Mason Kellar’s little brother, Jack, and three of Jack’s cronies. It wasn’t so bad at first. Jack probably would have been content to ignore her, but once his butt-buddies had recognized her, he was more or less duty-bound to be an ass. Ana understood that. She found her happy place and stayed there, unruffled, while Jack entertained his court by suggestively shaking his nozzle at her a few times before ramming it into his tank. She just pumped her gas and went in to pay.

She picked up some junk food while she was there, since she’d apparently blasted through the last batch already. She could only remember eating three candy bars, but that didn’t disturb her. She’d cut way back on the pot lately, which only seemed to make it hit much harder when she did smoke, and indica made her crazy hungry. She ought to pick up more rolling papers too, but she didn’t want to do it in town. She’d wait, pick some up the next time she was in Hurricane or St. George, where no one knew her or cared to.
Jack and his friends came in while she was waiting for the cashier to figure out how many nickels and pennies made up nine cents. She could hear them there behind her, muttering, fake-moaning and laughing, but when she turned around, Jack said, “Hey,” in a perfectly civil tone.

“Hey,” said Ana and kept walking.

“Wait up a sec.”

What to do, what do to…antagonize him, and by extension, his brother or play along and set herself up for escalating episodes of harassment?

Ana stopped at the door and turned around.

“Mace and I are having a party down at the lake on the Fourth,” said Jack while his friends grinned and sniggered. “Want to come?”

“Are you serious?” she asked after a moment.

He feigned innocence, just like he wasn’t inviting her to her own gangbang and body dump. “Hey, we can be friends, can’t we?”

“I have plans,” said Ana and turned to go again.

He caught her arm. “I said, we can be friends—”

“You want to step off me right now, Jaquelina,” Ana interrupted, not loudly. “Or I will beat the ever-loving shit out of you in front of all your boytoys and you will never, ever live that down in this town.”

His friends looked at him. The cashier moved away to stock some shelves. The single other customer decided she really ought to look at the sunglasses right this instant. It was a sunny day, after all.

Jack let go of her with a face-saving shove. “Try to be nice and see what you get. Bitch.”

Ana almost walked away. She knew she should. It was the smart thing to do and certainly, nothing good could come of any alternative. She was exhausted and later, she would use that as her excuse, but it wasn’t true. If it had been Mason, she might not have done it (but Jack was Mason and she knew that, too), but she did and at the moment, she just didn’t give a damn what the consequences were.

She put her bag of junk food down on the nearest shelf and turned around. “Say that again, I dare you. Call me a bitch to my face and say it loud and proud, because it is the very fucking last word you are ever going to say with all your teeth still in your mouth.”

Jack’s friends watched, owl-eyed, solemn. The cashier went into the back and returned with more cookies for the shelf. The customer selected some sunglasses and tried them on.

Jack said nothing.

“No? You must not have meant it then. So apologize.”

He started to laugh.

She slapped him in the mouth.
All three of his friends stepped back. The sound of crinkling plastic as cookies went in their proper place stayed steady as ever. The customer tried on another pair of sunglasses. Another customer opened the door behind Ana, excusing himself as he walked right through their little standoff and over to the soda cooler.

“Apologize for calling me a bitch,” said Ana. “This is the last time I’m telling you.”

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Louder. Loud and proud.”

“Sorry I called you a bitch.”

“Now go pay for your gas. You’re holding up the line.” Ana picked up her bag and opened the door.

No one followed her. No one called after her. Hell, no one saw or heard a damn thing.

Mammon.

“That was stupid,” Ana told herself, climbing up behind the wheel, but although she agreed, she still didn’t care. She was tired. It was time to go home.

Freddy’s was still standing when she passed it, or appeared to be from the road, but she didn’t stop to make sure. Until she’d done something with this stupid pile of kid-scribbles and had it all loaded up and ready to go when she went to work in the morning, she considered herself still on the clock. Anyway, she’d need to go home to get what she’d need to give Chica’s insides a decent cleaning… hell, she’d probably need to go to a hardware store, so what was the point of stopping? The fact that she was exhausted and there was a better than average chance she’d just go to bed once she finished her homework barely factored in at all.

So she drove on by without stopping. If she had, she wouldn’t have seen the car, which was parked next to the gymnasium, although she would have seen the four men filming their establishing shots in front of the gory, pornographic graffiti covering the back wall. They certainly heard her truck go by, and one of them jogged to the corner of the building, tensely watching the road until he was sure it wasn’t coming back. A little nervous laughter was exchanged. Then they continued filming, using the light while they still had it before they went about the potentially troublesome business of breaking in, unaware that this was the last sunset any of them would ever see.

But Ana didn’t know about them and never would. She just went home.

She didn’t bother going into the house when she got there, but took the artwork from the daycare directly into the garage. There, she plugged in her tablet and browsed listlessly through a number of crafting websites operated by people who were into it a hell of a lot more than she was. Ultimately, she found inspiration in decoupage, cut a perfectly good piece of plywood into a number of shapes that looked like ducks, damn it, and not like a bunch of droopy dicks and enormous balls with feet. After cropping the blank space out of the coloring papers, Ana spent a good hour covering ducks with moons and stars, ice cream cones, horses, apple trees, happy suns, smiling moms and dads, and even a Freddy Fazbear or two, then brushed out several coats of lacquer and presto, she had a headache and three hours of her life gone that she was never getting back. Damn kids.

Ana left the ducks drying in the garage and took her tablet inside at long last. She tested the sleeping bag—still a little damp—resigned herself to sleeping in the bed of the truck tonight, then
went into the kitchen. She opened a beer and drank half of it on the short walk back to the foyer, where she collected a clean set of clothes and finally headed up to the second floor to wash up.

Ana usually used the same bathroom she and David had shared as children, but a shower just wasn’t going to do it tonight. The master bath off Aunt Easter’s bedroom had an enormous corner-model whirlpool tub, wide enough to host an orgy and deep enough to drown in. Beneath the sweat and the sawdust and now the nostril-burning smell of varnish, she still reeked of rolling around on the floor at Freddy’s, and especially sliding down the ramp in Pirate Cove. Surely there could be no better place to think fairly and objectively about whether or not she really needed to go back tonight than in a hot bath with a cold beer.

Ana climbed in and settled herself in the crossfire of her favorite whirlpool jets with her tablet. She sipped at her bottle while checking her email and then her calendar and then just sort of naturally, as a logical procession, searching for animatronic parts.

She found a few suppliers with products available for private hobbyists, but nothing she saw looked anything like the parts she’d seen on Bonnie and Chica. That was only to be expected. Technology was a fickle bitch, where each year of real time might as well be an ice age, and from everything she’d heard, the Old Quarry pizzeria had opened and closed in 2003. The animatronics at Freddy’s couldn’t be less than twelve years old; they were older than the ice age, dinosaurs of engineering, living fossils.

And yet, with the memory of Bonnie’s knee still fresh in her mind, she could not understand why everything she was able to find online looked so primitive. She hadn’t expected to be able to just pick out a new drumstick for Chica, but, damn it, she had thought she’d be able to get a couple pneumatic pumps. Sure, browsing through the first three suppliers her search engine pulled up wasn’t exactly an exhaustive investigation, but it discouraged her just the same. She didn’t know what any of this stuff was. Most of it didn’t even have names, just model numbers and sizes. She could sort of tell what it was supposed to do, but in the same way, she could already tell none of it was compatible with the animatronics at Freddy’s. Everything here needed motors and processors and compressors and power cables.

This was impossible. Even if she could rig something up with this crap to get Chica moving again (she thought she could, although the cost was daunting) and even if she could make it fit within the physical confines of Chica’s leg casing (not a chance), she could not even begin to see how to install it so that Chica herself could use it. Everything Ana could see, even the really stupid-expensive stuff, seemed to be dependent on an external power source and, more importantly, external control. What was she supposed to do? Wire it all up into a remote control box so Chica could…could steer herself around the building? Where the hell were all the plug-n-play parts for the walking animatronics?

In mounting frustration, Ana tapped from website to website, but saw only variations on the same general design. This couldn’t be this hard. There was something here, something obvious she was missing, something she’d see if she only knew the first fucking thing about animatronics.

Hang on…

Feeling stupid, not only for not thinking of this much sooner, but also for thinking it might work now, Ana opened a new search and typed ‘animatronic repair’.

Most of what came up were old webzine articles or forums where hobbyists could compare notes (and porn, of course, because internet), but there were a startling number of actual outlets, manufacturers and repair services, mostly situated around cities with a theme-park-based economy.
Sternly warning herself not to get excited, Ana added ‘Utah’ to the search filter and tried again.

Nothing. Or rather, several shady online college courses, lots of ads promising the best prices for animatronic repairs on various auction sites, more porn, a help-wanted ad, and then nothing. Even clicking on sites that specifically mentioned Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria either led to abandoned livejournals, ancient articles about Reardon and the missing kids in ‘93, ghost-hunting blogs, or Page Not Found error screens.

Discouraged, but not quite ready to give up, Ana scrolled back up to the job listing, which proved to be unrelated yet interesting. There was a Chuck E. Cheese in Warren, apparently. They were looking for someone local who could provide weekly maintenance and on-call emergency repair service for their animatronics and were offering thirty-four dollars an hour. The listing was a week old, but was flagged as still available. She bookmarked it, thinking absently that it might be worth giving them a call, see if they wouldn’t mind passing her number along if they succeeded in hiring someone. Then, as a last scrape against the bottom of the hope-barrel, she went to Craigslist.

There were no animatronic repairmen offering their services today, so Ana made a listing of her own. Animatronic Repairman Wanted in Mammon, Utah. Time sensitive. Serious inquiries only. She’d give it a week and if she didn’t get anything (apart from dick pics; it was Craigslist, after all), she’d take it down. At least she could say she’d tried.

Which she was sure would be a great comfort to Chica when her pumps blew and she ended up face-down on the tiles for the rest of her life. Which wouldn’t be very long after the roof fell on her.

Ana set her tablet down a little too hard, then leaned her head back and scowled into her reflection.

Aunt Easter’d had a wild side, all right. Mirrored bathroom ceiling. And God, her feet were filthy.

Okay, so if she couldn’t replace Chica’s pumps, what could she do? Patch them, she guessed. She could pick up a can of spray-sealant that might do the trick, at least as a short-term solution. Maybe after she’d had some sleep and more time to shop around online, she’d think of something better. In the meantime—

“In the meantime, you’ve got enough on your plate,” she told herself sternly. “Not your circus, not your monkeys, remember? And you know what? In that spirit, forget Freddy’s for tonight and just go to bed.”

She’d told them she’d be back.

“You will be back. You’ll just be back another day. What’s the big deal?”

The roof…

“What are you going to do about that roof tonight?” she asked herself reasonably. “What are you going to do about that roof at all? Admit it, you just want to go wallow in someone else’s misery for a while. Good Christ, girl, don’t you have enough of that right here?”

Chica was waiting for her.

“No, she’s not. She’s doing exactly the same thing she does every other night, whether you’re there or not. And it’s the same as the roof—what are you going to do? If you really want to help her, get some sleep and look at her with fresh eyes and a clear head.”

Bonnie was waiting for her.
“Yeah,” Ana admitted, lifting one foot out of the water to watch it splash down again. “Yeah, I know. But I’m tired. I’m just…so tired. And come on. He doesn’t really miss me. Not really. He says that to everyone.”

It sounded like an excuse. Which it was, but it also sounded like one, and a lame one at that. But if she was making up excuses, she guessed that meant she’d decided.

Ana finished her bath, braided her wet hair, and got dressed, just the shirt and underwear. She didn’t need pants just to go out to the yard and go to sleep. Hell, she didn’t need to go out to the yard. Why was she even considering dragging her damp sleeping bag out to a damp tent, when she was standing in a dry house with eight empty bedrooms, two of them suites?

It was time to move in.

In silence, Ana cleaned away all evidence she had ever invaded her aunt’s bathroom and left, snapping the light off behind her.

It wasn’t night yet, but the light coming through the western window had that deep fiery glow that meant sunset wasn’t far off. It threw Ana’s shadow stark and black on the wall, deepening the purples and making the gold lotus-pattern on the wallpaper seem to leap out, luminous. She stood for a moment, feeling the air and the space around her, but if she had it in her to sleep in one of the house’s many rooms tonight, it wasn’t this one.

Ana made her way to the hall, watching her feet sink into the plush indigo carpet so she wouldn’t have to look at this empty room and remember it the way it was supposed to be, with Aunt Easter’s huge four-poster trimmed all around with curtains, books in the bookshelves, clothes in the closets, and Aunt Easter snuggled up with David against the pillows, reading…

She reached the door, turned left toward the room she’d had as a child—the room next to David’s —took one step and stopped. Her pants, the empty beer bottle, and her nine-hundred-dollar tablet hit the floor, unnoticed. Water trickled down her back like claws and drip, drip, dropped onto the wooden floor. It was the only movement, the only sounds.

At the far end of the hall, blocking the door to the attic stairs, sitting on a chair, was Plushtrap.

‘I threw him,’ she thought, but didn’t say it. She couldn’t talk, had no air. ‘Funny joke, asshole, I said and then I threw him. I wasn’t high. I wasn’t dreaming. Everything else really happened, so that part happened, too. I know that happened.’

He grinned at her, all torn gold satin and teeth.

After a long, thought-free moment, Ana started walking again. She did not run. She was calm.

Plushtrap did not try to get away. He was not alive. His eyes glittered as she came nearer, neither out of fear nor pleasure, but only because they were glass. He did not dart away when she reached him, did not attempt to avoid her hand when she seized him by the ears, did not resist as she carried him down the stairs and out the door, across the crushed gravel drive in her bare feet, straight to the dump trailer, and threw him in as hard as she could.

The trailer was empty at the moment. Plushtrap hit the far side with a muffled bang and bounced back, rolling over. A few notes of that strange song played, knocked loose by the impact. His mouth moved, not singing and not biting. Laughing at her.

Ana shut the trailer, tied it down, and went back inside. She locked the door for the first time since taking possession of the house. Until that moment, she’d never even looked at the lock, wasn’t
entirely sure there was one. She locked the door and then she just stood there, her hand still clutching the latch as if she were waiting to feel it joggle in her grip, being tested from the other side. That was crazy, of course. She could stand here all night, but she would never hear the pitter-patter of his little feet on the porch or feel the tremors of his little hand pulling at this latch.

She would just go upstairs and find him already back on his chair at the end of the hall.

The grandfather clock struck the hour, filling the hall and her head with the Westminster chimes. Each strike of the hammer on its hidden bell-plates echoed off the marble, filling the house with noise, wiping out all other thoughts. When it was done, the relative quiet fell over her like a blanket, suffocating at first, but gradually calming.

Ana leaned back into the door and somehow ended up sitting at the bottom. She listened to the pendulum tick, her own heartbeat slowing until they were in sync. She was fine. She was mis-remembering, that was all. Memory was far from infallible and her own was even less reliable than most. She’d been wakened too suddenly. The storm was disorienting. And it had startled her, seeing him there last night. Maybe she’d only thought about throwing it and then gotten distracted and between one thing and another…

Or maybe it had gotten up and climbed back onto its chair by itself. Funny joke, right? Funny, funny joke.

Ana wasn’t laughing.

Well, it was gone now. And if it showed up again, she’d set the fucking thing on fire and bury it with a stake through its heart and its mouth full of wolfsbane.

Ana pulled her day pack over onto her lap and hugged it hard. That helped. Finding the bottle of little pink pills in the side pocket helped even more, but she didn’t take any. She held the bottle tightly in one fist, staring up the stairs into nothing as the rooms to either side of her caught the last of the sun’s fire. She listened to the clock.

You’re fine, it told her, over and over. You’re fine.

Somewhere in the house, floorboards creaked. It was an old house, always settling, never still. It was not the sound of Plushtrap climbing in through the window and back onto its chair. There were no such things as ghosts. She could dry-swallow one of these pills in her hand—or two or even three—and go to sleep right here as the sun set and the dark closed in and she’d be fine.

Another board creaked.

Ana scrambled up and fled.
Chapter 5

CHAPTER FIVE

Bonnie saw neither the car turn in nor Ana’s truck go by. He was on stage when both these events occurred, strumming his way through the opening act of the eight-o’clock Wednesday set and counting down the seconds until he was free to go back into the West Hall and watch for her. The sun would set at 9:03 tonight, which meant he’d have to get back on stage for a whopping three minutes of Freddy’s monologue and then stay there nearly another hour, unless Freddy broke him out early, which of course he wouldn’t do. Freddy didn’t care if Ana came back or not. For most of the day, whenever his between-sets patrols brought him through the West Hall where Bonnie watched the road, Freddy’s only acknowledgement that he was even there was a sigh. As the day dragged on, he’d begun to add the occasional grunt or pat on the shoulder, but even these gestures were Freddy’s unspoken way of telling him not to get his hopes up.

It had nothing to do with hope. She’d said she’d be back tonight. She’d said so. She’d said she’d come for him, even if she had to dig him out, so she was coming.

And she wouldn’t have to do any digging. The stormwater had drained and the floors had mostly dried. The dining room was still wet, but even there, the flooding had subsided to one big puddle and half a dozen smaller ones, although it was all pretty slick. Bonnie had fallen once, too eager to get to the West Hall, and Freddy had used that as an excuse to order Chica not to come down for her off-stage acts. Because the floor was wet, as he’d felt the need to emphasize. He hadn’t mentioned Chica’s legs or Ana’s orders not to let her walk around. In fact, Freddy hadn’t mentioned Ana, directly or indirectly, all day. It was as if she’d ceased to exist the moment she slipped through the curtains and out of sight.

But Bonnie couldn’t stop thinking about her and the eight o’clock set was the perfect time to space out, since it was mostly Freddy’s magic act, followed by a short set of slower songs, where again, Freddy had center stage. At this time of night, the idea was to help kids wind down, not work them up, and Freddy’s growling baritone could turn almost anything into a lullaby. Bonnie had nothing to do but stand here and look pretty while his programming did all the turning, nodding, laughing, strumming and back-up singing for him. In twenty-two minutes, the set would end and he’d have a little time to watch for Ana before he’d have to get back onstage for those last three minutes, one more monologue, and one last long wait. Ana probably wouldn’t be here before it got dark anyway.

Lost in these thoughts, Bonnie never heard the car pull in. His first clue that anything was wrong was when Freddy abruptly stopped his act, right in the middle of pulling a ratty old silk-flower bouquet out of his hat. His head turned slowly, as if tracking the movement of a winged insect only he could see. His round ears swiveled slightly on their pins as he listened, picking up sounds that Bonnie, with his ears forward and aimed out into the dining room, could not hear. But there must have been something, all right, because Freddy folded the flowers up with a brisk tug through his fist and tucked them away in his wrist, then put his hat back on and said, “BE. STILL. BE. QUIET. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

The convulsion that took him when this command overrode his programmed routine was quick and almost painless. When it was over, Bonnie’s arms were locked in the playing position on his guitar, his ears flopped low over his shut eyes, listening as hard as he could to Freddy’s footsteps as he left the stage and then the room.
The minutes crawled by, quiet enough that Bonnie could hear all the little sounds that so often escaped his attention: his and Chica’s fans humming, the steady wheeze as hot air blew out through the joints and cracks of their casings, the slow plink-plink-plonk of water dripping, the wind on the roof…and then the car.

It came from the back of the building—a lighter engine than that of Ana’s truck, with a loose fan belt and squealing brakes—circled around to the front and slowly faded out of hearing, only to return a few minutes later. Bonnie tracked its slow progress as best he could without moving his ears, and when it reached the north side of the restaurant, it parked. Not good. Sure enough, a short time later, he heard car doors opening and shutting, then the indistinct clamor of voices, followed by the inevitable muted clunk of something heavy hitting one of the gymnasium’s windows.

It didn’t break. The tinted safety glass that made up the gymnasium wall made a tempting target for trespassers, but even if it wasn’t four inches of solid Lucite, it was still pretty durable by human standards. After a few more whacks with the rock or the crowbar or whatever they were using, they gave up.

But although the sound was not repeated, Bonnie doubted whoever was out there had just left. And sure enough, a few minutes later, he heard the loading dock door banging as they tried to raise it, then a pounding on the man-sized door beside it. When that lock also proved to have more muscle than they did, they moved on and once more, there was silence.

He waited, but he didn’t hear the noisy engine come on. He wasn’t sure what they were doing out there—they’d had enough time to have walked around the building by now—but they weren’t leaving. And they wouldn’t have to look too hard to find a way in, thanks to him.

The thought gave him a guilty twinge, but he felt worse about the fact that Ana wouldn’t come if she saw a car in the parking lot. After all, this wasn’t the first time someone had tried to break in and it wouldn’t be the last. There was nothing to do here and nothing left to steal. Odds were good, whoever was out there would come in, look around, maybe light their silly candles and try to summon up the ghost of Billy Blaylock, and then leave.

Freddy’s footsteps were coming back and with them, Foxy’s. No sooner had Bonnie recognized this—his hearing was terrible when the microphones were fixed in place like this—than he heard Foxy’s voice in a gruff rumble, too distant to make out words.

“I DON’T KNOW. BUT. THEY. WOULD. HAVE. LEFT. BY. NOW. IF. THEY. WEREN’T,” Freddy replied. “THEY’RE. COMING. IN. THEY. JUST. HAVE. TO. WORK. UP. TO. IT. FIRST.”

“That’s never a g-g-g—GREAT DAY TO BE A PIRATE—good sign,” Foxy said, closer now. “NO.”

“So where d-d-do ye want me?”

“THE. KITCHEN. FOR. NOW,” Freddy said with a grumble. “IF. THEY. GO. ANY. FURTHER. CIRCLE. AROUND. THROUGH. THE. BREAK. ROOM. WE’LL. CUT. THEM. OFF. AT. THE. PIG.”

“Easier to p-p-pick ‘em off before they get their bearings,” Foxy said. “They’ll rattle a few d-d-doors, all right, but they’ll c-c-come in by the West Hall.”

“I KNOW.”
“It ain’t-t-t too late for me to d-d-d—DOUBLOONS!—double back and wait for ‘em in the C-Cove. Once they’re all in, I c-c-come out and c-c-c—CUTTHROATS AND THIEVES—cut off their escape. Ye move in from here and-d-d we’ll meet in the middle and mop up the blood.”

“ONCE. THEY. SEE. US. MOVE. WE. HAVE. TO. K-K-KILL. THEM.” Freddy’s slow, dragging stride briefly turned to splashes as he navigated through the deepest remaining puddle. “I. WANT. TO. GIVE. THEM. THE.” A long pause. He settled on, “BEEN. A. FIT. OF. THE. OUT.”

“Rather g-give ‘em a slice up the middle and p-p-pitch ‘em in the p-p-pit,” Foxy remarked, already moving away at a light, easy run Bonnie genuinely envied. “They lost the rights to me d-d-doubts when they broke in. And d-d-don’t tell me Ana b-br-broke in. One thing ain’t-t-t nothing to the other.”

“IT. FEELS. THAT. WAY. SOMETIMES. DOESN’T. IT.” Freddy climbed the stairs to the stage and took up his place in the center. “BONNIE. CHICA. WAKE UP. BUT. DON’T. MOVE.”

Bonnie raised his head and turned his ears at once toward the West Hall, just in time to hear a man’s voice shout, “Guys! Over here!”

“I. SAID. DON’T. MOVE. WE. ARE. ANIMATRONICS. WE. ARE. BROKEN. BE. STILL.”

Bonnie resumed his shut-down posture, but kept his eyes open—just a slit, as if his eyelid-springs were loose—and his ears aimed backwards, listening. “LET’S GET THIS PARTY STARTED,” he said. He couldn’t do any better than that. According to his clock, the restaurant was still in operation and his speech restrictions were still in place, but at least he said it at his lowest volume and only through his speaker, not moving his jaw.

Freddy grunted, then said, “DOES. THAT. MEAN. THEY’RE. INSIDE.”

“YOU BET!”

“How. Many.”

He didn’t know, but the voice had said ‘guys,’ so three for sure. Bonnie held up three fingers, then rocked his hand back and forth in a gesture of uncertainty.

Freddy grunted, thinking. “ARE. THEY. LAUGHING?”

Bonnie knew why he asked, but God, when did laughter turn into a warning sign of the worst possible scenario? He shook his head slightly, then shrugged again, meaning no, not yet.

“All. RIGHT. WE’LL. TRY. TO. PLAY NICE. CHICA. IF. IT. GOES. BAD. TRY. NOT. TO. MOVE.”

“Okay, Freddy.”

“Bonnie.”

“I’m ready, Freddy.”

There were no more words. Freddy’s servos whirred as he raised his microphone and bent his head, and then all was quiet, except for the water dripping out of the ceiling.

It took a long time for whoever was out there to come in, long enough that they actually could have finished the eight o’clock set. In that time, they seemed to just stand around talking. One of them
was far chattier than the others, and although Bonnie couldn’t make out his exact words, the rhythms of his voice rose and fell in oddly familiar ways. He wasn’t sure quite what it reminded him of, though, just that it was something he’d heard before and had left a dark sort of stain in his memory.

But at long last, he heard them in the West Hall, where they stayed for seven long minutes, talking seriously among themselves. With only one door between them, and that one wedged partly open, Bonnie could make out three distinct voices, but only a few actual words. He had to see them before he finally understood who they were.

The first thing he saw was the microphone. Not one like Freddy’s, but the fuzzy kind carried on an adjustable stick. That microphone and the ominously familiar way the one voice had been talking outside was all Bonnie needed to know they were reporters. Everything else—the cameras, the equipment cases, the battery-powered lights—only made it more obvious, only they sure didn’t look like the reporters he’d seen before. And he’d seen plenty, here at the Grand Opening, and before that, at the closing of Circle Drive…and before that, at Mulholland, in 1987…and in 1984…and on and on and it went, back to the very beginning, tragedy by tragedy. Oh yes, Bonnie knew reporters, but even as he knew he was looking at some now, none of the other reporters he’d known had tried to break a window or kick in a door. Equipment notwithstanding, their overall attitude as they filed into the dining room was not that of men getting a story, but of boys breaking in. Bonnie knew that sort even better.

And there were four of them, he saw, not three. All were men, and, although Bonnie was terrible when it came to guessing ages once they hit their full height, they definitely weren’t kids. The oldest of them had a bit of grey in the dark beard he grew mostly on his thick neck, and even the youngest was well out of his teens, although he still had the enthusiasm of a kid.

“Holy shit, look at this place,” this specimen said, looking wide-eyed up at the stage. His was the voice Bonnie had heard outside, the frontman for their little group. He had dressed oddly for the occasion: hiking boots, khakis and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the top two buttons undone, showing off a turquoise-and-shell necklace. Fashion had changed a lot over the years, but that was not reporter-wear. In fact, throw in a fedora and an empty gunbelt and he could be any oversized kid dressing up like whatsisname, Bullwhip Jones. The other three wore t-shirts and jeans, none too clean or in especially good repair, which only made the first guy’s outfit stand out like an even sorer thumb. “I take back everything I said about you, Spence. This is amazing.”

One of the others, easily the biggest of the bunch, grinned without looking up from the wires he was untangling. “Told you.”

“You told me we were going to some old pizza parlor. I was thinking something like, I don’t know, some old Dominos. Look at those things! Everything’s wet and dark…it’s like a del Toro set! How’d you even know about this place?”

“Sub-Reddit. Creepy childhood memories and shit like that. This one guy spun some unbelievable bullshit about the mascots coming to life at night and eating people. Like, hundreds of people. Made it sound like the mascots were possessed by dead kids and the pizza parlor was haunted and the whole town was covering it up. Equal parts Child’s Play and The Shining with just a sprinkling of Deliverance. Obvious creepypasta is obvious, but someone else came on talking like the place at least was real, so I figured, why not? Who doesn’t want to take a road trip to the ass-end of Utah in the middle of summer, right?”

“Right.” The first guy took out his phone—a tiny little toy of a thing, like Ana’s, almost unrecognizable as a phone to Bonnie’s still outdated way of thinking—and aimed it around the
room, not for light, as Ana so often used her phone, but as if it were another camera. “So what exactly happened here?”

“Nothing, here.” The big guy finished separating wires and came over to apply them in some mythically futuristic way to the first guy, clipping something the size of a penny conspicuously to his collar and running the wire beneath his shirt and around to the back, into something that looked a little like a walkie-talkie. “Sound check?”

“Check, check. Spencer eats pussy one. Spencer eats pussy two.”

“Like a champ, brah. At least that’s what your mom says.” The big guy sent an inquisitive glance at a third guy, who had set up some equipment, including a folding chair and a folding computer, one half the size of the last portable computer Bonnie had seen. “We good?”

“Not…sure,” the third guy said, squinting at the monitor. “There’s some background noise.”

“Probably the wind.”

“No, I see the wind. This is something else. I don’t know…could be air in the vents, but it sure looks mechanical.” His gaze shifted and surprise washed over his face in the blue light of the computer. “Or maybe a server tower’s on somewhere. You’re not going to believe this, but we’ve got wifi.”

“No fucking way.”

“I’m looking right at it. Hidden network, no name, but it’s unlocked.”

“Who the hell sets up a hidden network and doesn’t password it?”

“Is there power?”

The men looked at each other, before the fourth guy, silent all this while, heaved a sigh and took one of his lights over to the nearest outlet. He plugged it in, flicked the switch a few times, then unplugged it. “No,” he said.

“Well…whatever, we don’t need it. Everything looks creepier in the dark,” the big guy declared. “You good to go, Bryce?”

“Yeah, yeah. I can clean it up in post, I guess.”

“Bob?”

The fourth guy, now setting up tripods around the room and switching on battery-powered lamps, said, “What?”

“You ready?”

“Dude, do I look ready?”

“Bob needs a minute,” the first guy concluded, turning back to the big one. “So what is the deal here? We just drove ten hours across Buttfuck, Nowhere, to a place where nothing happened? You know I hate having to make shit up on the fly. I always get called out on it, Spence, always. I’m a terrible liar.”

“Shouldn’t be in the ghost-hunting business then.”
“I’m too pretty to do x-sports and too straight to strip. I had no choice.”

“But that isn’t what I said,” the big guy went on. “I said, nothing happened here. This is, like, a local franchise. There were three or maybe four other places in town, the keywords there being ‘in town.’ There’s no way we’re getting in there without getting a visit from the local tin star, so the way I figure it, we shoot here, tonight, before anyone even knows we’re in town. Tomorrow, we get some establishing shots at the real site on our burner cameras until Johnny Law shows up, at which point we politely ask for access and he politely throws our collective butts out of town. That way, we not only got footage of the interior, which for all any of our viewers knows, is the interior at the other site, but we also got a cop giving us the sauce and confiscating our gear. That’s street cred, man. Bonus ducks for police brutality.”

“But something happened?” the first guy pressed. “There were actual documented events?”

“Oh yeah, no doubt. Way back in ’93, over the course of just a few days, some guy by the name of Reardon lured five kids out of the restaurant and killed them. The bodies were never found, so the full extent of the gory details are unknown. I sent you all the links before we left,” he added with a frown. “Didn’t you look at them?”

“I didn’t have time.”

“We were planning this for a week.”

“I was with Jennifer.”

“He was with Jennifer. Look, man, you got to decide,” said the big guy, unaware that the decisions had all been made. “Do you want to get famous or do you want to get laid?”

“Uh…both?”

“I’m pretty up on the serial killer celebrity A-list,” the sound guy remarked. “And I never heard about any of this. Are you sure it really happened or is it just some urban legend that got built up around those freaky fucking things?”

All the men looked over at the main stage.

“You know, that’s the weirdest part of all,” the big guy said. “Those things don’t even byline in the media, when logic would dictate they’d be the stars. All the newsfeeds just refer to ‘a local pizza parlor’. It was the Reddit guys who mentioned the mascot angle. Five minutes ago, I’d have told you they had to be made up, but wow, there they are.”

“There they are,” agreed the first guy, clapping his hands and rubbing them together like a cartoon caricature of an evil plot in the masterminding. “And everybody in the world is going to know they exist by tomorrow. I am going to put this place, that face, and this whole damn town back on the map.”

And if there was ever any doubt, there it ended.

Freddy’s fans revved slightly. Across the room, the sound guy squinted and leaned toward his monitor, tapping at his keyboard.

“Okay, so we got the usual toys. We’re going to do an infrared sweep and some EVP sessions—that reminds me. Bryce, when you dub in the voices, get a real kid. Preferably a little girl. Girls are creepy.”
“Dude, I hate bringing in outside talent. That shit comes back on you.”

“We can’t keep using our own voices,” the big guy countered. “That shit comes back on you too. What else have we got in the toybox, Bob?”

The quiet man made a last adjustment to his lights, then picked up a black equipment bag and unzipped it, laying out its contents one by one: a few cans of spray paint, a number of half-melted candles, the skull of a deer or goat or some similar animal, and a board game.

“Right, so here’s the action plan, boys. Me and Bob are going to poke around and Satan up the joint. While we’re doing that, you and Bryce clear a path into the gym, because I am not leaving without a shot of that place. After that, start shooting the EVP shit, but stay out of the back. I don’t want a repeat of the Scio Mill fiasco. That’s nice and creepy—” He pointed in at the gift shop. “—or you can frame something with the cat or…or the dragon? What is that? Swampy G—oh, it’s an alligator. Whatever, it’s fine, just save the band for the big reveal.” He turned, framing the main stage with his fingers. “I want the outro here. Make sure you keep the bear in the shot the whole time. I like the way his eyes are open. Looks like he’s looking at us. What do you think, Bob?”

“Looks fake.”

The other three men looked at Bob, then at the stage.

“No way they’d still be standing. No way they’d still be here at all,” the quiet man said with a shrug, “but double no way they’d still be standing. Looks fake, like you planted ‘em.”

“You got a point,” the big guy said after a moment, then headed for the stage. “Okay, I’m going to tip the chicken over, see if it looks more convincing.”

Chica’s fan revved, but the men were talking, oblivious.

“Not the chicken,” the front man said pleadingly. “I like that one. That hole with the teeth? Creepy as fuck!”

“Has to be the chicken,” the big guy said. “The rabbit’s all Donnie Darko with that fucked up face.”

“Tip the bear.”

“I’m not tipping the bear. The bear’s the actual Freddy Fazbear.”

“So?”

“So it’d be like if this were McDonald’s and you wanted to tip Ronald over and film the fucking Grimace. Look, man,” he said, mounting the stairs and turning around to spread his arms in a gesture of bureaucratic helplessness. “How about we tip the chicken and twist the head around so you can still get the face in the shot? Or I could pull it off and put it somewhere for you to find in the sweep?”

Small servos whined as Chica opened her eyes and just as quickly closed them. Her feathers quivered as she tried to stay still while the men debated the merits of her dismemberment.

“Do they come off?” the front man asked doubtfully as Freddy’s fingers flexed on his microphone. Bonnie could all but feel the effort it must be taking him not to let the Toreador March sound.

“Cuz, yeah, that would be cool. I’m down with the headless chicken.”
“I am totally taking that rabbit’s head home,” the quiet man interjected, then visibly blanched when Bonnie looked at him. “Whoa…guys?”

“Of course they come off,” the big guy was saying, moving to Chica. “If you’d looked at those fucking links I sent you instead of humping Jennifer’s leg all week, you’d have the read the part about Reardon luring those kids away by dressing up like a mascot. If he could do that, obviously, they come apart. Watch.”

With that, he reached up and gripped Chica’s head.

Chica jerked, then reached up and grabbed his. Her eyes opened, not full black, but not far from it. “I’M HUNGRY,” she chirped. “LET’S EAT.”

Before anyone could react, she twisted. There was a wet crunch and a muffled pop as the neck broke, but she kept twisting, tearing muscle and snapping tendons until it was skin alone holding him together, and skin just couldn’t do that. The first split appeared somewhere in that scruffy beard, but it was hard to know just where, because in the next instant, his neck seemed to just unzip, unleashing a great gush of blood and a few frothy bubbles that were the dead man’s first, last and only scream.

The man’s bulky body snapped its last red tether and fell to the stage and, as if released from a paralytic spell, his friends scattered. Chica held the head only long enough to know where they were going, then threw it. Her legs weren’t much good these days, as they all knew, but Chica spent most of her nights in the arcade, and she could sink a skee-ball from over her shoulder and out in the hall. The head flew across the room and scored a dead hit on the quiet man’s own head as he ran for the West Hall, the only one of them to actually go for an open door. The other two bolted blindly deeper into the building.

So much for waiting for Freddy’s signal, although to be fair, Bonnie couldn’t have held still while one of these meatsacks pulled his head off either. And Freddy was only waiting until he could be sure he’d get all four of them together. Bonnie didn’t understand everything they’d said, but he knew damn well that once the cameras came out, there was no letting them leave.

“FOXY,” Freddy boomed, heading for the stage stairs. “THEY’RE. RUNNING.”

“On it,” Foxy growled, dashing out of the kitchen, leaping over the headless body and the second sprawl of a man that might be dead or only unconscious. He banged through the door and into the West Hall, gone in a moment. Foxy was fast.

Bonnie wasn’t as slow as he had been, but he still couldn’t manage much better than an ungainly lurch as he got off the stage and headed for the kitchen. Freddy was already limping off down the East Hall, but there was no sense in following him. If the two running men hooked right at the signpost, they’d either corner themselves in one of the restaurant’s many entertainment rooms, or they’d loop back through the security office and the break room to the back store room. If they hooked left, they’d meet Foxy in the Cove. If they doubled back, they’d hit Freddy. It was all over but the—

“HI BONNIE!” Chica chirped suddenly, so loud her speakers hummed.

There was a rapid splash of footsteps, a scraping sound, and Bonnie turned awkwardly around in time to see the quiet man seize a table and run it across the floor, pushing it like a battering ram.

It hit like one too, knocking Bonnie clean off his feet. He flew back through the kitchen doorway and slammed into the oven, a bunny-shaped hammer on a giant gong, before dropping with a back-
cracking crash to the tiles. The damage was negligible, to him anyway, but getting up was a bitch and while he struggled with it, there was the quiet man, now shouting unintelligibly with panicked bravado as he fumbled through his equipment, looking for a weapon to finish the job.

The Toreador March, playing loud, playing fast, and coming closer. Freddy had heard the commotion and was coming back.

The quiet man, already growing hoarse, finally snatched up one of the tripods and swung around, but he was too late. There was Freddy, slapping the ridiculous weapon away with one hand, balling the other into a fist. The quiet man tried once more to scream, but never got past the inhale before Freddy’s fist hit him, stoving in his entire face and buckling out the back of his skull.

So that was two down, and right on cue, here came the other two, tumbling like puppies through the door at the other end of the kitchen, seeing Bonnie on his back. They must have known Foxy was after them, because they kept coming anyway, hugging the wall, keeping the oven between them and making a dash for the door, only to meet Freddy immediately on the other side.

Freddy snatched at both, but his left arm wasn’t very responsive these days. He missed one, caught the other, crushed his throat and threw him to the ground to die, then came over to help Bonnie up, trusting Foxy to run the other one down. Bonnie couldn’t see it with Freddy leaning over him, but he heard enough. The distinctive scrape of Foxy pulling his cutlass from its sheath. The equally unique sound of that sword punching into flesh, through bone, and out again. The sword, scraping again as it was sheathed. The splashing as the dead man kept trying to run, not yet understanding it was over. The gurgling scream of realization. The thud. The crying.

“Ye all right-t-t, lass? I heard-d-d ye holler. Were ye hit?”

“HI BONNIE!” Chica said urgently.

“HI CHICA,” Bonnie said, trying to force his ears up so he wouldn’t broadcast his embarrassment at having to be picked up and practically carried out of the kitchen on Freddy’s arm like his fucking prom date. “I’M FINE. HOW ARE YOU?”

“She be fine, no thanks t-t-to ye, bucko,” snapped Foxy. “Next time, make sure he’s d-d-d—DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES—dead before ye turn yer back on him.”

‘Oh sure, like I meant to get sucker-punched with a fucking table and go turtle-up on the kitchen floor,’ thought Bonnie, but he wasn’t free to say it. “YOU DON’T SAY,” he snapped instead, pointing at the man still thrashing and sobbing his way across the floor with one hand pressed to his stomach where his life drained out.

Foxy looked back, rolled his eyes, and stomped over to end it with a hook to the head. “He were d-dead,” he grumbled, trying to shake the body off. Every swing of his arm just made the corpse twitch. “He were just-t-t making noise.”

“SURE.”

“DON’T FIGHT,” pleaded Chica, her eyelids at hopeless angles.

“We ain’t fighting. We’re just-t-t chatting, friendly-like, about Bon’s c-c-complete bloody uselessness.” Foxy shook his arm harder, wrenching it side to side and making the corpse slither in place like a fat, ungainly snake. “Coo, yer stuck on good, ain’t-t-t ye?”

“NEED A HAND?”
“Oh, g-grow a dick and fuck yerself, Bonnie.”

Freddy grunted, holding up one hand to stop the argument, and when that failed to stop either one of them, closed his hand as if to cup his muzzle in frustration, and flipped them both off.

Bonnie gaped at him, ears straight up and quivering a little in astonishment. So did Foxy. And so did Freddy, staring open-mouthed at his own hand as if he’d never seen it before.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?” Chica asked.

“I DON’T KNOW.” Freddy opened his fist, then closed it again. His middle finger stayed extended. He frowned, gave it a brisk shake, and tried again. Still the bird.

He was not all right.

With a scowling glance at the faceless body on the floor, Freddy opened the casing on the back of his hand and prodded at the delicate machinery within. The Toreador March began to play, note by note, like the steady stream of curses surely running through Freddy’s mind. This was his right hand, his good hand. He couldn’t lose them both.

“When you make a mess, clean it up,” said Chica, tapping her bloody fingers together. “Don’t do it later, do it now. Then you’ll have a happy house.”


“Why is this always-ways my job?” Foxy groused, stepping on the corpse to yank his hook out of its skull before turning it roughly over to check its pockets.

“Because. You. Fit. In. The.” Freddy clicked impatiently through a few files as he continued picking at the back of his hand with his huge, blunt finger, less suited to the task than an actual bear would be. “Chair.”

“Ye c-c-calling me the runt o’ the litter?”

‘If the teeny tiny shoe fits,’ thought Bonnie, but it was still too soon, so all he could say was, “You Bet!”

“Bonnie,” said Freddy with distracted disapproval, flexing his fingers one at a time. The middle one was still stuck.

“What I lacks in height-t-t, I more’n make up-p-p for in length, bucko.”

“Foxy.”

“Don’t fight,” Chica said again. “Please.”

“We ain’t-t-t-t fighting,” Foxy protested. “Ye’ll know when we st-st-start, on account o’ how Bon’ll be-e-eeeeeee on the ground.”

“It’s fun to play pretend, isn’t it?”


“Be nice,” Chica pleaded.
“I am nice,” Foxy said, stabbing his hook into another body to pull it and its pockets closer. “I just-t-t happen to be better when it comes to a fight-t-t, luv. That ain’t but a fact-t-t. Never saw the p-p—POINT O’ ME SWORD—point o’ false modesty. Always do what-t-t yer best at, I says.”

Bonnie did not answer. The microphones imbedded in his ears had picked up a new sound, one he thought he recognized. His own joints scraping briefly drowned out all other noise as he turned his ears, then his head, but once he stopped moving, the sound was unmistakable. Another engine, heavy, not quiet but well-maintained.

‘That’s Ana’s truck,’ he tried to say, but of course, he couldn’t. He twitched.

Whether it was the spasm or his silence, Freddy finally looked up from his hand, then straightened, turning his own ears in alignment with Bonnie’s.

“What’s wrong?” Chica asked.

Freddy grunted, attracting Foxy’s attention, who stopped rifling the bodies at once to tip his own damaged ears in the direction of the road.

The vehicle slowed briefly and the sound of its engines changed pitch. It had turned in.


‘That’s Ana!’ Bonnie shouted silently. Mute, frustrated, he slapped his chest, then ran his finger over it as if drawing mountain peaks or a heartbeat or just maybe three letters: A-N-A. He had to do it twice before Foxy suddenly said, “He’s saying it be Ana.”

There was a moment of shared stillness, then all three of the others turned in different directions to look at different things—Freddy at Bonnie, Foxy at the headless corpse onstage, and Chica at the slick of blood presently pouring out of the bodies down Freddy’s back and onto the floor. A moment later and they all did it again, like shadowbox figures in perfect sync, only now Foxy was looking at Bonnie, Chica at the stage and Freddy at himself.

The engines got louder, closer…and then shut off.

“I. Am. Open. To. Suggestions,” said Freddy, still staring at his chest.

“Where’s their c-c—Cargo—car?” Foxy asked urgently.

Bonnie pointed at the gymnasium.

“So she ain’t-t-t seen it. Right. Give ‘em here.” Foxy took the bodies, pinning the awkward bundle they made to his considerably smaller frame with the help of his hook, and headed for the kitchen and the loading dock beyond it. “Fred, g-g-grab the big’un there and meet me at the car. Don’t forget the bleeding head-d-d! Chica, luv, clean up and g-g-get on the mopping.”

“Okay!”

“Not. Chica,” said Freddy.
Foxy turned awkwardly, waving his good hand toward the dining room and past it, down the West Hall to the side door and on out, where they could all now hear the distinctive sounds of the truck’s doors opening and slamming. “I can’t start the bloody thing where it is, Fred! She’ll hear it! Ye’ve got-t-t to push me to the edge o’ the lot. And if she d-d-don’t see Bon, she’ll go looking—FOR ADVENTURE!—for him, so it’s got to be Chica!”

“I CAN DO IT!” said Chica anxiously. “I CAN HELP!”

“Aye, plenty o’ water around here. D-D-Dip yer feathers and get scrubbing! It don’t-t-t need to be spotless, it just-t-t can’t look like the Purple Man’s fucking p-p-playhouse! Bon, for the love o’ G-G-G—GUNPOWDER AND GOLD—stall her!”

Bonnie lurched into motion, almost running, unwise as that was on the slick floors of the dining room, but when he burst through the door into the West Hall, she wasn’t even there. He limped quickly down the hall and checked the door, but her truck seemed empty and the parking lot was still. He started to open the door, only to hear her voice behind him, muted by distance:

“Hello? Captain? Anyone in there?”

Pirate Cove.

Bonnie turned too fast—damn leg; it was so much better since she’d tinkered on it, but that swiveling motion was a killer—and watched with dismay as his internal systems lit up red for the second time that night before he tipped and crashed onto the floor at Tux’s feet.

If he’d known how well that would work, he would have done it on purpose. As it was, she was at his side before he’d even managed to kick himself over to the wall.

She bent over him, her brilliant eyes wide and flooded with concern, and never mind the blood in the other hall or the bodies or the car Foxy was probably even now putting into neutral and pushing away, when Bonnie looked into those eyes, nothing else mattered.

“HI THERE!” he blatted. “I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY, BONNIE THE BUNNY!”

“Are you okay?”

He nodded, trying to project an aura of suave confidence from the floor. “WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE KIND OF PIZZA? MINE’S PEPPERONI AND EXTRA CHEESE.”

“I’ll get Freddy.”

“NO!” He caught her hand before she could jump up and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “I CAN DO IT!”

“You sure?”

“IT’S TIME TO ROCK!” He released her hand, braced it on the wall, and dragged his bad leg up. With his weight balanced between his good leg and his arms, he managed, with only a little awkwardness, to stand. Only now that they were both on their feet did he notice what he had somehow failed to see before; once again, she was dressed in a t-shirt and underwear and not a stitch more. “WHAT’S WRONG?”

“What?” She looked at her bare legs and let out a high, warbling sort of laugh. “Oh jeez, not again. It’s been a long day,” she told him. “Hang on. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”
“OKAY.”

She ducked back through the broken part of the door and returned to her truck. Behind the imperfect cover of the open passenger door, she pulled a pair of jeans from her duffel bag and climbed into them. When she came back to the restaurant, she brought the duffel bag with her.

Staying the night? Bonnie’s heart couldn’t skip a beat, but his ears perked up involuntarily. “HI THERE!” he said, holding the boards to one side while she climbed through. “WELCOME TO FREDDY FAZBEAR’S PIZZERIA! IT’S GREAT TO SEE YOU AGAIN! I MISSED YOU.”

“I was gone less than a minute, Bon. Calm your tits.”

She said it wearily, not with rancor, but still he blinked. Cautiously, not that his tone conveyed it, he said, “HOW’S IT GOING?”

She laughed again, that same laugh. “I’ve been better, my man. Sorry, I don’t mean to take it out on you, but…you just have no idea the day I’ve had.”

“That’s so interesting. Tell me more.”

“Yeah, right.” She looked at him, then sighed and said, “Sure, why not? Where to start? Well, there was the whole misadventure this morning, you were there for that. Also, my boss is just a huge creep as well as a fucking coward, and he still won’t come right out and make a pass at me, but he won’t stop staring at my tits either. I swear to God, I’m tempted to come on to him just to get the ball rolling. And I bought him doughnuts and everything. After that, I had work, which wasn’t even my work but someone else’s work, and there were all these ducklings and they wanted to touch, like, fucking everything. It was a simple job, but I didn’t get it done, thanks to the ducklings, and then I had to go home to do arts and fucking crafts. I took a bath, but my internet sucks and I can’t find parts anywhere, plus my sleeping bag is still wet and my aunt’s wallpaper needs to come off, and Plushtrap.”

She stopped talking, her voice gone suddenly small right there at the end, as if choked off by an invisible hand. Her head turned. She looked at Tux for a long time without expression, then took a breath, made a smile, and looked at him again. “So how are things here?” she asked, waving vaguely toward the corridor behind him. “Foxy’s not talking to me.”

Bonnie, triggered, twitched hard and spat out a guffawing laugh. “OH, YOU WON’T FIND CAPTAIN FOX HERE, LITTLE FRIEND! HE’S DOWN IN PIRATE COVE. WANT ME TO SHOW YOU?”

“I really kind of wanted all you guys to stay in the Cove.”

“GOSH, I WISH I COULD GO WITH YOU, LITTLE FRIEND, BUT IT’S PIRATES ONLY IN PIRATE COVE! NO BONNIES ALLOWED!”

“Yeah, I knew that was too much to hope for. The show must go on, right?”

He twitched and his vision briefly darkened as his program performed a time-check and simultaneously logged all the errors associated with it being after sundown but before his free-mode engaged, and still being off the stage and chatting up a guest. He did not go black, but he lit right the fuck up with exception after exception, so that his joints sagged, his eyes flickered and his voice slowed and skipped and washed out with static. “THE NEXT…SHOW…STARTS IN-IN-IN…EIGHT HUNDRED…THIRTY-EIGHT MINUTES.”

She nodded, shook her head, and looked at Tux some more while Bonnie’s silent self-
recriminations ran their course.

“How’s Chica?” she asked finally.

He laughed again, jerking harder the more he tried to stop the stupid hackneyed heehaws puking out of him. “LET’S HEAR IT FOR CHICA THE CHICKEN! SHE’S IN THE KITCHEN RIGHT NOW, TRYING OUT HER NEW SECRET RECIPE, BUT SHE’LL BE BACK ON STAGE BEFORE YOU KNOW IT!” he said, hoping like hell it was true.

“But she’s okay? Still walking? Like I could do anything about it if she wasn’t,” she sighed. “What am I doing here, Bon? I shouldn’t have come back until I knew I could do something for her or at least try. I’m going to walk in there and she’ll look at me and think I’ve come to fix her, and what am I supposed to tell her?”

“IT’S OKAY.”

“It’s not okay!” she said sharply. “God! I know this is a kid’s place, and you’re programmed to shovel that happy shit around, but even kids know everything is not okay all the fucking time!”

The anger poured out of her and away, leaving her weaving slightly on her feet, small and unhappy…and frightened.

“What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“Nothing. I’m fine.” She laughed one more time, just a breath really, with no strength behind it and only a pale shade of humor. “Clearly, the fact that I broke in two nights in a damn row half-naked ought to prove I’m not fine.”

“What’s wrong?” he insisted, reaching for her hand.

She stepped back before he could touch her. “Nothing. I haven’t slept, that’s all. I’m tired. It’s making me see and hear things that aren’t there and…and say things I don’t mean.” She dropped her gaze again and flexed her naked toes. “And do things I shouldn’t do.”

Bonnie’s mics picked up the sound of an engine turning over, not too close. Clearly, Foxy had pushed the car to the end of the lot and was even now driving it down the steep access road and from there, off onto the hardpan and away to the quarry with its bloody cargo in the trunk. Ana did not react at all, too deep in her own head to hear it. Or maybe she wouldn’t have heard it anyway. He really had no idea what human hearing was like.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she was saying now as the sound of the car receded to a distant hum and then nothing. “Don’t ever tell Freddy I said so. I just…I don’t have anywhere else to go.” She tried to laugh and couldn’t. “I’m so tired. Part of me knows everything will go away if I just get some damn sleep, but the rest of me…knows…he’s there. At the end of the hall. Sitting in his chair. Don’t tell me how stupid that is, because I know, all right?” she said in a sudden, angry rush. It left her just as swiftly, taking the last of her strength with her. Her shoulders fell. She reached out one shaking hand and touched Tux’s grinning muzzle, squeezing the hard plastic until her knuckles were white. “I know,” she said again, almost whispering it. “I don’t need you to tell me what’s real and what’s not. I know. I just…” She peeked at him and away, blushing slightly, ashamed. “I need a friend tonight.”

He triggered.

“Oh God, not now,’ he thought, fighting it, but as hard as he fought, his mouth opened for one of those hyucking laughs and out came, “I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY, BONNIE THE BUNNY!
LET’S BE FRIENDS!”

“Please. Please just talk to me.”

He fought, static spitting out from his speakers, and sang, “SAY PLEASE AND THANK YOU, BE POLITE! SHARE YOUR TOYS AND NEVER FIGHT!”

“Please, Bonnie.” She reached for him, her fingers trembling in the air.

And he said, “HI THERE! I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY, BONNIE THE BUNNY! LET’S BE FRIENDS!”

Her eyes shut, squeezing out one tear to make its way in silence down her cheek. She wiped it away before it reached her chin, then turned without speaking and ducked back out under the boards.

No.

“COME BACK SOON!” called Bonnie, so cheerfully, as he grabbed the push-bar of the door and shook it, rattling the chain and banging against the boards outside. She heard, she must have heard, but she kept going. “HI THERE! I’M YOUR B-B-BEST BUDDY! BONNIE! THE BUNNY! DON’T LEAVE YET! THE FUN’S JUST STARTING-ING! STAY AND PLAY! OKAY? LET’S ROCK!”

She climbed back up into her truck, hunched over the wheel for a short storm of shaking, silent tears even his ears couldn’t catch, then wiped her eyes, started the engine, and drove away.

Bonnie backed up, shaking his head and laughing his hyucking laugh, the sound looping and looping, getting louder the harder he tried to shut it off, until he turned with a screech of wordless feedback and punched Tux in his big stupid smiling face. The cat’s plastic head exploded around his fist, the larger pieces flying off into the wall while the smaller ones flew back into Bonnie’s chest. He stood for a while longer, staring into Tux’s eyes—now staring back at him from the opposite ends of the largest of the three T-shaped metal arms that was the animatronic’s sorry excuse for an endoskeleton—then turned away and trudged back down the hall to the dining room.

Onstage, Chica waved at him, watching the door to the West Hall after Bonnie let it shut behind him, tapping her fingertips as she waited. She’d splashed enough water around on the places that mattered that one never would have known there’d been four dead men here just minutes ago, then moved the table close to the stage, where Ana had moved it the night she’d put Bonnie’s face back on. She’d also laid out those items she thought Ana might need: a ladle from the kitchen, a pizza tray, a garbage bag and, for reasons only another Chica could have understood, a party hat.

Without a word—words were not his friend tonight—Bonnie picked the table up and put it back against the far wall, then sat on the edge of the stage and just looked at his reflection in the wet floor.

After a moment, Chica shuffled over and touched his shoulder.

He shrugged it off. Eventually, she quit trying and went back to her corner of the stage.

The tip-tip-tap of her fingers kept the time as it passed until Bonnie’s mics picked up the low rumble of Freddy’s voice outside, followed by Foxy’s terse reply. The loading dock door rattled loudly, stopped, then rattled quietly, shutting with a clunk and not a bang. The muffled drag of Freddy’s footsteps and the swift, hard smack of Foxy’s metal feet on the tiles crossed the kitchen together, but even when the light of their eyes hit Bonnie and then swept the empty dining room, he
couldn’t bring himself to look up.

“Oi, Ana!” Foxy called. “Where ye at-t-t, lass?”

No answer.

Bonnie sat.

Freddy moved out of the kitchen doorway, across the room and into the West Hall. He wasn’t there long. He wouldn’t have had to go all the way to the end of the hall, just to the first wide place between the boards, to see that Ana’s truck wasn’t there. Maybe all he had to see was Tux. In any event, he was back soon, standing with one paw braced on the open door as he studied Bonnie, as if he hadn’t yet decided whether to come in or stay out. “WHAT HAPPENED?” he asked finally.

Bonnie looked at him.

Freddy’s eyes flickered, perhaps checking his own internal clock. He said, “TELL ME. WHAT HAPPENED? THAT’S AN ORDER.”

The contradiction in his programming stabbed in, twisted, and died away. Freddy’s orders superseded all rules but the Purple Man’s own, and whether Bonnie wanted to answer or not, now he had to.

Looking back at the ghost of his face in the floor, Bonnie said, “She went-t-t home.”

“Already?” Foxy took two steps toward the West Hall himself, then swung around and glared at Bonnie, ears flat and all his teeth bared. “I said-d-d stall her, not turn her out! Don’t ye shake yer head-d-d at me,” he snapped at Chica. “She didn’t c-c-come here to b-b-borrow a cup o’ corn flakes! She came, he d-d-did something, and now she’s g-g-g—GONE TO THE DEPTHS! I d-d-didn’t even get-t-t to clap eyes on her!”

“FOXY,” said Freddy, frowning. “BE. CALM.”

“No, I won’t and p-p-piss on yer c-c-calm, mate! I only ran across the bleeding d-d-desert, didn’t I? Ye ain’t-t-t the only one here, ye selfish son of a—SEA BISCUIT! Ye ain’t-t-t the only one who wants to see another face or hear a b-b-bleeding voice in this godforsaken hellhole! Ye d-d-don’t get to keep her in a…a pumpkin shell like the farmer’s wandering wi-wi-wi—WIRED TO THE RETICULARSPINAL TRACT.”

Foxy grabbed at his snout, apparently forgetting which was his hand and which his hook, as he gouged himself a new hole with the wrong one. His ears, already flat, tilted to that small angle that made all the difference between anger and apprehension.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?” Chica asked.

Foxy did not move for perhaps half a minute, not even to blink. Slowly, he pulled his hook from his muzzle and reached up with his hand to grip his throat. “Aye,” he said distantly, quietly. “Aye, lass, all’s well. Just-t-t a wee glitch. No more’n a flea-bite.”

“BONNIE,” Freddy said at last. “WHAT HAPPENED?”

It wasn’t an order this time. He could have kept quiet. He wanted to. But in the wake of Foxy’s ‘wee glitch,’ silence was petty, and under Freddy’s stare, a lie would have been impossible. He heaved a sigh through his fans and said, “She told-d-d me she didn’t want-t-t to be alone tonight. And I tried-d-d. I tried so hard-d-d. But I couldn’t help it.” He looked up, his eyes meeting Foxy’s.
“I told-d-d her she was.” His gaze dropped again. He shrugged. “So she went-t-t home. Sorry you d-d-didn’t get to see her.”

Foxy scowled, then rolled his eyes and started to make some awkward reply.

“No, I mean it,” Bonnie interrupted, no louder and with no more feeling, at least not out where it could be seen or heard. “I am just so, so fucking-ing-ing sorry. Because there’s irony here and the irony-y-y is, you are the only one of us who could have t-t-talked to her in anything like a normal w-w—WAY TO GO—way. B-B-But—” He shrugged again. “—you’re also the only one who could-d-d fit in the car. So you were th-th-there. And I was here. Telling-ing-ing her it was TIME TO ROCK when she was telling me she need-d-ded me. So, yeah.” Bonnie got up and headed for the kitchen, saying, “Come on, Freddy-dy-dy.”

Freddy followed at a wary distance, obviously thinking they were going outside right up until Bonnie stopped at the freezer. “WHAT IS THIS?” he asked, catching the door as Bonnie opened it.

“I’m going-ing-ing black.” Bonnie shrugged and laughed—his normal laugh, then his hyucking stage laugh, and his normal one again. “I’M OKAY right-t-t FOOT IN—now, but I c-c-can feel it happening-ing-ing. I k-k-kind of want-t-t—TO ROCK—want it to happen. I d-d-don’t want to be here t-t-tonight. T-T-Tell you the truth…” He stood for a while, trying to hold it together long enough to get it all out, and when he thought he had it, he turned around and looked at Freddy through a growing haze of darkness. “…I’m not-t-t sure I want-t-t to keep doing-ing-ing this at all.”

“BONNIE—”

“Someday, I’m g-g-g—GOING ON A BEAR HUNT—going to ask-k-k you for a b-b-big favor,” Bonnie interrupted, not loudly. “Not-t-t tonight, but some-d-d-day. You’ll d-d-do it, won’t-t-t you?”

Freddy did not answer.

“I need-d-d this,” Bonnie said through waves of static. He could barely see Freddy at all now. He was just a shape with two pale lights in the general area of a face. “I need t-t-to know this won’t-t-t last forever. I need-d-d to know you’ll st—STOP LOOK AND LISTEN—stop it when I say it’s t-t-t—TIME TO ROCK—time to stop-p-p.”

Wordlessly, Freddy opened the freezer door wide and watched with brooding eyes as Bonnie put himself inside.

The door shut, locking him in absolute darkness.

Bonnie switched on his eyes until those lights went out too.

He went black and that, blessedly, was all he knew.
Chapter 6

CHAPTER SIX

Ana slept that night in the cab of her truck with the doors locked, but when her phone’s alarm went off at five, her second thought—after ‘Where the hell am I?’—was a mental sigh of mingled exasperation and embarrassment. She got up and yes, okay, she went immediately to the dump trailer to check on Plushtrap, but he was still there and she only felt sillier for having to look. The events of the previous day were still blurry for the moment, but by the time she was out of the shower, she had come all the way awake and brought her memory back into sharp focus.

Oddly, it was the bit at Freddy’s that bothered her the most, and not the bit at the gas station. Poor Bonnie. She could still hear the sounds he’d made as she left—that laughing, screaming, staticky sound as he begged her to come back the only way he could, while the restaurant was still ‘open’ and his…how did he put it? His speech restrictions were still set too high, or something like that. But it had all worked out for the best; if she’d spent the night at Freddy’s, she’d be busting her ass right now trying get back here in time to get herself ready for work. And after all, Bonnie was fine. It was Chica who’d been waiting on her broken promises all night.

After a healthy breakfast of coffee and a Snickers bar, Ana loaded up the decoupaged ducks and headed to work. The morning meeting was brief and then it was off to the daycare center. Mrs. Pickett was again waiting for her, but with eager anticipation this time. She had already been inside and spent several minutes exclaiming over the work Ana had already done, but when she saw the ducks with the kids’ art lacquered onto them, she actually squealed, so Ana guessed they must look all right. If this wasn’t enough to let Ana know how happy she was, the lunch she left behind at the tiny table consisted of a crustless peanut butter and banana sandwich cut into triangles, two sugar cookies, and a half-pint carton of chocolate milk—a definite upgrade from the previous day.

Ana nibbled throughout the morning as she worked, but without interruptions and with a good night’s sleep, she was done by noon. After a thorough clean-up, she loaded up her shit and went back to the office. No one was there at the moment, so after topping off her thermos with cold coffee and updating the workboard with Job Complete (next to Wyborn, Wright and Hageman’s names; her own was still down as unassigned), she drove off to the lot where the old mall used to be. Big Paulie was dubious to say the least when she told him she’d finished up the daycare, but he put her to work.

The day passed in a roar of engines and exhaust and sweat and swearing—a good day. At five, some of the men went home to wives and suppers, while the rest, Ana included, tramped across the lot to Gallifrey’s and commandeered a table for rowdy talk and working-man meals. If Ana found herself the butt of more than her statistical fair share of the coarse humor, she took it without flinching and gave it back as good, and it was a fine time with actual human people. She’d kind of missed that.

But one by one, the men broke away and eventually, the last one left and it was just her and Big Paulie. Before she could flag Lucy Gallifrey down for a to-go box and excuse herself, Paulie said, “You done all right out there, kid.”

“Thanks,” said Ana, still trying to catch Lucy’s eye without actually standing up on the table and waving both arms.
“Don’t mistake me now. I know who you are and I won’t forget it just because you can drive a backhoe and do half a day’s work.”

“That’s all anyone can ask, I guess.”

“And I won’t be working with you tomorrow. I took you today as a courtesy, because I wouldn’t turn you out in front of the whole crew, but now you know my feelings on it and if you show up on my site again, I won’t hesitate.”

“Okay,” she said mildly.

He seemed to take her refusal to protest as a personal attack, scowling as he said, “I told Shelly he was a fool for taking you on and twice a fool for keeping you.”

“Any particular reason?” Ana asked, waving harder to absolutely no effect.

He cocked his head. “You say that like I got none.”

“Have I given you one?” she asked, genuinely curious.

He leaned across the table, jaw tight and eyes hard. “Joe Stark was my boy’s best friend, growing up. Little Paulie ate over at his house a hundred times, he ate at mine. They fell away some after he met Mellie, but we stayed close enough to nod at over the years. It’s hard to see any man come apart like that, and him, practically a son of mine. The way he ended up…you heard about that?”

Ana gave up on Lucy and pushed her plate to the edge of the table. “I heard he took a dive into the canyon a while back, but what exactly do you expect me to feel about it? I never even met him.”

He shook his head and had a long swallow of lemonade. “I don’t expect you to feel anything. The women of your line have always been hard-hearted.”

“The women, huh?” Ana snorted. “My mom was no prize and nobody knows that better than me, but at least she was there. My father drop-kicked me to the curb before I was out of the fucking womb. Sorry if he was a friend of yours, but in my book, that makes him the asshole.”

He studied her with something that was almost sympathy. “That’s how you see it, huh? Oh, the things I could tell you.”

Ana shrugged defiantly. “Go right ahead. I can almost guarantee I’ve heard it all before.”

“Your mother was a man-eater,” he said, not angrily, but as a matter of fact. “Her and Marion both, I’m sorry to say, nothing a pair of she-leeches with their mouths between their legs.”

“My, what a vivid image.”

“It’s the truth,” he said. “Bad blood will always show through, and Jesselyn Blaylock was rubbing up on boys before she was out of bobby socks. I’d have been ashamed to call her daughter and her kids should have been ashamed to call her mother, not that she stuck around long enough to hear it. No, she lit out and left the last of her brood when they were still in diapers. Lord alone knows where she ended up, but she’s dining with the Devil now, I’m sure.” Big Paulie paused to run an eye over Ana. “You’ve done that a time or two yourself, I should think.”

“A time or two,” said Ana, sitting at the table with him.

“Jessie skipping town like she did was the best start she ever could have gave those girls, not that it
made any difference in the end. Her folks were left to raise ‘em the best they could and I know her
daddy was never one to spare the rod, but even he couldn’t make ‘em mind. They were wild,
godless little liars from the moment they were dropped.”

“Lying about what, exactly?”

Paulie ignored the question. “Those girls went rotten as soon as they were ripe, just like their
momma,” he said. “Marion got herself knocked up at fifteen like there weren’t no shame in it. Her
grandparents would have put that child up for a decent family to raise if they’d had the chance, but
they died, and Marion whelped that bastard pup and paraded him around like a prince.”

“The nerve of some people,” Ana said. “Loving their kids just to spite the neighbors.”

Paulie’s lips thinned. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I understand she loved him, in spite of all your holy-rolling disapproval. I understand she made a
home for him that was better than anything she ever had.”

“That, she did. With another man’s money. And there was plenty of it, I’ll give her that,” he added
with a scornful sneer. “She opened her legs and pumped out all the pretty clothes and flashy
cameras she could ever want, along with that nice, big house and a new car whenever the old one
got dirty, but she couldn’t buy her boy a last name. Oh yes, she did what she did and she got what
she got, but she never got a ring out of it. Mellie got one up on her, if you can call it that, marrying
before she was old enough to drive. And poor Joe let her hook him just because no other woman
would have him. My boy tried to warn him. Hell, I tried to warn him, but he wasn’t having it.
Mellie was a beautiful girl, on the outside at least. She said she loved him, so he married her. He
had his whole life ahead of him, and she made him throw it away. He worked two jobs, seven days
a week, while she spent his money trying to live her sister’s life. He gave her everything she
whined after him for, all so she could look pretty while she catted around.”

“With who?” she challenged. “Everyone in this goddamned town is so quick to point their fingers
at her, but no one seems to know just who she was allegedly having it off with. So give me a name.
Give me proof or knock off the whore-talk.”

“Girl, you are the proof. Joe Stark opened up his coinpurse falling out of a dead tree when he was
no more’n twelve and the whole town knows it. That man you’re calling daddy could no more
have squirted out a baby than he could have squirted out a rainbow.”

Ana frowned.

“Now I have no comment on how your momma may or may not have made her pin money, but did
she step out on Joe Stark? That she did. And was he wrong to put her out when she came to him
cooking up the bun from another man’s batter? I sure don’t think he was. As for you, your modern
sensibilities may balk at the notion of ‘the sins of the father,’ but here you are and just look at you.
A blind man could see the mess you’ve made of yourself. Bad blood is all it is, and bad blood will
always come through.”

Ana did not flinch. “Of the mother,” she said.

“Beg pardon?”

“The sins of the mother, in my case.”

He shrugged. “Her, too. Let me ask you something. Honestly, now. What in the blue blazes are
you doing here?”
“The bank—”

“Hell, I know all about that mess, and I know you settled that hash months ago. You keep telling Shelly you don’t know if you’re staying, but you’re sure in no hurry to leave. What are you waiting for? No one wants you here,” he said before she could speak, as if there was anything she could have said. “Your blood is a stain and a curse on this town, and there is no one here who will ever give you welcome. Why don’t you just leave?”

She had no conscious intention of answering him, but to her surprise, she heard herself say, “Not until I know what happened.”

“You’d know better than anyone, wouldn’t you? Wait…” He leaned back, peering at her like she was something he’d just scraped out from his ear. “You mean to Marion? That’s who you’re concerning yourself over? Marion and his bastard?”

She didn’t have a chance to answer him that time, even if she could have thought of one.

“Marion,” he said, his voice gone rough and thick with contempt, “rolled in her sin like a dog in stink. She got what she had coming. What she went looking for, if it comes to that. No, I didn’t see it and I don’t know how it happened. I don’t need to and I don’t care to. It’s enough for me that she’s gone.” Pushing his chair back, he signaled Lucy (she came at once) and passed over the company credit card.

Taking the hint, Ana got up.

“Whatsoever you’re looking for,” Big Paulie said loudly as she started away.

Ana kept walking another step or two, then stopped, sighed, and turned around. “Yeah?”

“I hope you find it,” he said. Coldly. Like a curse. “Once you’re gone, maybe we can finally scrub the stink of you Blaylock bitches out of this town for good.”

She stood for a moment, then turned again, feeling stares like prickles on her skin, and left.

It wasn’t dark yet, but the sun was low in the sky. Once she got out of town and onto Old Quarry Road, she drove right past Freddy’s and went on home. Plushtrap was still in the dump trailer, unmoved and unmoving. She went inside, stumbled over the laundry basket she’d left in the foyer, and took the opportunity to restock her day pack with a clean set of clothes. This done, still restless, she went to the kitchen. She fetched herself a beer from the fridge, but didn’t open it; rolled herself a joint, but didn’t light it. She sat at the table with her day pack at her elbow and stared out the window at the shadows growing long on the ground.

After a while, she opened her day pack and brought out her tablet. She checked her email—no responses as yet to her Craigslist ad—then tossed her tablet back in her pack and sat some more, playing with the neck of her beer bottle and looking out the window. A big window in a big house.

*Marion got what she got…*

*…the sins of the father…*

*…of the mother, in my case…*

*Her, too.*

Did she believe it?
Yeah, actually, she did. How the hell does a security guard at a pizza parlor buy a mansion with thirty-plus acres of wooded land? Answer: She doesn’t. She can’t. No history was bad enough to put a place this size within the budget of a single mother making little better than minimum wage. Someone else bought it. Someone gave it to her.

Aunt Easter got what she got, all right—a brilliant son she refused to be ashamed of, a scarlet letter she refused to sew on, a man who refused to give her a ring, and a house that refused to let her have peace after that man returned and stole her son away.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Ana told the kitchen.

The kitchen agreed.

“It really doesn’t.”

The kitchen wasn’t arguing, but it did want to know…if none of it mattered anymore, what was she waiting for?

“Fuck you,” said Ana, shoving her chair back.

She left the kitchen, meaning to grab her sleeping bag and drag it upstairs to one of the bedrooms, but somewhere between here and there, her plans apparently changed. She went right past the sleeping bag, still spread out over the bannister, and jogged upstairs, heading directly for David’s room. She stood for a moment in the doorway, unsure what she was doing, just that she’d know it when she saw it, and when she saw it, by God, she knew it.

On the floor over by his toybox, half-buried in comic books, was an oversized pad of drawing paper.

Ana picked it up, looked for too long at the last picture David had ever drawn—Captain Fox, rendered as an actual living creature-man and not an animatronic, cutlass drawn and dripping blood, hook nearly the same size as his head—then flipped it over and took the pad with her downstairs. She slapped it down on the kitchen table, found a pen in her day pack, and sat down.

She thought, looking out the window again but seeing the lobby at Freddy’s. Small room, rectangular, gift shop on one side and cashier’s station on the other, with the doors like bookends to either side.

She drew it, then the dining room behind it. And from there, it went on, building the restaurant room by room on paper, stopping often to walk the halls in her mind. Something was off about her proportions, she knew, especially in Pirate Cove, but she just blacked out the problem area and kept drawing. She’d figure it out when she took the real measurements. This was just for…

Just for what?

Ana leaned back in her chair and studied her half-drawn map. She said, “I’m a bastard,” listening to the words in the air. She’d known it for a long time, even if she’d never said it out loud. It didn’t hurt. It didn’t mean anything. After a moment, she sketched in the quiet room. She said, “I’m an orphan and a bastard.” She drew the security room, adding, “Maybe. My father might be alive, somewhere,” as she blacked in the manager’s office, of unknown dimensions, behind it. “But for all intents and purposes, I’m an orphan. I’m an orphan and a bastard and I’m well on my way to becoming a drug addict.” She put in the employee’s lounge and the store room that completed the corner between it and the kitchen. “Aunt Easter is gone and she’s not coming back,” she said, moving her pen back to the area in front of the security room. She drew a circle, the signpost, and
the many paths branching off from it. She followed one of them to Pirate Cove, saying, “David is gone and he’s never coming back.” All four corners of the building were complete. She connected them with walls and worked her way inward, to the parts room at the restaurant’s center, its unbreachable heart. “I’m still here. Why am I still here?”

She looked down at Freddy’s, ink and paper, rooms and halls.

After a while, she tore the page off the pad and drew another rectangle on the next sheet. She broke it into a grid—seven columns, three rows. She numbered them, beginning in the middle of the top row with eighteen and ending with four. Then she tore that page out too and pushed the pad away. She set both pages together, side to side, and considered them.

“This is what you have,” she said, studying the completed picture. “And this is all the time you get. So, all horseshit aside, what are you going to do? You can do nothing,” she reminded herself. “That is an option. Let it all fall apart. No one in this town is going to care. You could leave tonight, if you wanted. No one’s going to miss you.”

Or?

“Or you could fix it.”

Could she?

Her eyes moved over the paper while her mind walked in Freddy’s.

“Yeah,” she said. “I really think I can.”

After a long, long while, she pushed herself up and went outside to the truck. She opened the back and stood for some time, just looking at the bed, empty now but for her toolbox and a few scraps left over from the daycare job. Then she went to the garage and raised the door, looking at the impressive array of tools and equipment she’d put together over the years.

And then, against her will, she turned and stared up at the house. It stared back at her, its many eyes black, reflecting light only in tiny points where imperfections hid in the glass.

“You’re not here,” she said, her eyes shifting from window to window. “I’m sorry. I know what I promised, but…you’re not here. If you’re anywhere, you’re there. If I leave now, that’s how I’ll always remember you—dirty and broken. So let me clean it up. Let me fix it. It won’t bring you back, I know that, but if I can’t bring you back…please…you have to let me leave you in a good place. Okay?”

Silence. The wind blew in from the quarry.

“Okay,” said Ana and started loading up the truck.

☆ ☆ ☆

The packing went fast. It ought to. She’d had plenty of experience packing up, but this time was different. She wasn’t giving up and she wasn’t just heading off to the next in a string of jobs she didn’t care about, as indifferent toward the home she was moving to as the one she left behind. Not now. Every box she packed was one more obstacle out of her way.

She had plenty of good lumber and sheetrock in the garage, but she left it for now. Likewise, she
left all her clothes, food, and personal junk. She’d buy more of whatever she needed; no point
shuttling everything she owned back and forth like kids caught in a bitter divorce. She took all her
tools and working equipment, though. She wasn’t sure she’d need it all, but she was a little afraid
that if she stopped to really think about what she needed, she wouldn’t do it at all. And she wanted
to do it. From the moment she’d picked up that pad of drawing paper, it had felt like the gears had
finally come unstuck and started to turn. It was still impossible, of course. It had been impossible
when she still thought she had six weeks to do it in and now she had less than three, but she’d
never let reason stop her before and she was too old to start now.

She was nearly to Freddy’s when another car appeared, loaded with teenagers either on their way
to the quarry for a fun-filled night of drinking around an illegal bonfire or maybe on their way to
Freddy’s themselves for a fun-filled night of smashing glass and drawing dicks on the
animatronics. Whichever, they stopped dead in the road when they saw her truck before turning
around and heading back to town.

That was going to be a problem, Ana thought, watching them go. There’d be a lot more traffic to
avoid the closer it came to the Fourth. She hadn’t given much thought to covering the windows,
seeing as they were already boarded up, but it wasn’t enough to be invisible during the day. Night
was when she’d be doing most of the work and at night, even a sliver of light was as good as a
beacon. Blacking out the windows immediately moved to the top of her mental list of priorities,
which meant a trip to Hurricane tonight rather than tomorrow. Not even, she realized; tonight and
tomorrow, because she’d have to rent a commercial hauler for the lumber, rather than make a
dozen trips in her truck.

“One thing at a time,” Ana muttered, turning up the steep access road to the top of Edge of
Nowhere.

“Tonight, all you got to worry about is prep work. And Freddy. Freddy is your biggest problem and
your top priority.”

She brought the truck around to the back of the building—her new parking space, she told herself,
hidden from the road—and backed it up to the loading dock. She knew it would be locked down
and jammed shut, so she didn’t try to force it open, but jogged around to the side door and crawled
in next to Tux.

There were chunks of plastic on the floor, not sharp enough to cut, but painful under her hands and
knees. She brushed them away, only to reclaim the largest piece and turn it over, belatedly
recognizing Tux’s condescending smirk. She looked up and sure enough, above the neck, the
concierge of the Grand Pavilion Hotel at Freddyland was nothing but eyes, teeth and enough metal
joints to connect them.

“Oh Bonnie,” Ana sighed and tossed the chunk of plastic away.

It was still early. She could hear Foxy telling tales of the sea down in Pirate Cove and Chica’s
voice, muffled, coming from the reading room as she passed it, so she wasn’t surprised to walk
into the dining room and find Bonnie onstage, glitching wildly as he attempted to play his broken
guitar. Freddy was conspicuously absent, but she guessed he was walking around, working the
‘crowd’ in the other parts of the restaurant, and she was in no hurry to meet him. He’d said she
could come over whenever she wanted, but she had a feeling he was going to go back on that
promise faster than a politician after election day once he saw her moving in.

“Keep going,” she told Bonnie as she picked her way across the still-damp floor by the light of her
phone. “I’ll be in and out for a bit, but don’t worry. You just do your thing, my man.”

He shook his head, laughing his stage laugh while his hand slapped and jittered on his guitar.
“I’ll be here,” she promised and went through the kitchen into the store room.

There she paused, shining her phone around and trying to see through the dangerous jumble of tables, shelves and other crap to the space available to her. Freddy hadn’t left much of a path through this mess, but she thought she could at least get the generator in. Everything else could just go into the kitchen for tonight, although there wasn’t a lot of space there either. Damned if she’d move it any further, though. Every minute she spent just lugging shit around was a minute lost and she didn’t have enough time as it was.

And on that note, time to get started.

Ana pocketed her phone, pulled the table leg out of the track and raised the loading dock door. She just held it for a little while, surveying the store room some more in sunlight, then shoved it up until it was securely lodged on its rusted runners, and started pulling tools and boxes out.

She’d made a dozen quick jaunts back and forth from the dock to the kitchen before Freddy caught her. He didn’t come through the kitchen door, either, where she’d been keeping half an eye open for him. No, she simply finished putting the last drawer back into her big toolchest here in the kitchen and turned around to find him immediately behind her, literally inches away, having apparently come through the hall from the employee’s lounge and waiting for her to see him before he snapped the lights on in his angry eyes and started playing his cheerful music: *Dum dum da dee da, now you’re gonna die.*

“Hi, Freddy,” she said.

He grunted. His gaze moved deliberately away from her and over the orderly sprawl of power tools presently occupying every inch of counter-space in the kitchen.

“I need to get past you,” she said.

“What is this?” he asked, much too cheerfully for the number of teeth he was showing her.

“What are you up to?”

“We’ll have a nice long talk later, okay? But right now, I have got to get the rest of this shit unloaded and get back on the road. Step aside. Please.”

His eyes narrowed. He backed up, turning his head to keep her in his sights until she’d squeezed past him and was in the store room, then followed her and watched, silent, from the doorway as she unloaded the last few items. When she came to the end of it—the power generator, a 255-pound beast of a thing—she steeled herself and turned back to him.

“I don’t suppose you can give me a hand with this,” she said.

He clicked hard, grunted, and folded his arms.

Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Ana pulled her shirt off and twisted it around the laughable ‘handles’ that the manufacturer had bizarrely thought made the generator portable, while Freddy unfolded his arms fast and retreated to the kitchen. She could hear him there, grumbling without words and pacing back and forth as she heaved the generator out of the truck and onto the dock, and from there, into the store room. She parked it as close to the restaurant’s fuse box as she could get and, rubbing at the strain in her neck and shoulders, went into the kitchen.

Freddy backed away from her, looking at the oven and the ceiling and anywhere but at her sweaty tits barely contained by her working-woman’s bra, and when he bumped the counter, he turned all the way around and stood staring into the cupboard doors. The Toreador March played on its
endless loop, too loud in this relatively small space, and a little faster than she remembered it.

“Something wrong?” she inquired, opening her toolchest.

“PUT. YOUR.” He clicked a few times. His right hand twitched. “CLOSED. ON.”

“I am. See?”

He glanced back at her. She held up her hands, now safely covered by a pair of heavy work gloves, and waggled the stiff fingers at him. His gaze went at once between them to her chest. His eyes flashed, his mouth opened, and then he froze…and looked at her chest again as his distinctive March stuttered and silenced.

Delayed reaction to the sight of cleavage? Maybe. Or maybe he was looking at her tattoo—the inked wounds, filled with gears and wires and the empty place for her absent heart. Either way, he didn’t seem to know how to react. He stared.

“Like what you see, big bear?” Ana asked with a crooked smile.

He raised his eyes, blinking, to meet hers, then looked at her chest, and suddenly flinched with his whole body. Down came his eyelids at an angry slant. Back came the music, playing faster and louder. He turned back to the cupboard, both hands flexing as if hungry for a neck to wring.

‘Nice to know I still got it,’ she thought and went into the store room.

Before she managed to separate even one rusted shelving unit from the heap, he was there, snatching it out of her gloved hands and flinging it with a deafening clamor into the furthest corner.

“What are you up to?” he asked with only friendly curiosity at a deafening volume and his eyes blazing in angry slants.

Ana calmly bent to shake another piece of rusted metal free of the heap. “I’m just looking—”

He snatched that one away, too. “YOU’RE. NOT. LOOKING. YOU’RE. TOUCHING. LEAVE. IT. ALONE.”

“—to see if anything can be salvaged,” Ana continued, lifting one side of another table and spying a decent-looking length of 2x4 beneath it.

“I. SAID. LEAVE. IT. ALONE. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

“—before I take it all out,” she said, wrestling with the lumber, trying to pull it out without dislodging the entire heap.

“I. SAID. THAT’S AN ORDER,” he growled, yanking it out of her hands and snapping it between his like a stale breadstick. “THAT. MEANS. YOU. STOP.” The last word broke off too abruptly. He tipped his head back, the March now spinning through the room like a crazed carousel, then leaned very close and growled, “WHAT. DID. YOU. JUST. SAY.”

“You’d have heard me the first time if you’d just shut up and let me talk.”

“YOU. LISTEN. TO ME,” he snarled, pointing into her face, but seemed to get distracted by the fact that he’d used two fingers to point, and when he looked up again, Ana had won the argument by unhooking her bra and taking it off.

After he was gone, she finished rummaging through the junk in peace, but it was a hopeless cause.
Everything that wasn’t rusted was broken; everything that could be repaired was so ugly, she didn’t want it. And it wasn’t like she had to replace everything. A few tables and shelves for her own convenience, sure, but after all, the restaurant was abandoned. The animatronics obviously didn’t care if the light fixtures went back up or not.

So settled, Ana wiped down her face with her shirt and put it on. She checked the time—half past eight—and stuck her head into the kitchen, where Freddy was pacing up and down along the oven, growling to himself. “It’s safe to look,” she told him.

He stopped pacing. The Toreador March hitched and played, hitched and played. He did not look.

“Look, I’ve got to run to the hardware store while it’s still open. If Bonnie flips his shit, just tell him I’ll be back.”

He grunted.

“You are such a prude,” she laughed and left. No sooner had she shut the loading dock door than she heard the table leg being hammered in on the other side.

In Hurricane, Ana spent a good hour at the Lowe’s, stocking up on hardware, half a dozen jerry cans, and shelving to replace the mess Freddy had made of the existing ones. At the Walmart, she bought cleaning supplies and enough home stuff to set up a workable kitchen and bedroom, once she had the space for it. At the gas station out of town, she filled the truck’s tank and all the jerry cans, and finally headed for Freddy’s.

It was nearly ten now, half the night over, and she still had so much work to do.

She did it in her head all the way from Hurricane to Mammon, endlessly running through the hours ahead of her, room by room and step by step. Unload the truck, put shit away, have a look at Chica’s legs and go to bed. Under no circumstances was she to stay up all night. She had work in the morning. More importantly, she had to come home from work in the evening and get in at least five good hours cleaning and clearing so she could start the real work just as soon as she rolled out of bed on Saturday…

And there Ana’s thoughts stayed, two days ahead of her physical body, mentally emptying the back room behind the kitchen while she drove right past the loading dock and around to her usual space next to the side door. She had the truck half-emptied before she realized what she’d done, and by then, it would have been more trouble to take the truck around back, so she just finished up, cussing herself out under her breath for slipping up on her first night. Up until now, she’d only been trespassing, and even in this town, it was unlikely Sheriff Zabrinsky would take on the paperwork for breaking and entering if he caught her poking around. At most, she was risking a warning, maybe a fine, and definitely a closer eye kept on her and the empty pizzeria, but that was it. No more. If her truck happened to catch his eye now and he came in and found all this shit and her in the middle of it, there was no way he’d believe she was here for what she was really here for.

She could barely believe it and she was doing it.

The truck was empty now and Tux, buried to his hips. She picked up the coffeepot and all the food she could easily carry and took it down the hall, so distracted by her own thoughts that she walked right through the dining room without absorbing the implications of an empty stage or the mutters and rustling noises leading her to the kitchen until she was actually standing in the doorway, looking at the animatronics rummaging through her stuff. All four of them.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked.
They all turned to look at her. Chica turned too fast and tipped herself into the oven, but fortunately, Foxy’s reflexes were on point tonight. He snagged her with his hook before she could fall, holding her until Freddy righted her.

“AN-N-A,” Freddy growled, sweeping one arm back at the counter full of tools with the hand that wasn’t still holding on to Chica. “EXPLAIN. THIS.”

“In a minute,” Ana said. “You okay? How are your legs?”

“IT’S A GREAT DAY FOR PIZZA,” Chica replied, which she guessed meant I’m fine, thanks for asking.

“Ana.” Bonnie dropped her nailgun back into the crate where he’d found it and limped toward her. Grinning, Ana unloaded her arms on the nearest open space on the floor and went to meet him, folding herself into his stinking, too-tight hug gladly. “My man,” she said into his chest. “Sorry about last night.”

“I thought-t-t… I thought…”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I know what you thought.” Ana gently pulled away until he released her, then reached up to pat his smooth, flockless cheek. “Fortunately, after a good night’s sleep, reason prevailed and I remembered what you said about your speech restrictions before and after operating hours.”

One by one, the other three animatronics turned and looked at Bonnie.

“Heh,” said Bonnie, ears low. “You d-d-did, huh?”

“And if I’d only stayed a little longer…” She shrugged. “I wasn’t thinking clearly. That’s a pretty sad excuse, but it’s all I’ve got. I hadn’t slept and I wasn’t thinking. You mad at me?”

“No,” he said without hesitation.

“You sure? It’s okay if you are. I’d be mad at me.”

He just shook his head, staring into her eyes. Of course he wouldn’t be mad. Ana couldn’t imagine his programmers allowing the animatronics to get mad at guests, no matter the reason...except maybe Freddy. Freddy and rules didn’t always go hand in paw.

Ana shrugged the thought away and said, “Well, I’m sorry anyway. It wasn’t cool and I’ll try not to let it happen again, but in all honesty, crazy does run in the family.”

“Mine, t-t-too,” said Bonnie.

“God, you’re handsome when you smile,” she said, then checked the time and turned her attention back to the unpacking. “But don’t change the subject. What are you doing here?”

“WE. LIVE. HERE.”

“Not you,” she said to Freddy, then turned a questioning eye on Foxy. “You. You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“KNEE. THERE. ARE. YOU.”

“Freddy, it’s rude to interrupt. Pirates stay in Pirate Cove,” Ana told Foxy. “It’s against the rules to
wander around, you said so yourself.”

“Sun’s down,” said Foxy, eyeing Freddy. “Rules be d-d-different after d-d-dark. I said that, too.”

“You did at that,” she agreed, but she had to think about it first. “That was a long time ago.”

He folded his arms and leaned up against the oven, shrugging one shoulder. “Not a hell of a lot-t-t else competing with ye for m-m-memory space these days.”

“I suppose not, but still. How long do you hold onto stuff before you…How do I put this?…clean out your save files?”

“Clean out me…?” Foxy squinted, then shook his head. “Just ask what-t-t yer asking, lass.”

“How long would you remember me if you didn’t see me so often?”

“Four t-t-times ain’t so often.”

“I’ve been here more than that.”

“Not to see me,” he replied and although he said it no special way, something in his neutral tone and unchanged expression gave her a twinge that was almost conscience. She did spend an awful lot of time with Bonnie. She wondered now for the first time if the others felt neglected. After all, when this place was open, it would have been filled with kids competing for their individual attention. When it was just her…and she ignored all but one of them…

“They don’t have feelings,’ she reminded herself. “Then why do you remember me at all?”

“Pirate, ain’t I?”

She waited, but that seemed to be it. “Pirates have good memories?”

“They do when it c-c-come to booty.”

Ana swung all the way around to gape at him, then burst out laughing. “What the hell did you just say? Oh, hey, no! Bonnie! Put that back!” Ana grabbed the crowbar out of Bonnie’s hand and put it back on the toolchest. “Leave that stuff alone, man. You’ll break something.”

“You’re g-g-god-damn right-t-t I will,” Bonnie agreed, ears flat and lenses open a bit wider than she was used to seeing them, making Brewster’s green eyes seem black.

“DON’T FIGHT,” Freddy remarked, picking up the crowbar himself and briefly studying it before putting it down and opening a drawer on the toolchest.

Foxy’s attention had drifted to Bonnie, although not with any great show of concern. Now he shrugged again and said, “Yer’s were th-th-the last face I seen. And the f-f-first I seen clearly in a goodish while. ‘Course I remember-r-r ye.” He glanced at Bonnie, then gave Ana a roguish smile that lost nothing in the translation from his plastic, vulpine features. “There’s just some parts I remember b-b-better than others.”

“There you go again. Isn’t there a rule about not coming on to the guests?”

“There ain’t, c-c-come to think on it. And even if th-there were—” His head cocked, lower jaw falling open (and on a slant; she really needed to have a look at that) in a toothy sort of robotic smile. His eyepatch snapped back down and his hook-hand came up. “I BE A PROPER PIRATE. WE FOLLOW THE TIDE, NOT RULES.”
Freddy gave him a narrow, sidelong glance, but said nothing as he continued to explore the toolchest.

“This here be a landlocked state,” Ana reminded Foxy, leaning out to slap the drawer shut. “No tide.”

“Aye, and th-the restaurant b-b-be closed,” he countered. “Ye aren’t sup-p-pos-osed to be here either, so maybe ye ain’t-t-t the one to be quoting r-r-rules in the first place.”

Ana snorted. “I guess I’ll be a pirate. Apparently, we can do what we want.”

“Will ye now?” He raised his eyepatch just to wink at her again. “Welcome ab-b-board the Fox.”

Bonnie’s ears snapped flat.

“Did I say I was joining your crew?” Ana asked pointedly, opening the closest cupboard to find dozens of boxes of pizza dough mix, molded together into a giant brick of black cardboard and greenish paste. She closed the cupboard.

“If yer one o’ B-B—BLACKMANE, ME MORTAL ENEMY!—Blackmane’s, I’ll have to take ye p-p-prisoner.”

“You will, huh?” she said distractedly, opening the next cupboard. Quart-sized cans of black olives, gallons of pineapple chunks, even tins of anchovies. Heat had swelled the contents and moisture rusted out the metal, so that most of the cans bulged and the bottom of the cupboard was painted in a thick, black substance best left unidentified. She closed that cupboard too. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Me, t-t-too,” Bonnie muttered.

Foxy grinned, more at Bonnie than at her. “Watch yer word-d-ds carefully now, lass. Ye know old C—CAPTAIN FOX—can’t turn d-d-down a challenge. P-P-Part o’ me core programming. ASK NO QUARTER AND GIVE NONE, aye, that be the pirate’s code, immutable as me sp-speech patterns.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

Freddy grunted and opened another drawer.

“Seriously, even if you caught me, what are you going to do?” she asked, leaning out to slap Freddy’s hand and shut the drawer. “Lock me in your cabin until I promise to be good?”

“Me c-c-cabin, eh?” He rubbed the curved end of his hook under his chin, looking her over. “Rather have yer p-p-promise to be b-b-bad.”

Bonnie started forward.

Freddy caught him by his casing and pulled him back, saying, “ENOUGH. MIND YOUR MANNERS. FOXY.” Again, Freddy gestured at the counter. “AN-N-A. EXPLAIN. THIS. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

“Just give me a minute, would you?” Ana wiped the counter cleanish with her empty hand and then wiped her hand even less cleanish on the seat of her jeans. “I can’t work under these conditions. Wait here.”
Ana left to collect the cleaning supplies. When she got back to the kitchen, Foxy was leaning up against the doorjamb to the storage room with his arms folded across his chest staring at Bonnie, who was staring back at him from the opposite end of the room, ears flat and eyelids angry. Freddy had taken up a position between them. All they needed was Chica in a pair of glittery hotpants holding up a numbered panel while the bell rang in the next round.

“You done?” she asked wryly. “Or should I go out and come back in?”

Foxy shrugged. “Yer c-c—CALL ME CAPTAIN FOX—call, mate.”

“We’re d-done,” Bonnie muttered, with this-isn’t-over written huge over his cracked, plastic face.

“Good. Because I got a lot to do tonight and it’ll go faster if you’re not fighting.”

“DON’T FIGHT,” Chica agreed.

“AN-N-A—”

“I’m getting to it, okay? Just give me a minute.” Ana moved Freddy away from her toolchest, shut the drawers he’d been playing in, and climbed up onto the prep counter, opening all the cupboards.

“Okay, Freddy,” she announced. “I saw some, like, heavy plastic crates in the other room there? Go get me one.”

Freddy did not, but after a second or two, Foxy did.

“Hold it for me,” she ordered, passing the first cans down to him. When the crate was full, she told him to put it by the loading dock door and bring her another one, which he did without comment.

Freddy watched her empty the shelves, clicking noisily to himself, but when she came to the end of it, all he said was, “WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?”

“Just tossing the place over really quick before I put my stuff away. You know,” she remarked, peering into the corners as she wiped them down. “I am seriously astonished I haven’t seen any rat shit yet. All things considered, this place ought to be Vermin City. You got dead bugs everywhere, but no rats. You got a cat or something?”

“Or s-s-something,” said Foxy from the next room.

“HUSH,” said Freddy, investigating another drawer.

“Well, it’s doing its job, that’s for damn sure. See those bags at your feet, Bon? Bring ‘em to me.”

Bonnie obeyed and Ana started unpacking the groceries: a jar of peanut butter, crackers, cookies, jerky, several dozen cans of open-and-eat food, and so on and so on. Nothing that needed cooking and nothing that needed refrigeration. Nothing particularly good for her either, but she’d eaten a lot worse. Two cheap mugs and a box of plastic sporks were all the dishes she intended to need.

“You m-moving-ing in?” Bonnie asked, ears up.

“No,” Ana confirmed. “But you are going to—I swear to God, Freddy!” she interrupted herself sharply. “If I have to tell you to get your paws out of my tools one more time, you’re going to be wearing a hook your damn self! Shut it!”

All three of the other animatronics looked at Freddy with varying expressions. After a long servo-
“But you’re going to see a lot of me over the next few weeks,” Ana concluded, resuming the unpacking.

“WHY?” Freddy demanded.

“Because I’m going to be here. Did I not get the coffee stuff?” she asked herself, peering into the bottom of an obviously empty bag. “No, I know I did. I must have left it in the hall.”

“THE. HALL.” Freddy looked at the kitchen doorway, then at Ana again. “YOU. HAVE. MORE.”

“Well, yeah. If you wanted to be nice, you could go get some of it and bring it on in here for me. The sooner I get unpacked, the sooner I can get started.”

Freddy left in a wake of tinkling music and mutters.

“I LOVE MAKING NEW FRIENDS,” said Chica, looking nervously after him. She waddled over and picked up a box of Lucky Charms, holding it up for Ana to take. “I CAN BAKE THE CUPCAKES! I LOVE TO COOK. I’M TRYING OUT A NEW RECIPE FOR DELICIOUS FAZBEAR PIZZA!”


“ONLY THE BEST KIND I EVER INVENTED! THE SECRET INGREDIENT IS MARSHMALLOWS.”

“D-D-Damn it, Ch-Chica—THAT S-S-SOUNDS…GREAT.”

“You know, you say that like it’s not,” said Ana, putting the cereal away. “But just because it’s pizza doesn’t mean it has be covered in marinara sauce and cheese. Think about it. Graham cracker crust, chocolate syrup, marshmallows. S’mores pizza.”

“YUM!”

Rubbing his throat and glaring at Chica, Bonnie said, “Or you c-c-could skip the middleman and knock-k-k your teeth out with a hammer.”

“Got a sweet t-t-tooth, do ye?” Foxy asked, once more in his leaning spot on the oven.

“Not especially. I’m just saying, if you’re going to put marshmallows on a pizza, that’s how you’d do it. Don’t think that this—” She indicated the contents of the cupboard with one hand while continuing to stock it with the other. “—is my usual fare, Captain. It’s just quick, convenient and non-perishable.”

“Don’t think-k-k I be judging ye for it, luv,” Foxy countered. “EAT WHAT YE PLEASE AND DROWN ALL YER SORROW.”

“Live for today,” Ana chanted along with him. “We die on the morrow.”

“There ye g-g-go again, stealing me lines,” Foxy remarked at the end.

“I’m a pirate now. We steal things. Page four of the handbook.”

“Mm. Well, ye ain’t-t-t one o’ the crew until the Captain says so. What say ye c-c-come by me
cabin, lass? Show me what yer made of.”

“Skull and bones, trouble and rum. Same as any other pirate,” Ana told Foxy, reaching out to stroke Bonnie’s flat ears until he brought them grudgingly up. “Chill, my man. We’re just making conversation. I’m still your girl.”

“For now,” said Foxy.

“You’re not helping,” said Ana, coaxing Bonnie’s ears up again with more petting.

“I ain’t-t-t known to be particularly helpful, lass. I weren’t made to b-b-be a gentleman. I were made to b-b-be a pirate.” He paused and in a low, musing tone, added, “Taking what-t-t I want be part o’ the g-g-game.”

“Where are your eyes, Captain?” Ana asked, wiping down another shelf.

“They’re about-t-t to be out of his g-g-goddamned head and rolling on the goddamn floor!” Bonnie snapped. “Wh-Wh-What are you st-st-still doing here anyway? Haven’t you g-g-got a princess to f-f-fight or a dragon to fuck?”

“Bonnie!” Ana gasped, but it was hard to sound too shocked through her laughter. “First of all, that’s really mean and secondly, it’s also backwards.”

“Is it?” Bonnie asked archly.

Foxy raised his hook, curved side out, making it absolutely clear without a word or change of expression just how many fingers he was holding up on the hand he didn’t have.

“DON’T FIGHT,” said Chica, cheerfully enough but with a hopeless sort of expression.

“They do this routine often?” Ana asked. “Because I get the feeling it’s going to be a lot less funny the longer I have to listen to it.”

Chica nodded, clicking to herself, and sighed, “YOU HAVE NO IDEA.”

Bonnie and Foxy put a little more distance between themselves. Neither spoke, although they continued giving each other the side-eye from their respective corners of the kitchen.

Their tense quiet made it possible to hear the Toreador March getting louder again and soon Freddy’s footsteps could be heard between the notes. He could be quiet when he wanted to be, he’d proven that in the past, but he was making plenty of noise now. He was angry. He wanted her to know it. Freddy hit the single swinging door hard enough to bounce it off the wall and cheerfully roared, “WHAT. THE. HELLO. IS. ALL. THAT.”

“Wow, Freddy. Use your indoor voice.”

“DON’T,” he snapped, pointing at her with two fingers. “YOUR. MINUTE. IS. UP. EXPLAIN. NOW. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

Ana looked at him for a long moment, then climbed down from the counter and went to her day pack. She opened it, took out the folded sheets of thick paper that were her hand-drawn map and calendar, and held them out.

Freddy glanced at them, but stared at her for another half-minute at least before he lowered his pointing hand and came into the kitchen. He took them, unfolded them, and studied the blocky,
unlabeled indications of rooms and halls for scarcely a moment before turning it right-side up. After a long, silent stretch of time, he exchanged the map for the calendar and looked at that. His plastic eyes skipped back and forth as he read the notes she’d written for each day—her schedule.

Watching him, it struck Ana that was a weird detail for his designers to include. Text recognition was one thing; corresponding eye animation took it to a whole new level. “What do you think?” she asked finally, amused to realize she couldn’t just wait him out. She was that eager to get started, that anxious for his approval.

He looked at her, moved the map back to the top of this stack of two pages, and frowned at it some more. “WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?” he asked heartily. “WHAT IS THIS?”

Ana took a bracing breath and forced a smile. “I’m going to fix the roof.”
Ana wasn’t sure just what she expected their reactions to be following this declaration, but it wasn’t silence. All four animatronics stared at her, not blankly, not as if their programming did not allow them to comprehend her words, but as if they absolutely did and were sharing a moment of stunned disbelief.

“YOU CAN’T,” said Freddy at last, prompting Chica to enthusiastically reply, “YOU CAN DO ANYTHING WITH HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS!”

“A little short on friends at the moment,” Ana admitted with a careless shrug. “But that’s okay. I can do this by myself. The fates have aligned, providing me an extended run of good weather, a three-day weekend at a critical juncture, and access to a commercial upcycled lumber yard. I’ve got the tools already and I’ve put up a metric shit-ton of buildings before, including roofs, and as much as anyone can guarantee anything in this fucked-up world we live in, I can guarantee you, I got this.”

“YOU CAN’T,” Freddy said again, still with that grim plastic frown.

“Sure, I can. Hey, you do me a solid, I do one for you. That’s how it works. And you did me a real solid that one time. In fact, I think it’s safe to say you probably saved my life.”

Freddy grunted. It was neither denial nor agreement, but more a sound of impatience, as if her life and the saving or losing of it were entirely irrelevant to the matter at hand. “YOU. DON’T. UNDERSTAND.” he said. “YOU CAN’T. BECAUSE. I. WON’T. LET. YOU.”

Ana let out a breath that was half a laugh and half a sigh. “God, I knew you were going to do this, I just knew it. Seriously, Freddy? You won’t let me fix the roof?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He clicked to himself for a while, but when he spoke, all he said was, “BECAUSE. I. SAID. SO.”

Ana’s brows raised. “Holy shit, is that the wrong answer.”

“I’M FREDDY FAZBEAR. I’M THE LEADER OF THE BAND.”

“Yeah, you are. You’re Freddy Fazbear.” She leaned forward a little, putting special emphasis on her next words with a direct stare. “You’re the animatronic. And I’m the human. Want to guess what that means?”

Freddy’s hands clenched on his biceps. “I’M. THE. ANIMATRONIC,” he growled. “YOU. ARE. THE. TRESPASSER. WANT. TO. GUESS. WHAT. THAT. MEANS.”

“Oh for…really? We’re back to this shit?” Ana threw her hands up and slapped them down on her thighs again. “Check your memory banks, big bear. You’re the one who said I could come over whenever and stay as long as I want.”
“THIS. ISN’T. WHAT. I. MEANT,” said Freddy, sweeping one arm back at the equipment filling the far end of the kitchen. “YOU. CAN’T. DO. THIS. YOU. CAN’T.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said quickly. “You think I’m high or something and I’ll tear half the building down and then sober up and realize I’m in over my head and leave you with the mess.”

Freddy blinked at her, uttered a short bearish laugh, and said, “NO. I. WASN’T. THINKING. THAT. UNTIL. NOW.”

“Then what’s the problem? Look around! You can’t just ignore this and hope it goes away! You have to fix this! Now! Before it’s too late! Chica, back me up on this.”

“I CAN HELP,” Chica said obediently, waddling closer to Ana in the narrow kitchen aisle. “LET’S ALL WORK TOGETHER. I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS. I CAN BAKE THE CUPCAKES!”

Freddy held up one hand before she could get too carried away with her act, still glaring at Ana. “YOU. CAN. VISIT. BUT. YOU MAY BE ASKED TO LEAVE. IF.” He clicked a few times, his gaze drifting over her left shoulder for several seconds before coming back to her with an air of frustration. “YOU. DAMAGE. RESTAURANT. PROPERTY.”

“If I damage it? Hey, look around, big bear. The damage is already here. I’m talking about fixing it.”

“NO.”

“Freddy—”

“I. SAID. NO.”

She looked at him and for a moment, it was almost like he was looking back, like he was a person and not a giant toy programmed to respond to keywords and situations. In that moment, he was real—still broken, still filthy, still doomed, but real—and maybe it was time he got a reality check of his own.

“That roof is coming down in the next hard rain,” she told him quietly, no longer smiling. “And the next hard rain is coming.”

Again, they all looked up. Freddy stayed that way longest, his plastic eyes shifting from point to point along the ceiling, frowning.

“Believe me, if it weren’t for the vault you’ve got backstage, it would have already happened, but it can’t do the job forever. If you don’t let me fix that roof now, you’ll be buried under it by September at the very latest.”

Freddy grunted and walked to the kitchen door, looking out into the dining room at the spongy tiles that had already fallen, the cracks in the wall, and then at the ventilation duct overhead.

“I know you don’t want me here,” she said, watching him, and had to laugh because of how true that was. It hurt, but it was an old pain and she was used to it, like the scars his indifference that day had left on her back. “You never have. I don’t expect that to change. But sometimes, we have to do things we don’t want to do, to get the things we need. You need this. You need me.”

Chica tapped her fingertips together, her eyes whining as they shifted back and forth between them. “EVERYBODY NEEDS HELP SOMETIMES,” she said.
Freddy glanced at her, then looked at Ana. “ARE YOU SURE?”

“Dead sure.”


“Yeah, actually, I can. This is what I do for a living. When I’m not, you know, doing other things. Mostly it’s this.”

“Why?”

“Why do I do it for a living?” she asked, surprised. “Or why do I do other things?”

“Why would-d-d a woodchuck… would. You. Do. This. For. Us.”

“It’s never a math question,” she muttered and sighed. “Look, Freddy, I don’t know what to tell you that you could even begin to understand. I’m not ready. That’s it in a nutshell and I realize it’s just the worst answer, but there it is. There’s so much I never did. For you, for him… for me.” Now it was her turn to look around. “I don’t believe in ghosts, but if I did, his is here. I’m not leaving until I put it to rest. You’re part of it. Don’t ask me how or why. I don’t know. It just feels right.”

He looked at her, thinking, and keeping his thoughts to himself. At length, he said, “If I say. No.”

The temptation to reach out and open his chest-panel was a strong one, but she restrained herself. Bonnie had shut down instantly when she’d done it to him, but if she had to resort to a cheap trick like that to win a fight with a giant teddy bear, she’d already lost. “I’ll argue,” she said. “But I’m not going to do anything behind your back. This is your house. Not mine.”

He grunted, glanced once more at the exposed duct on the ceiling, then turned all the way around and faced her. “Show. Me. What. You. Want. To. Do. This. Isn’t. Yes,” he added, pointing his fingers into her face like a gun. “But. Show. Me.”

Taking her staplegun from the counter and a Sharpie from her day pack, Ana went out into the East Hall as far as the Freddyland display. She took altogether too much satisfaction covering it up as much as her two oversized sheets of paper could. Uncapping her pen, she crossed off the first block of her simple calendar. “Today is June 18th. Move in, stock up, and take care of Chica. I bet you thought I forgot about you,” she added, smiling at Chica.

“I knew you’d never forget my birthday!”

“Well, I didn’t. I haven’t found the right parts yet,” she admitted. “But I haven’t given up. In the meantime, I can at least get you cleaned out and plug any holes in your tubes. And I’ll do it whether or not you let me fix the roof,” she added, turning back to Freddy, whose frown had grown considerably more troubled in the last few seconds. “I’m a lot of things, but not an extortionist.”

He grunted.

“Anyway, Chica is my only job tonight, because I’ve got work in the morning, but when I get off, it’s right back here and straight to work, covering the windows and hanging the doors.”

“I d-d-don’t think that’s going up-p-p again,” said Bonnie, twisting around to look back at the kitchen and the displaced, very broken door that was presently leaned up against Swampy.

Freddy’s grunt of agreement held a distinctly self-satisfied sound.
“I don’t mean actual doors, although I will need a few of those,” she muttered, pulling out her cell phone to make a note. “At least for the exterior, because the ones you’ve got are a joke. No, I mean hang plastic. It’ll make it easier to use the laser-tape measure and also hopefully keep the dust down. That part shouldn’t take too long, so I might be able to at least start tomorrow getting the store room ready.”

“READY. FOR-R-R—ARE YOU READY FOR FREDDY?—FOR. WHAT.”

“Storing stuff, of course. It’s got the driest ceiling, it’s got a cement floor, and it’s got the loading dock, so it’s my staging area.” She hesitated a glance at Freddy, then bit the bullet and said, “And the quiet room is my new workshop.”

Freddy’s eyes narrowed. “TWO. ROOMS.”

She was going to need more than that, but maybe it was best to ease him into this. “Construction is noisy,” she said. “And the deeper we get into summer, the more kids are going to come out to the quarry to fuck around. It takes just one curious kid hearing a bandsaw up in this joint and my ass goes to jail. I need someplace to cut.”

Freddy grunted. “WHAT. ELSE.”

“Well…there’s a bunch of little things, but the biggest job this weekend is the haulaway.”

“HALL.” He clicked a few times. “AWAY.”

“Yeah, sorry, that means clearing and cleaning.”

“I. KNOW. WHAT. IT. MEANS.” Freddy walked away, rubbing at his muzzle and grumbling to himself without words, all the way to the middle of the dining room. After a long time, and without looking back, he said, “WHAT. DO. YOU. WANT. TO. TAKE.”

“Everything.”

Now he turned around. “WHAT. DO. YOU. MEAN. EVERY. THING.”

“I mean everything. This stuff—” She kicked at a ridge of mushrooms growing on the curtains where they lay tangled around the fallen stage lights. “—and this stuff—” She picked up a plastic tray that had somehow made it all the way into the dining room and tossed it into a heap of others over by the tray return window Swampy was guarding, then walked over to the cashier’s station and pointed in at the massive pile of interlocked shelves, tables, and garbage barricading the lobby. “—and especially all that.”

“NO,” said Freddy.

“Non-negotiable, big bear. Everything that isn’t bolted down is getting shoveled out. Everything that is bolted down is getting the bolt-cutters taken to it. Everything goes.”

“NO,” he said again, no louder but with a severe angling of his eyelids. “IT IS UNLAWFUL TO REMOVE FAZBEAR ENTERTAINMENT INC. PROPERTY FROM THE PREMISES.”

Ana glanced back at the other animatronics, then squared off confidently against him. “I call for a vote.”

“God-d-d, if only,” said Bonnie and Foxy laughed.
“I’M THE LEADER OF THE BAND,” Freddy said, giving his chest a thump of emphasis. “YOU. TALK. TO. ME.”

“Okay. Okay. Let me think.” Ana pressed her hands over her eyes, deeply regretting not taking more computer courses back in high school. Or finishing high school. Or any number of regrettable decisions she had made that had brought her to this point in life, pitting her wits against an animatronic mascot in an abandoned pizza parlor in Mammon, Utah. “Okay,” she said, facing Freddy. “I think I got this. Do you know what garbage is, Freddy?”

Slowly, his head tipped back. He regarded her narrowly as he clicked to himself and finally said, “YES.”

“Is it unlawful to remove garbage?”

Freddy growled. Not a grumble, not a grunt, a growl.

“Is it unlawful—”

“NO. BUT.” He folded his arms, digging himself in without moving. “THAT. IS. NOT. GARBAGE.”

“It wasn’t always,” Ana agreed. “But it is now. It’s broken. It’s rusted. It’s moldy.” She pointed at the curtains. “It’s growing fungus. Do you see that?”

He didn’t look. He just glared at her.

“It’s garbage,” said Ana. “And it’s all coming out.”

Freddy did not argue. Neither did he stop scowling.

“A lot of this stuff can be recycled,” she went on, moving closer to the cashier’s station to get a better look at the barricade. “I don’t know, though. It may help a little on costs, but it’s going to eat up a lot of time if I have to drive out to the recycling place with every load.”

“RECYCLING USABLE MATERIALS LOWERS ENERGY CONSUMPTION AND HELPS PREVENT POLLUTION!” Chica chirped, waddling after her.

“Yeah, but it’s a pain in the ass,” said Ana.

“RECYCLING IS COOL!”

“Cool like a pain in my ass. Anyway, I’ve only got this weekend to clear as much as possible, so my options are damn limited. The important thing is to get it out of the way so I can get the walls and ceilings down.”

“What?” Freddy looked sharply up, then at her. “No.”

“Yep. All ceilings, all light fixtures, and all interior sheetrock. Everything’s coming down,” she said, looking up at the ventilation duct running up the hallway. “Including that, probably. I don’t know yet. What even is that?”

Freddy’s grunt was the only response she got from any of them.

“No, seriously, what is it? Because it looks like a real duct the way King Kong looks like a real gorilla. I’ve seen a lot of industrial HVAC systems and I’ve never seen ductwork like that. It’s exposed, for one thing, which is weird enough for a family diner. Then there’s the fact that it’s
three times bigger than it needs to be, and don’t ask me what’s made of. It sure ain’t galvanized sheet metal, that’s all I know. Plus, and this is the stinger, where are all the vents? I’ve seen maybe three in the whole building. If that’s a genuine mistake, it’s so mindfucking colossal and preventable that it’s almost admirable, and if it’s not, what in the name of tapdancing Christ is it?”

“LET’S SING A SONG,” Chica suggested, reaching out to pluck at Ana’s arm. “HEY GANG, LET’S SEE WHAT’S IN THE KITCHEN. I LOVE TO COOK. LET’S MAKE CUPCAKES! COME ON, LET’S GO!”

She might have gone on like that, but Freddy put both his hands on her shoulders and she quieted, although she continued to tap her wing-fingers together and look strangely, plasticly upset.

“Is it an insulated cable-line or something?” Ana asked, tracing the path the duct took across the ceiling with her eyes. “I mean, if I touch it, am I going to electrocute myself? Well, there’s no power, so I guess that’s not really an issue…except there’s no power, but there’s still wifi. And round and round and round she goes,” she groaned, rubbing at her eyes. “Questions, questions… and it’s not like I can call the city and just ask for answers.”

“LEAVE. IT. ALONE,” said Freddy.

“Yeah, I know that’s your answer. That’s your answer to everything,” muttered Ana only half under her breath. “But I need to know.”

“NO. YOU. DON’T.”

“Yeah, I do. It’s a safety issue.”

“NO. IT. ISN’T. AN-N-A,” he said, interrupting her even as she opened her mouth to argue, “YOU. HAVE. TO. TRUST. ME. WHEN. I. SAY. IT’S. SAFER. NOT. TO. FIX. IT.”

“Oh, I have to trust you, huh? Yeah, right, that’s totally fair.”

“SAY IT WITH ME, KIDS. LIFE. ISN’T. FAIR.”

She glared at him, but he glared back and he was better at it than she was, so she switched gears and tried diplomacy. “I realize what I’m saying sounds a lot like vandalism to you, but I swear, it’s absolutely necessary. The load-bearing walls in this building can no longer support the weight of the roof. Some of them have to be replaced and all of them have to be inspected. You don’t want to see me wrecking the place. I get that. I do. But I’m telling you it’s already wrecked and that wreckage has to come out before I can fix it.”

“NOT. ALL. OF. IT. NOT. THAT.”

“Yes, all of it, and yes, that. Look, Freddy, there is a serious mold problem here and I honestly don’t know who wins yet in the fight of how badly I do not want to figure out how to sterilize that thing’s interior versus how badly I don’t want to pull it down on top of my damn head, but one of the two is definitely happening.”

“YOU. CAN’T.”

“Why not?” she asked patiently.

To that, predictably, he had no answer, only a deep frown.

“I th-thought you said you were just fixing-ing the roof,” said Bonnie.
“I am. But I can’t just pull a roof out of Freddy’s hat and slap it down, there’s a process involved. Foundation-bone’s connected to the wall-bone’s connected to the roof-bone. It’s not a matter of personal standards as much as safety—”

“SAFTEY FIRST!”

“—although for the record, Ana Stark does not half-ass a job.” She waited, but Freddy didn’t interject another argument, so she relaxed somewhat and went cautiously on. “Just as soon as I safely can, I need to start pulling down the roof, because it all has to be ready for the build in one weekend—the third, fourth, and the fifth of July.” She returned to her calendar, talking out loud while she made notes in the margins. “All the roof work has to happen at night, when no one driving by can see me. That means no exterior lights, just the headlamp, so I can cover it with my hand. There’ll be plenty of fireworks, so the noise shouldn’t be as noticeable, but there’s a very limited window there, only from about six to ten Friday and midnight Saturday. Sunday, fireworks are illegal again, so all the noisy shit has to be finished by then, so I can tar and resurface. By Monday morning, your roof will be…I was going to say as good as new, but that thing was a piece of home-grown shit when it was new. I’m going to build you something much better than it ever was.”

Freddy joined her and stared at the calendar. “AND. THEN. YOU’RE. DONE.”

“Well, no. I mean, yeah, the exterior stuff will be done. The roof will be sound, that’s the important thing, but there’ll be a hell of a lot left to do on the inside. Just sheetrocking the ceiling is going to be a bitch and a half by myself, but at least I don’t have to try to do it all in one weekend.” She waited, watching Freddy study her calendar, already mentally forming her next argument for his inevitable ‘no’, but again, she just couldn’t wait it out. “What do you say, big bear?”

“I. SAY. STOP. CALLING. ME. THAT,” he replied without looking at her. Then he grunted, straightening, and finally turned around. “WHAT. DO. YOU. NEED. FROM. ME.”

“I need you to say yes.” She opened her arms. “I need you to trust me.”

Freddy was quiet. So were the others, but their stillness had a watchful quality. They were waiting, like her, to see what he would decide.

But he was too quiet, too long.

Ana let her arms drop, forcing a smile to mask her disappointment. “It’s a lot to ask,” she said. “You want to sleep on it?”

Freddy glanced upward, but it was hard to tell whether he was looking at the ceiling or at the ventilation duct that ran across it, or maybe just checking to see if God was paying attention. He did not look at Ana.

“Or do you just want me to go?” she finished, still smiling.

Bonnie fidgeted.

Freddy glanced at him, then at Chica, then went back to studying the calendar. “NO. YOU. CAN. STAY. TONIGHT. YOU. CAN. LOOK. AT. CHICA. THE. REST. OF. IT…” He grunted, rubbed his muzzle and then his forehead, and finally said, “I. NEED. TO. THINK. ABOUT. IT.”

Well, at least he didn’t say ‘no’ again. That was something. It wasn’t encouraging, but it was definitely something.
“Thanks,” she said, on the off-chance that good manners might score her a few more points before he tallied them up.

Freddy grunted and pointed at Chica, who tapped her fingertips together hopefully. “WATCH. HER.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ana, moving to take Chica’s hand. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Freddy, already turning way, turned back. Both he and Chica looked at her with nearly identical expressions of surprise.

“Oh,” said Ana. She let go of Chica’s hand and stood, feeling absurdly stupid, even for someone talking to animatronics. “You meant her…watch me.”

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but for a moment, Freddy’s features shifted to something that might have been chagrin. He turned his back to her before she could be sure. “STAY IN THE DESIGNATED SHELTER AREA,” he said and walked away.

There was a lot of clicking when he was gone. To Ana, watching him fade to black in the lightless hall, the sound reminded her weirdly of sticks and toy swords smacking together. Then Bonnie’s fan revved and she thought of a car antennae whipping through the air for just a moment before she pushed it away.

“He’s really not-t-t as big of an ass as he seems,” Bonnie said finally. “He’s j-j-just…”


Another silence.

“He’s an ass,” said Foxy, pushing himself off the doorway where he’d been leaning. He, too, set off down the hall and didn’t look back. “I got-t-t a bunk for ye to use when yer ready, lass. Don’t forget-t-t now.”

“She’s not sleeping-ing-ing in your cabin!” Bonnie snapped before Ana could refuse it.

Foxy chuckled, now just a shadow in the dark. “Did I say she’d-d-d be sleeping?”

Ana smiled wanly, glanced at Chica, then forced a broader smile. “You ready?”

Chica nodded, tapping her fingertips together.

“Go on over to the stage, then. Bonnie, can you help her with the stairs?” Ana looked one last time down the hall, but all she could see now was a pale smudge that might be Peggy Pigtails, frozen in her jaunty wave at the base of the signpost. She thought once more of that day on Circle Drive, seeing Freddy through the doors as she ran for them…and then pushed it from her mind and went to the kitchen for her tools. She carried enough keepsakes of that day with her as it was. It wasn’t worth remembering more than that. It wasn’t even the same Freddy.

* * *

She dreamed of her mother that night, bad dreams, as they all were, but not a memory this time, or at least, not a whole one. It was just her mother, soaking wet, her clothes tangled with river grass and clinging to her drug-wasted body, chasing her through Aunt Easter’s house. Her hand was gone. In its place, she wore a car antennae the way Foxy wore a hook. Ana didn’t see it, but she
could hear it, the sound it made slicing through the air just behind her. She ran as the house changed around her, growing more monstrous and maze-like with every rotted door she tried to put between them.

“I got you!” her mother kept screaming as the antennae whipped the walls, splattering Ana’s back with the house’s blood. “Marion got what she got, but I got you! Do you hear me, you little shit? We had a deal! I got you!”

Then she was upstairs, her mother crashing through the room just behind her, but all the doors were locked and there was nowhere to go but to the attic stairs, and Plushtrap was there, sitting on his chair at the end of the hall. He let her come, grinning, pretending to be dead until she was there, her hand reaching out for the door, and then he lunged. His tiny hands gripped at her, sharp as hooks. There was no pain, only the idea of pain and the sight of its metal teeth tearing flesh and snapping wires, crunching bone and scattering gears.

Ana wanted to scream. She tried to, but even in her dreams, her throat locked up. She stumbled back, struggling to unhook the twisting, clawing, chewing thing that had her, and suddenly fell through the floor.

She hit another one and all the pain that had been absent during the rest of this dream slammed into her all over and all at once, slapping her right out of sleep and onto the floor at Freddy’s.

Ana lay dazed for a little while, staring at the faint light slanting out of the kitchen across the tiles until she decided she was, in fact, awake. She sat up. After a moment, she looked up at the table beside her, the table she had put herself to bed on top of precisely because the floor was so horrible, then looked at herself on the floor some more.

‘Should have taken Foxy up on his offer,’ she thought, knowing she never would. Failing that, she should have picked a better place to bed down, but she’d been so tired after finishing up with Chica that she just didn’t feel like making the effort. Besides, it was Freddy’s. There weren’t any good places, only places slightly less awful than others. At the time, being well-off the floor had seemed like it was making the best of a bad situation. And once she’d pumped up the air mattress and made it up with sheets, it had actually been kind of nice, if one ignored the smell. It had just been so long since she’d actually slept on an air mattress that she’d forgotten how…well, airy they were, especially along the edges. Now she remembered she’d rolled off the damn things a thousand times, she’d just always been on the floor before.

Oh well. Live and learn.

She stood up, rubbing at the worst of the pain, and fished around in her day pack, which she had conscripted for use as a pillow, until she found her phone. She didn’t really need it; she knew what five a.m. felt like and this was nothing like it. Sure enough, it was only a little after two. She’d been asleep less than an hour.

She could hear sounds in the kitchen and was awake enough to recognize that she had been hearing it for some time without really paying attention to it, but now, along with the low grumbles and some metallic tapping and scraping, her ears picked up the distinctive sound of a drawer on her toolchest opening. She even knew which one—top left. After some subdued rattling and more wordless mutters, it closed and the tapping and scraping sounds resumed.

Freddy. She knew just by the voice, and if he was still messing around with her damn tools at two in the freaking morning, she was going to open a bear-sized can of whoop-ass.

Ana tucked her phone back into her day pack and headed for the kitchen. She wasn’t trying to
sneak up on him. Much later, she would wonder why she hadn’t at least said something as she walked up to him, but at the time, it never even occurred to her. She had heard him, so surely he’d heard her.

But he didn’t look around when she came around the oven. All his attention was fixed on his hand, which he had opened up and splayed on the counter before him. He was jabbing at it with a screwdriver, oddly clumsy for a bear programmed to perform card tricks.

‘It’s his left hand,’ she thought suddenly and almost laughed, because the idea of an animatronic having a dominant hand was beyond hilarious. But there he was and the more she watched him struggle to hold the screwdriver—it looked like a toothpick in his grip, adding to the general sense of the surreal—the more he looked like someone trying too hard to make his off-hand do what the other had always done without effort.

What exactly was he trying to do, anyway?

Whatever he was doing, he couldn’t do it with his left hand. The screwdriver slipped; Freddy said, softly but distinctly, “HELLO.”

Ana had to rub her mouth to keep from laughing at this prissy stand-in for an incredibly mild epithet.

Freddy didn’t dignify her smirk with his attention. He bent closer, the light from his eyes brightening as he narrowed them, searching the insides of his open hand, and then he straightened, opened the top left drawer of her toolchest, returned the screwdriver, opened a few more drawers, and selected the needlenose pliers. He fumbled with them, ultimately using his right hand to manipulate the fingers of his left around them, and bent close again.

Ana walked over to have a look for herself. “Let me see it,” she said, reaching for him.

And again, she wasn’t sneaking. She never for one moment thought he was unaware of her, just that he was pissed and ignoring her, yet when she spoke, his fans roared and he spun, yanking his arm from her startled grip in one second and slamming it into her chest in the next.

There couldn’t have been more than two feet between her and the side of the oven, so it wasn’t a lengthy flight, but flight it was. Her feet were off the ground, her hair snapping out in front of her, time itself stretching out as if she were stoned, so that she seemed to have all the time in the world to remember her stay at that ranch in Montana and how she’d had to learn the hard way never to walk up on a horse from behind. Even the ones that like you will kick.

Then she hit several things seemingly all at once—her back, butt and head all recorded separate impacts—and sat dazed at his feet, looking up at his shadowed face as the black sockets there opened up again into Freddy’s friendly blue eyes. His arm twitched; he might have been reaching for her, but he changed his mind and stepped back instead.

He grunted.

“It’s okay,” Ana said. Her voice caught. She tried to take a deep breath and couldn’t. “I walked into it. I’m fine.”

Gathering her legs under her, she pushed against the floor—God, that hurt. Why did it hurt her chest to use her damn arms?—and slowly got up.

Freddy backed up another step, his fans too loud and irregular. One note of the March slipped him. Just one.
“I’m fine,” she said again and forced herself to say it louder so it’d sound like she meant it. The shock was fading and now the pain was starting to register, filling in her chest with lead. She was reasonably sure nothing was broken, but she was going to bruise up like a thunderhead before morning. That was going to make the work she had to do, not just at her actual job, but here where the real job was, just so much better.

“Sorry, Freddy,” she said and this time offered her hand, palm up, as if she were coaxing an animal to her. “Can I see it?”

Freddy looked at her hand, then at his. Frowning, he put his arm out and watched, fans loudly revving and notes of the Toreador March dropping, disconnected, as she took it.

He had pulled the casing plate open on its hinged side and peeled the padding away, exposing the inner workings of his hand. It looked creepily skeletal, all long metal bones hinged at the joints, without any visible springs or wires cluttering up the view. She could easily see where he’d been gouging at himself; more difficult to determine was just what he’d been trying to do.

“Move your fingers for me, one at a time,” she ordered, demonstrating.

He did, but when he came to the middle finger, she heard a faint grinding sound under his servos and the finger didn’t move.

“That’s new,” she muttered, frowning. “You snap a spring, big bear?”

He didn’t answer.

“Well, if you didn’t have one before, you probably have one now. You should have come to get me. You’re going to break something trying to fix yourself and it’s not like they have a robotic hand aisle down at the hardware store. Hold still.”

Ana opened up the bottom right drawer of her toolchest and brought out her precision kit. Alternating between her sculpting pick and her long-handled tweezers, she did her best to straighten the parts he’d bent ramming the tool through the middle of them in an effort to get at… whatever the hell was wedged in there.

“ARE. YOU. ALL. RIGHT.”

“I’m fine.”

He grumbled to himself, low in his speakers and without words, as she probed carefully through his ‘bones’ and finally said, “RULE NUMBER SIX—”

“Don’t touch Freddy,” she said with him. “Yeah, I know. Pretty sure I won’t forget it again. What can I say? Sometimes you just have to hit me before I listen.”

His fan revved. He said, “AN-N-A.”

And from the hall, like an echo in Bonnie’s voice, came, “Ana?”

She pulled in a deeper breath, wincing, and called, “We’re in the kitchen.”

A few seconds and she could hear his footsteps, not quite running but walking a lot faster than he ought to, and a few seconds after that, he was there, gripping the wall and looking back and forth between her and Freddy with anxious eyes. “What-t-t—WHAT DO YOU SAY?—What happened?”
“Nothing,” said Ana as Freddy opened his mouth. “I fell into the oven in the dark.”

Freddy looked at her. His muzzle closed and became a frown.

“Are you ok-k-kay?”

“I’m fine.”

Bonnie looked at Freddy. His ears twitched. “Are you sure?”

“I said, I’m fine…and I think I found something.”

She had. Just how she could have known with such certainty it was the thing she was looking for, she couldn’t explain, but it was. It was just as solid as anything else in his hand, but it felt wrong, out of place. She scraped around it with the pick, feeling out its dimensions, trying to visualize just what it could be. A screw? A piece of his casing? Something small and hard, whatever it was. She wasn’t sure how much damage it was doing in there, but she was dead sure Freddy was doing more trying to get it out.

“What are you doing-ing-ing?”

“Freddy’s got something stuck in his hand. Come here, I need your eyes.”

Bonnie switched them on and limped over, letting her take his jaw and aim his eyes where she needed them. “What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but it sure doesn’t want to come out,” she muttered, finally getting the thing, whatever it was, loose and now working on tickling it out between the metal bones to a place where she could grip it with the tweezers without letting it slip and wedge itself into a new sticking place. She could see it now, but still couldn’t make out what it was, only that it was pale and vaguely triangular, like a tooth. She couldn’t get a good look at it through the complicated mechanisms of his fingers, though.

She leaned back, thinking, then put the tweezers down and said, “I got an idea. Stay here and don’t move.”

No response from either of them.

“Bonnie?” she prompted.

“Yeah.”

“Freddy?”

He grunted.

Neither one of them looked at her, just at each other.

Ana left the kitchen and went to her day pack. Moving her phone, her clothes and the jumble of essential and not-so-essential leftovers of her life, she felt around in the bottom. Napkins. Stray receipts. Ketchup packets. Condoms. Tampons…

There! A half-empty packet of gum. And there, an extra straw she’d gotten at some drive-thru or another and hadn’t gotten around to throwing away, even though no one in the history of the universe had ever had a drinking-straw-related emergency.
Ana unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it in her mouth, wincing at the taste of stale, heat-softened cinnamon. She chewed as she went back to the kitchen, where the two animatronics were still staring each other down, then pinched off just enough of the gum to cover one end of the straw.

“It’s just a matter of finding the right tool for the right job,” she declared, offering her empty hand again. “Let me see it.”

It took some fiddling, but the interloping object was no match for a flexible straw and sticky gum. Soon, Ana pulled it triumphantly out and held it up into the light of Freddy’s eyes, but there the first word of her ‘What is this?’ became a puzzled whuff of empty air as she realized just what she had.

A tooth, she’d thought, first spying it wedged into his bones. Pale and small and hard, like a tooth. Because it was. Surely not a human tooth, *surely* not…it just looked like one. An incisor, to be specific, chipped along the upper edge and broken at the root. There was…something…smeared on it. Oil, she decided. Old, discolored oil. It couldn’t possibly be blood. And how could a tooth have gotten in there in the first place? Yeah, okay, his hand, his arm—heck, his whole body—was cracked open any number of places wide enough for an object this size to pass through, but that still left her with the picture of either a person placing their tooth through said crack for shits and giggles, or…or what, exactly?

Freddy grumbled out something that did not even begin to sound like ‘thank you’ and snapped the casing on his hand shut. His eyes dipped to take in the sight of the tooth, then came back up to meet hers. He didn’t invite her to leave it for the tooth fairy. He didn’t ask her what it was, either.

“Yeah,” said Ana slowly, tossing the straw away, tooth and all, to lose itself in the debris littering the floor. She spat out her gum, wrapped it in its wrapper and tossed that away too, turning her back on him deliberately as she headed for the door. “You’re all going to need a good cleaning, but one thing at a time, right? I’m going to bed. Keep the noise down, big bear.”

Freddy grunted.

Bonnie wasn’t following her, which was almost funny, considering he usually stapled himself into her shadow the minute she walked into the building. Ana paused, halfway to her table, and looked back at him, still in the doorway and staring at Freddy. She didn’t like the look in his eye, which was funny since, objectively speaking, it was just a vacant plastic stare. Nevertheless, she had the strong feeling that words were about to be exchanged and she didn’t want to hear them.

“You coming, my man?” she called.

He looked at her, ears twitching, then at Freddy again.

Better bring out the big guns.

“Want to tuck me in?” she suggested and this time, when he looked at her, she winked.

She had no doubt that would get him going, and it did, but not right away.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, backing up.

Freddy came to the doorway as soon as Bonnie cleared it and watched as Ana, giggling, let Bonnie lift her up and set her on the table. Then he shut his eyes off and walked away into the dark.

“Everything-ling-ing all right?” Bonnie asked, keeping his eyes on Ana but rotating his ears to track
Freddy’s retreat.

“All good in the hood, my man. It’s just, you know…Freddy’s pissed at me,” Ana whispered, laying herself carefully down in the middle of the air mattress, as far from soft corners and long drops as she could get. “But it’s fine.”

“Did he…” Bonnie’s ears lay down, came up, twitched. He picked up her sheet and pulled it up around her shoulders. “Did he say so?”

“No, but Freddy’s really good at saying stuff without saying anything.”

“Yeah, he is. But did-d-d he—”

“He doesn’t like me, that’s all. And that’s fine.”

His cameras whined softly as his eyes shifted over her. “He j-j-just doesn’t know you.”

“He knows me.” Ana smiled wider. Her chest hurt, but nothing was broken. “And he knows I shouldn’t be here.”

“Yeah, well, Freddy c-c-can just get the fuck-k-k over himself for once,” Bonnie said. He tickled the sole of her foot where it poked out, then leaned on the table and looked at her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, why do you keep asking?”

He didn’t answer, just looked at her, leaning over with his arms on either side of her mattress, filling her vision. At last, he said, “Would you t-t-tell me if you weren’t?”

She kept smiling, but it wasn’t easy. “I’m fine. You know, it’s been a long time since I’ve been tucked in, but I’m pretty sure there’s supposed to be a goodnight kiss somewhere.”

He smiled his Bonnie-smile and bent close. She craned her neck up and pressed her lips to his muzzle for a second before letting her head drop back atop her day pack.

“Good night, my man.”

“Night, baby girl.” He straightened up and went over to sit on the stage, reaching out for his guitar.

“You just going to sit there all night?” she teased, letting her eyes shut out the sight of him, one foot on the stage and one on the floor, strumming on his broken guitar.

“Nope. Just until you’re out-t-t.”

“Then what?” she asked sleepily, thinking, ‘Then he’s going to kick Freddy’s ass.’

“I don’t-t-t know. Guess I’ll g-g-go back to the arcade or something-ing-ing.”

The sound of Bonnie’s finger-servos whining as they moved over the absent strings of his guitar filled the silence. It was a good sound, mechanical and soothing. She drowsed to its steady rhythms and soon was fast asleep. She never heard him mutter, “See? I c-c-can lie, too.”

* * *

Bonnie sat on the stage and watched until Ana’s snoring told him she was all the way under. Then
he put his guitar aside and got up. He took a few steps, paused when Ana shifted on the table, then went on out. Chica was in the arcade still, playing air hockey with Foxy and beating him so badly neither were bothering to keep score. No sign of Freddy, not there, not in the security room, not in the employee’s lounge.

Bonnie kept looking, circling the building twice along Freddy’s usual patrolling routes before he finally noticed the emergency exit in the back hall next to the security office was missing a doorknob. When he touched the door, it creaked open. He ducked through and there on the other side, leaning up against the wall almost directly beneath a spray-painted picture of himself, was Freddy. His arms were folded, his head bent as if contemplating the cracked pavement under his feet, in quiet contrast to the graffiti just behind him, where a Freddy even larger than life simultaneously sodomized one screaming victim while eating another.

“Hey,” said Bonnie.

Freddy grunted.

“What-t-t happened to the d-d-door?” Bonnie asked, thumbing back at it.

Freddy shrugged. “IT. WASN’T. KEEPING. ANY. ONE. OUT. ANY. WAY.”

Bonnie found a place to stand close to Freddy, but not quite in arm’s reach. He looked at the stars while Freddy looked at the ground.

It was a nice night. He didn’t often notice things like that, but he made himself see it now. He wanted to get mad, of course, but Ana was inside, deep asleep and vulnerable. She needed him to be calm, so he would be.

“Did you hit-t-t her?” Bonnie said at last.

“YES.”

Bonnie nodded. The stars faded. He opened his eyes. He was not going black. He was okay. He thought through a number of things that began ‘If you ever do that again,’ but they all ended with Freddy telling him ‘Enough,’ so he let it go. For now.

“She lied-d-d for you,” he said instead.

“NO.” Three notes of the March stuttered out of his speakers. “WHAT. SHE. SAID…SHE. BELIEVED. IT.”

“When she said-d-d she fell into the oven?” Bonnie demanded scornfully.

“OH. THAT.” Freddy shook his head. “YES. SHE. LIED. THEN.”

Bonnie frowned at him, fighting his temper and his curiosity. Curiosity won. “What else d-d-did she say?”

Freddy glanced at him, then pushed himself off the wall. “IS. SHE. ALL. RIGHT.”

“I think-k-k so. She’s asleep, anyway.”

“SHE. WANTS. TO. STAY. UNTIL. INDEPENDENCE DAY,” said Freddy, walking away, not back to the building but out into the parking lot. “EVERY. NIGHT. I DON’T KNOW. HOW. I’M. GOING. TO. MAKE. THIS. WORK.”
“What’s to figure out-t-t?” Bonnie demanded, following. “Just leave her alone.”

“IT’S. NOT. THAT. SIMPLE.”

“Sure it is. She knows what-t-t she’s doing. And you d-d-don’t need to be such a—”

Freddy glanced at him. His eyes were tired.

Bonnie couldn’t finish. He said, “You’d like her if you g-g-gave her a chance,” instead.

Freddy did not argue. He didn’t agree. He did nothing.

“But you won’t-t-t, will you?” Bonnie stopped walking, his hands in useless fists. “She just wants to help-p-p. Why is that-t-t such a bad thing?”

Freddy kept going, but only for a little while. His steps slowed, then stopped. His head bent. Then he turned, too fast, and came back. One note of the March dropped (‘A-Flat,’ thought Bonnie dazedly) and then he was seized and yanked nose to smooshed hackey-sack nose. Freddy said, “SHE’S. GOING. TO. TEAR. THE. WOOF. DOWN. DO YOU UNDERSTAND? SHE’S. GOING. TO. TEAR. THE. WALLS. DOWN.”

“She’ll fix it-t-t, Freddy! Jesus! She wants to d-d-do something for us, something-ing-ing amazing, and all you c-c-care about is the mess!”

“Oh. My. G-G-Godd,” said Freddy, cutting a sharp upwards glance as if inviting the aforenamed’s input. “THINK. ABOUT. THE. NOISE. BONNIE. DO. YOU. REMEMBER. HOW. IT. WAS. IN. THE BEGINNING. DO. YOU. REMEMBER. HEARING. HIM. BANGING. AROUND. SCREAMING.”

“We c-could barely-ly-ly hear it,” Bonnie argued. “And we have microphones. Ana will never know——”

Freddy’s speaker spun out half a bar of rapid notes.

“NOT. AN-N-A. YOU. IDIOT,” Freddy snapped, giving him a joint-rattling shake. “IF. WE. COULD. HEAR. HIM. MAKING. NOISE. HE. CAN. HEAR. US. HE. WILL. HEAR. HER. NOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“He c-c-can’t get out,” Bonnie said, but he could feel his ears low to his head, all but shouting his uncertainty to the world.

“He. COULDN’T. GET. OUT,” Freddy countered grimly, his eyes flickering as the lenses opened and shut, opened and shut. “BUT. THAT. WAS. YEARS. AGO. AND. EVERYTHING. IS. FALLING. APART. HE. MAY. HAVE. GIVEN. UP. BEFORE. BUT. NOW. HE’LL. HAVE. A. REASON. TO TRY. AGAIN. AND. IF. HE. DOES. I. CAN’T. STOP. HIM. I. CAN’T. EVEN. SAY. HIS. NAME. SO. STOP. ACTING. LIKE. IT. DOESN’T MATTER. IF. THIS. WASN’T. AN-N-A. YOU. WOULD. BE. TELLING. ME. TO. K-K-KILL. HER. YOURSELF.”

He wanted to argue and couldn’t. His speaker scratched out a little static and that was all.

They looked at each, neither speaking, until, so perfectly synchronized it might as well be part of some forgotten routine, Freddy released him and they started walking again.

“I’m s-s-sorry,” Bonnie mumbled.

“SO. AM. I.” Freddy glanced at him, heaved a staticky sigh, and said, “I. WANT. THIS. TO. WORK. BELIEVE. IT. OR. NOT. I. JUST. DON’T. SEE. HOW. IT. POSSIBLY. CAN. WHEN. SHE. THINKS. SHE’S. SAFE. AND. WE. CAN’T. TELL. HER. SHE. ISN’T. AND. THE. SPACE. BETWEEN. IS. FULL. OF. MONSTERS.”

“We c-c-can look out for her.”

“BONNIE. WE. ARE. THE. MONSTERS.”

Bonnie didn’t answer. He knew.

Together, they walked to the row of water-starved trees that bordered the lot, and through them, to the ledge that overlooked the desert. It was a bright night, full of stars, with a nearly-full moon low in the sky, showing him the nothing that lay in all directions. None of the pizzerias had exactly been set down in pleasant places, but this was by far the deadest, the most remote. It was like living at the literal edge of nowhere, and the longer he’d been here, the less it bothered him. The less anything bothered him, really.

He’d never known how dead he was…

Freddy grunted, a sound that was nearly a chuckle. When Bonnie looked at him inquiringly, he said, “YOU’RE. HUMMING.”

“I am?” Bonnie brushed his fingers across his speaker, a little embarrassed.

“HER. SONG.” Freddy thought about it and uttered that not-quite-laughing grunt again. “YOUR. SONG. YOU. HAVE. A. SONG. BONNIE. IT. MUST. BE. LOVE.”

Freddy’s cut-and-paste mode of speaking made it difficult to read him sometimes. Bonnie wasn’t sure how to take that. If Foxy had said it, however neutrally delivered, it would have come from a mean place, but this was Freddy, and for all his faults, Freddy really didn’t have many mean places. So it was a joke, he guessed; a little bitter, maybe, but still a joke.

“It’s not-t-t our song,” Bonnie said. “It’s just the one we’re using-ing-ing until I write us a better one.”

“AH.” Freddy shook his head, but smiled, after his fashion. “I. REALLY. DON’T. UNDERSTAND. WHAT. YOU. SEE. IN. HER.”

It was another joke, Bonnie was almost certain of it. Nonetheless, he said, cautiously, “Do you want-t-t to?”

Freddy’s smile, such as it was, fell into shadow as Freddy bent his head, becoming a frown. He stared out into the desert, his eyes moving restlessly from the stars to the quarry, heaven and the grave, thinking. “I DON’T KNOW,” he said at last. “PART. OF. ME. DOES. IF. ONLY. BECAUSE. IT’S. SO.” He clicked a few times and finally shrugged, defeated by his own limited vocabulary. “TO. SEE. YOU. FALL. SO. HARD. FOR. SOMEONE. SO.” He stopped to click again.

“Before you finish-sh-sh that, remember that we k-k-killed, like, four guys, just a few days ago.
“Okay? She’s not-t-t the worst person in that building-ing-ing tonight.”

“NO,” Freddy agreed after a moment, but something about the angle of his eyelids and the tilt of his ears told Bonnie he was thinking about the basement again. “BUT. SERIOUSLY. WHAT. DO. YOU. SEE. WHEN. YOU. LOOK. AT. HER. WHAT. DO. YOU. SEE. THAT. I. DON’T.”

A thousand fractured images tumbled through Bonnie’s mind—her bluer-than-blue eyes reflecting the glow from his, her braid slipping through his fingers, her serious face turned up to him as she stood at the foot of the stage—but the picture they ultimately formed wasn’t one of Ana at all.

“You know that-t-t-t moment,” Bonnie said haltingly. “That first moment, when we were switched-d-d on for the very first t-t-t—TIME TO ROCK!”

Freddy grunted.

“When everything-ing-ing was new and st-strange and a little scary. There was music, remember?”

“ON. THE. RADIO.”

“Yeah. And everything it p-p-played was the most amazing-ing thing I ever heard-d-d. And then he g-g-gave me the guitar and it was mine. I couldn’t-t-t play it, but the possibility-ty-ty was there, you know? So much p-p-possibility. I knew the feeling-ing before I ever knew the word and it was the b-b-best—FRIEND—feeling ever. I remember the first-t-t song I ever played, the Hokey fucking Pokey, and I remember thinking-ing-ing, ‘This changes everything.’ And it did-d-d. It was my world-d-d…before my world was this.”

Freddy said nothing, but his ears moved, listening.

“She’s that moment-t-t,” said Bonnie and his voice was small, so much less than the wind or the bugs or the distant hum of life miles away in town. “Not the first-t-t one, but the last. She’s my last possibility. I love her. You c-c-can laugh at me all you want—”

“I’M. NOT. LAUGHING.” Freddy’s eyes moved from star to star, stone to stone. “IT’S. NOT. FUNNY.”

The wind blew, never quiet, never still.

“What-t-t are you going to do?”

Freddy looked at the quarry, the moon, the back of his hand. He sighed and let his arm drop. “NOTHING.”

“For how long?” Bonnie pressed.

“IF. SHE. FOLLOWS THE RULES…” Freddy let that go, the effort of clipping apart his sound files too arduous to waste on something so blatantly unlikely. “AS. LONG. AS. I. CAN,” he said finally. “BUT. I. JUST. DON’T. SEE. HOW. THIS. IS. GOING. TO. WORK.”

They stood together for a few minutes after that, but the quiet was not peaceful.


“Aren’t you coming-ing?”

Freddy shook his head. “I. WANT. TO. BE. ALONE. JUST. FOR. A. WHILE. I. NEED. TO.
“Okay.” Bonnie took a few steps, knowing he needed to be the bigger bunny here and just leave it alone, and then gave up and looked back. “If you k-k-kill her, I’m done,” he said quietly. “I’m not-t-t-t saying you can’t. I’m not even saying you sh-sh-shouldn’t. You’ll do what you think-k-k is right and I guess I still b-b-believe that. I’m just saying-ing-ing if you have to k-k-kill her—”

“I KNOW,” said Freddy, keeping his back to him so that his words blew, broken, on the wind. “I. HAVE. TO. K-K-KILL. YOU. FIRST.”

There was nothing else to say. Bonnie went back inside and Freddy stayed on the edge of the lot and stared into the darkness.
Ana slept the sleep that comes with too few hours and too many thoughts. All too soon, the alarm on her phone went off like a siren directly under her ear. She rolled instinctively away from the noise, but the action pulled at her chest and she curled up again, inadvertently sparing herself another fall onto the floor. Belatedly cautious, she felt for the edge of the air mattress before turning onto her back. This was far less painful on the second attempt; the first hurts of the day were always the worst. The phone’s alarm continued to drill into the back of her head, helping orient herself to reality.

Freddy’s. She was in Freddy’s. And that meant…

“Bonnie?” she called.

Two round lights snapped on in the darkness. “Yeah?”

“Just checking.” Yawning, she dug into her pack and shut off the alarm. Four-thirty. Work at five. Plenty of time to get there, but not enough to waste.

Ana sat up with a sleepy wince, then pulled her shirt up and had a look at herself in the light of Bonnie’s eyes. A bruise had appeared in the night, not quite perfectly placed across her gears-and-wires tattoo, but close enough to make it almost seem deliberate. The color was a deep purple, the edges well-defined, with a pale lightning-fork shape through the middle that would match the wide crack in Freddy’s forearm.

“Jeez,” said Bonnie. “You okay?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s a beaut, ain’t it?” She touched it, feeling it puffy beneath her fingertips, exploring the strangely satisfying sense of hurt that only comes from picking at scabs or poking at bruises, until she remembered Bonnie was also watching. “It’s fine,” she assured him. “It’s nothing, really. I fell off my bike.”

Servos whirred, amplified in the empty room. “Into the oven.”

“What?”

“You said-d-d you fell into the oven.”

“Oh. Right. Whatever, the point is, it’s fine.” Ana dropped her shirt and boosted herself down onto the floor, whereupon her bare feet broke the dry crust coating the tiles and let the gooey stuff underneath ooze up between her toes, and short of stepping on a Lego brick or being doused with a bucket of ice water, a better wake-up was hard to imagine.

She needed to find a better place to sleep. She honestly didn’t think her standards were that high—a floor that wasn’t three inches deep in mold and mushrooms, a ceiling that wouldn’t kill her in her sleep, and a door so she could change her clothes without an animatronic wandering in to stare at her. Oh, and since she’d be doing an equal amount of sleeping during the day as at night, it would be nice if her bedroom wasn’t sharing space with a regular song-and-dance act. That alone limited her options.
“You okay?” Bonnie asked again, standing with some difficulty and heading toward her.

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“How gross your floor is.”

Bonnie’s eyes dropped to look at the floor.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I’m going to fix it. By this time next week, this place’ll just be a shithole, instead of a hellhole.”

He stuttered out a laugh. “That’s the spirit-t-t.”

With her phone for light, Ana shuffled across the cluttered dining room to the kitchen and stared blearily at the counters, trying to remember why she’d come in here. Coffee? Sounded right. She could see the coffeepot, but where was her camp stove? Still in the hall, she decided, which begged the question, how badly did she want coffee?

Badly. So badly. Also, she was going to need to get some of this Fazbear smell off before she went to work. God knew how she was going to do that. She’d better think seriously about the hygiene situation before Monday. She had a camp shower at home…somewhere…but damned if she knew where she could install it. She’d need a drain for sure, and if she wanted any chance of warm water, she’d need a window to hang the bag out, not to mention some way to disguise it so no random jackass painting up the wall would see it and think someone was brewing prison hooch in the back room at Freddy’s.

“Ana?”

She looked back. “Yeah?”

“You’re just-t-t, um, standing there,” said Bonnie. “Are you sure you’re ok-k-kay?”

“Yeah. I stayed up too late, that’s all. Kind of slow to reboot this morning.” She shuffled toward the counter, patting the coffeepot in passing but still too lazy to go look for the stove. If she left in the next five minutes, she could stop at the Donut Hole and grab a coffee and some donuts for the ungrateful bastards at work. But what was she going to do about a shower?

Ana’s eye fell on the cleaning supplies. She picked up a can of air freshener—it promised her the scent of cashmere woods, whatever the hell that smelled like—and gave herself a spritz under each armpit. After a moment, and because he was standing there, she gave Bonnie a spritz too.

He watched the mist disperse against his chest, then raised his eyes without moving his head. “Are you sure you’re awake?”

“I’m sure I don’t want to be. Does that count?” Tossing the can back on the counter, Ana squeezed past the bunny blocking her path and headed back over to her day pack to get dressed. “Do me a huge favor while I’m gone?”

“Sure. What-t-t?”

“Keep everyone else out of my stuff. I realize I’ve got it kind of everywhere, but some of that shit is expensive. I come back and find my generator in pieces and I won’t need to pull the roof down, I’ll just blow it the fuck off with the full megaton force of my rage. Got me?”
“Got you.”

Ana pulled her jeans on, threaded a belt and buckled it, stepped into her boots and tied them, then unbraided, brushed and rebraided her hair. “Good enough,” she muttered, tucking her shirt in.

“Okay, I’m off. I’m probably going to be late tonight, because I’ve got to pick some more stuff up and swing by the house and all that, but I should be here before dark. Need anything before I go?”

He hesitantly opened his arms.

So much for getting the Fazbear smell off. Ana went to him and let him wrap her in one of his Bonnie-hugs. “You glad I’m here?” she whispered, knowing he’d say yes, but wanting to hear it out loud anyway.

“Oh,” he said, also whispering, just because she had. “So much, b-b-baby girl. Just so much.”

She kissed him, thinking, ‘Worst breath of the day,’ and smiling because he didn’t notice or care, and never would. “See you, Bon,” she told him and pulled out of his arms to discover Freddy standing in the kitchen doorway, grim as the Reaper and as silent, watching them. “Hi,” she said.

Bonnie stepped back, followed her eyes, and looked at Freddy.

Freddy did nothing.

“You got something to say to me, big bear?” Ana asked, not exactly hopeful, but not giving up yet either.

Freddy’s hand flexed. He glanced at it, frowned, then stepped out of the kitchen and continued on down the East Hall. “HAVE A NICE DAY,” he said as he walked away. “COME BACK TO SEE US REAL SOON.”

Bonnie’s ears drooped.

“Aww.” Ana reached up to pat the thatch of thicker flocking on the top of his head. “Didn’t you hear him? He wants to see me again. Real soon.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“Hey, considering how much he probably wants to crumple me up like a paper ball and throw me out the door, that’s practically a hug. You got to look on the bright side, my man. Besides, you love me, don’t you?”

His ears came up. He looked at her, fans revving and servos whining. “Yeah,” he said through a crackle of static. “Yeah, I-I—I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY, BONNIE THE BUNNY!”

“That’s all I need to know.”

With that, she picked up her day pack and headed out the door to work.

* * *

It was a long day, due more to boredom than aggravation. Big Paulie had obviously talked to Shelton and made his ass-headed feelings known, so when the morning meeting concluded and all present were again lectured on how vital it was that every man available bust his ass to get the old mall cleared and ready for the coming build, Ana Stark was assigned to stay in the office and
answer the phone.

It rang only twice all day. Both times, it was Shelly, asking if he had any calls.

After work, she headed home, took a shower just because it would be her only chance all weekend, dumped some clothes into a box of bathroom crap she’d only partially unpacked in all the months she’d been here, and took it out to the truck. She was surprised at how much there was. Stuff she’d forgotten, like the camping shower; stuff she hadn’t thought she’d need, like the Easy Bake Oven Rider had given her for his going-away present; and stuff she just hadn’t had room for the first time around, like her many boxes of booze and mixers. But at last, she got it all loaded and was on her way.

At Freddy’s, she stopped just long enough to unload everything into the hall at Tux’s feet, with all the stuff she hadn’t gotten around to putting away yesterday. It was early yet. The restaurant was still ‘open,’ at least in the minds of the animatronics. Bonnie and Chica were on stage when she carried the first box through the dining room, telling jokes between verses of This Old Man. She noticed Freddy watching from the shadows at the back of the room as she was making her third trip. By the time she was taking the last box in, he was in the kitchen, looking over the boxes marked *Booze, More Booze* and *Puke and Rally, Bitches* with a predictably disapproving eye.

She didn’t stop to talk. They were still performing, so they couldn’t really talk back anyway. Besides, there were things she really needed to get at the Lowe’s in Hurricane, not the least of which being a utility trailer so she could double her load capacity for the haulaway, because without one, the slim chance she had of emptying the restaurant in a single weekend narrowed to none at all.

After Lowe’s, she stopped in at Walmart for a cooler and two bags of ice—it wouldn’t last the weekend, but at least she’d have cold drinks tonight and tomorrow—half a dozen battery-powered lamps, all the Easy Bake Oven mixes she could find, and more water, both in bottles by the case and gallon-sized jugs.

There was a liquor store on the way out of town, so she stopped on impulse, in spite of the fact that she had three boxes of mostly untapped booze waiting for her in Freddy’s kitchen that were more than equal to her infrequent urges to binge-drink and black out. They not only had what she wanted, they also had rolling paper, so she picked up some of that too, and more lighter fuel for her Zippo. One more stop at the gas station to fill up and back to Freddy’s she went.

It was later than she’d thought now. The sun, low in the sky as she’d left Hurricane in the rear view mirror, was entirely gone by the time she reached Mammon. Lights were coming on all over town, shining out of windows, through curtains and blinds—a reminder of the work she had ahead of her this evening.

After sitting on her ass all day with nothing to think about except Freddy’s, she was so ready to start working, but there always seemed to be one more tedious job that came first.

“This was the plan all along,” she told herself, pulling up to the side door next to Tux. “Prep tonight. Clear tomorrow and Sunday. Just stick with the plan, stay on schedule, and everything will be all right.”

She shut the headlights off, kept the engine running, unloaded quickly and then took the truck around back and parked it so her new utility trailer abutted the loading dock. Then she slung her day pack over her shoulder and jogged back to the side exit. After the haulaway, she wouldn’t have to use Tux’s door anymore, but for now, even if it meant carrying a lot of heavy shit all the way through the building, it was safer than navigating the booby-trapped heaps of junk filling the store.
Crawling through the broken side door into darkness, Ana pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight app to assess the mound of bags and boxes surrounding Tux. There wasn’t all that much, but everything was either bulky or awkwardly-shaped, or just plain heavy. She got as far as pouring the ice into the cooler and had only started picking out bags to carry when she realized there was light behind her. She turned, grateful to see eyes coming to meet her. “Give me a hand?” she called.

The eyes jerked as their owner twitched and the next thing she heard was plastic applause.

“Ah, damn it,” Ana laughed. “I just do not learn.”

“Sorry, I c-c-can’t help it.” Bonnie’s voice. As he came nearer, she could even make out a few features on his cracked face. “Let me-e-eeee have some of that.”

She started to hold out a case of bottled water, only to pull it cautiously back at the last instant.

“How much can you lift?”

He clicked and said, “ACROMIOCLAVICULAR PROCESS NOT TESTED BEYOND SEVEN HUNDRED EIGHTY KILOGRAM LOAD. OVERALL AMBULATORY SUPPORT STRUCTURE BECOMES UNSTABLE AT FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY-FOUR KILOGRAMS.”

“What’s a…acro…uh…?”

“It’s m-m-my shoulder.”

“Why didn’t you just say shoulder?”

“Because the g-g-guy who programmed me knew the word-d-d acromioclavicular.”

“But what did all that mean?”

He took the water from her. “Sh-Sh-Short answer, I can lift-t-t-t more than I can c-c-carry and I can carry about a thousand pounds. Well, tested to carry,” he amended, flicking one ear. “If we had a g-g-good reason to try, I bet t-t-two of us together could-d-d even carry your truck.”

“Yeah, sure you could. That’s a two-ton truck, Bon. You’d break your back.”

“Naw, just-t-t cracked it a little.”

“Is this where I’m supposed to coo all over you and ask to feel your muscles, tough guy?”

“Full d-d-disclosure,” he said seriously, “I don’t have muscles. But please d-d-don’t take my word for it. Feel up-p-p anything you want.”

“But you really can carry that much, huh?” She looked back at Tux. “Hang on, then. No sense making more trips than we have to.”

He followed her agreeably to the end of the hall and stood while she loaded him up. When he had it all, she took her day pack and the cooler, just so she could pretend she was helping.

“You’re sure you’re okay with all that?” she asked as they walked together to the kitchen.

“Yup. B-B-Built like a bunny, st-st-strong like a b-b-bear.”

“Like a Fazbear, anyway. Or are you? How much can Freddy lift?”
“Well, our endosk-k-letons are all made the same way, more or less, so…yeah. It doesn’t-t-t matter how we look, no one’s really the s-s-strongest.”

“You’re the sexiest, though.”

“Hell, y-y-yeah, I am.” But in spite of his cheerful tone, his ears went flat and broody. “P-P- Popular op-p-pinion notwithstanding.”

Ana rolled her eyes, but couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “Oh stop. You couldn’t hard-boil an egg with all the time I’ve spent with Foxy.”

He glanced at her, opened his mouth, closed it, kept walking, then suddenly said, “Okay, first? You slept-t-t with him.”

She whipped around, open-mouthed. “Ex-cuse me?”

He was already shaking his head. “In P-P-Pirate Cove, I meant. And that c-c-counts, so you’ve b-b-been with him almost as much as you’ve been with me. And s-s-s—SECOND SLICE OF THAT DELICIOUS FAZ—second, if I’m imagining things, am I also imagining-ing the fact that you j-j —JUXTAPOSITION OF THE BASILAR NERVE—just assumed I must mean Foxy on the s-s-subject of sexy guys to be jealous of, when it was Fred-d-d—FREDDY FAZBEAR’S PIZZA—Freddy we were just talking-ing-ing about? Nobody mentioned Foxy.”

He had her there.

“Are you jealous?” she asked. “ Seriously? Of Foxy?”

“You say that like I sh-sh-shouldn’t be and d-d-don’t think I didn’t notice you changing-ing the subject.”

“What have you got to be jealous of?” she asked, addressing the first half of his comment and ignoring the latter.

“He was flirting with you last-t-t night.”

“So? Did you see me flirting back?”

“I sure didn’t see you t-t-telling him to fuck off.”

“Why should I? He lives here. I’m going to see him every day. I can be friends with the man, can’t I?”

“Are you asking-ing my p-p-permission? Because you p-pr-probably shouldn’t.”

She looked at him, amused by his black tone and inflexible scowl. “Oh wow, Bon. Let me give you a little free advice, straight from the mouth of a modern American woman, and tell you there ain’t no girl worth having finds that shit attractive, because when you say you don’t trust another man around your girl, you’re really saying you don’t trust your girl around other men.”

“That man. Not-t-t other men. That one.”

“Uh huh. So tell me something,” she said lightly. “Would you feel the same way if our positions were reversed?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re c-c-cute. Like they even could be.”
“What about Chica?”

That got his attention. “Uh…Ch-Chic-c-c-ca? Wh-Wh-What ab-b-bout her?”

She laughed. “Oh, come on! It’s not like it’s a leap. It’s got to be lonely here and she’s got a nice shake in her tailfeathers. You never made a play?”

“Not-t-t the way-y-y you’re th-th—THALAMIC PROCESSES—thinking. We t-t-ried a few… uh…We c-c-couldn’t really…I mean-n-n-n…we’re k-k-kinda p-p-plastic.”

“So?”

“So we’re p-p-plastic.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, it k-k-kinda does.”

“Come on. You don’t believe that.”

“Yeah, I kinda d-d-do.”

They were coming up to the party room now, so much as she would have liked to continue, Ana said, “Hold that thought, because I am not done telling you how wrong you are,” and pushed open the door.

“What are you d-d-doing?” Bonnie asked, sounding almost alarmed.

“Just hang on a sec,” she said distractedly, peering into the dark. It looked exactly the way she remembered, except for a little more water-staining on the wall it shared with the dining room. The smell of mildew was strong, but nowhere near as bad as it was elsewhere in the restaurant. As bedrooms went, this was prime real estate.

While Ana investigated from the doorway, Bonnie limped over to the junction and peered around the corner like a cartoon spy, then looked back and hissed through his speakers, “You c-c-can’t go in there!”

“Pretty sure I can,” she said and proved it, picking her way across the room in the dark until she bumped a table. She fidgeted with the strap of her day pack, then went ahead and set it down, already mentally appropriating the wardrobe for her clothes and planning where to lay out her bed.

Behind her, the door creaked open and Bonnie’s eyes threw her shadow huge on the stage wall. “Hey,” he said in his scratchy, artificial whisper. “We’re not-t-t sup-p-posed to be in here.”

She looked back at him. “Why not?”

He didn’t seem to know how to answer. “We’re just not. C-Come on, we need to g-g-get out of here.”

“What are you afraid of?”

His shoulders immediately straightened and his twitching ears went up. “I’m not afraid-d-d, I’m just-t-t…you know. There’s rules.”

She almost told him she was a pirate, but decided, given his weird, untold history with Foxy, that fell just on the other side of the mean line. Instead, she said, “I’ll risk it. Come on in if you’re
coming in, Bon. You’re making me nervous just lurking in the doorway.”

He leaned back to check the hall again, but then came all the way inside. The door wheezed slowly, slowly, slowly shut. It might have bumped him when it finally closed; he twitched.

“You okay?” she asked, amused.

“Yeah, s-s-sure. I b-b-break rules all the t-t-time. I’m kind of a b-b-bad bunny.” He tried to shrug, or maybe just twitched again. His eyelight made the shadows in the room jump and whirl as he looked around, his gaze bouncing back and forth along the ceiling until it came to an oversized square vent. He set his load down next to her pack and stepped away from the table, eyes locked on that vent. “I j-j-just don’t know what-t-t we’re doing here—” The last word broke off short as he jerked and looked at her. His servos spun a little faster. One ear twitched. “Are we…uh…m-m-making out? B-B-B—BE SURE TO FLOSS—God d-d-damn it. Because! Because it’s f-f-fine if we’re not-t-t, I d-d-don’t want to assume or anything-ing-ing, it’s j-j-just awesome if we are.”

“This is what you think a bad bunny is?”

His eyelids took on an annoyed slant. “Hey, I’m p-pl-plenty dangerous, I’m just not a d-d-dick!” The expression held a moment, then wavered itself away. “Um…are we th-though? Making-ing out-t-t—OUTER LAYER OF THE MENINGES REMOVED—God damn it!”

She hadn’t been planning to and she sure didn’t have the time, but when he asked like that, stumbling over the words, ears broadcasting ten thousand tumbling thoughts while he tried to play it cool, the looming shadow of the Fourth of July faded into insignificance. It was just her and him, like it was meant to be, like it had always been. Fate, with a capital F.

She smiled. “Well, I’d like to, but apparently, you’re plastic and I guess that means…I’m not sure what that means, actually. You don’t want to?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean-n-n, that’s not what-t-t I…damn it.” He ran his hand over the top of his head, scraping away bristles of what used to be plush fake fur, and heaved air out through his joints in a sigh. “Can I st-start over?” he asked without much hope.

“Sure.”

He blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s never too late to start over.”

His ears went down and up a few times. He took one dragging step, looked down and around at all the stuff on the floor, then up at the vent, then at her again. His left hand rose, twitched, rose again and hesitantly beckoned. “C-C-Come here.”

She went. His hands tapped and twitched their way around her waist, endearingly awkward until he was sure of their placement, when between one heartbeat and the next, his cautious grip closed into an unbreakable vise. He pulled her to him, right up against the cracked, bristly, stinking plane of his chest. It was warm there, over his heart; everywhere else, he was cold and clammy as a coffin.

“Not-t-t sure what to do,” he said. “S-S-Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Do you know what you want to do?”

His cameras whined, changing focus. One hand flexed. “Yeah.”
“Do it,” she said, not without some amused trepidation, because depending on where his adaptive programming paths were branching off to at the moment, things might be about to get really, really weird.

He lifted his right hand off her hip, hesitated, then touched the back of her head. She watched his cameras change focus as he shifted his gaze from her face to his hand, listened to his cooling fans change rhythm as he followed the line of her braid all the way to the tip, then felt the small tug as he pulled the band at the end away.

He unbraided her hair. Slowly. And when it was all free, he sank his hand into the loose heap of it and pulled his fingers through it. Again. And again. Almost combing it. The tiny points of pain that came from having strands inevitably caught in the joints of his knuckle-bones were nothing at all when set against the look in his plastic eyes—eyes she had herself put in and knew damn well could not truly hold the haunted hunger burning there.

Time must have passed, but she didn’t feel it passing, which was funny because if this were anyone else by now she would surely be wondering just what the hell he was doing and how long he was going to keep doing it before he decided her arousal bar was full or whatever and just got on with it. She had never been the feminine sort and most of the time, the attention she did receive came at the wrong time or from the wrong person; ‘Nice tits’ was about as flirtatious as that crowd ever got, but as crude as that was, it was preferable to silly shit like ‘Nice hair,’ which was trying to do exactly the same thing as ‘Nice tits,’ while simultaneously insulting her intelligence by pretending it wasn’t.

But Bonnie wasn’t trying to impress her. He was really this into her hair and even if his fascination were some glitch caused by a program that had obviously never been designed with a dating simulator in mind, it was weirdly effective, maybe just because there was no pressure to accept or reject his interest. It was okay to just enjoy being petted and not think about where it might lead.

One last pass through her hair and he finally let his hand return to her waist, but he still didn’t speak.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Y-Yeah. It’s just... You’re s-s-so—SO MUCH FUN!” he blatted suddenly.

“Thanks.”

“I d-d-didn’t mean that-t-t, damn it.”

“Thanks just the same. You’re fun, too.” She clasped her hands behind his neck and stood on her tiptoes, face to face, mouth to mouth. Under ordinary circumstances, she’d be worried about her breath, but again, this was never going to be a problem with Bonnie. “Want to have some fun with me?”

“Yes, p-p-please.”

“You can keep the please and thank yous on the stage,” she told him. “When a girl brings a guy to her bedroom, she’s not looking for lessons in good behavior.”

“Yeah. Heh. I g-g-guess...” His hands tightened on her waist. “Bed-d-d-room?”

“Yeah. I’m going to need a place to sleep, aren’t I? Among other things.”

“Here? You can’t sleep in here!”
“Why not?”

He visibly cast about for an answer, twitching at the ears and left arm, and finally said, “It’s the p-p-party room.”

“I know.” She leaned into him, her full body pressed against his, and winked. “Want to party?”

He stared at her, at the vent, at her, and finally let his twitching ears fold back in defeat. “Yeah,” he said, almost groaning it. “Yeah, I d-d-do. Damn it. Freddy’s g-g-going to kill me.”

“Freddy’s not invited. Close your eyes.”

“I c-c-can’t.”

Her smile died in an instant. She reached up, frowning, to prod at first one eyelid and then the other. “Which one’s sticking?”

“N-N-No, I mean I...” He took her wrists and brought them down, helping her recover her original position, arms twined around him. “I c-c-can’t feel it if I can’t see you.”

“But you feel it when you can?” she asked, surprised and curious.

“Almost.”

“What’s it feel like?”

He looked at her, his cameras whirring and gears turning. “Like a kiss,” he said finally, scarcely audible through his speakers.

So she kissed him. She kept her eyes open too, for the first one, watching his features blur together out of recognition, but then closed them and really leaned into it, nibbling now at his lower jaw, then at his muzzle, molding herself to his inflexible plastic casing until they were practically one body. She touched him, her hands playing through the brittle fuzz on the back of his neck, then his shoulders, then down his sides, feeling with amusement the spastic little shudder that answered when she came to his hips.

“Does it matter if you’re plastic?” she murmured, there against his mouth.

“Not-t-t in the goddamn least-t-t,” he replied with such heartfelt fervency that she dropped her head on his chest and laughed. At him. At her. Just because it felt good. He clicked and let out a loud hyucking laugh of his own in what was clearly a programmed response triggered by nothing more than the sound of her own laughter.

Something in the ceiling startled at the sound, thumping and scraping at the sides of the air duct overhead as it crawled away. Sounds had a weird way of making things seem much bigger than they were in such situations, but damn, whatever the hell was up there sounded bigger than she was.

Ana stared at the vent until she couldn’t hear anything anymore, and only then noticed Bonnie was also staring upward, his ears stiffly upright and twitching slightly.

“You okay?” Ana asked.

His eyes shifted back and forth as if reading the water-stained ceiling. His hand on her waist had tightened even more, no longer merely uncomfortable, but beginning to be painful.
“Bonnie?”

“Yeah,” he said and moved her firmly away and behind him, still looking up. “We g-g-got to go. Now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing-ing,” he said, picking up her pack and pushing it into her chest, all without taking his eyes off the ceiling. “We shouldn’t-t-t be in here, that’s all. And everyone’s waiting-ing for us.”

She rolled her eyes, but shouldered her pack again. Once she’d hashed out the rooming arrangements with Freddy, she’d be back, but for now, there was no point stressing Bonnie out.

Bonnie quickly reclaimed his boxes and bags, so Ana went ahead to get the door for him. She didn’t like the way he was moving—too fast for his bad knee, especially with all the weight he was carrying—and his twitching had come back with a vengeance, but before she could ask him again if he was all right, he suddenly turned his head and focused right on her face and said, quietly but intently, “I’d never let anything-ing hurt you. You know that-t-t, right?”

“Like what, exactly?” Ana asked, thinking that would have sounded damned creepy coming from anyone else.

“Anything,” he insisted.

She smiled at him, mentally rolling her eyes. “I know. Come on.”

When they reached the kitchen, Ana was not exactly shocked to see the other three animatronics once again rummaging through her stuff. Of all the boxes she’d brought in, Freddy had opened the one marked PERSONAL and had half-unpacked it. He was presently holding up one of her t-shirts, apparently to read the message on front—the Lick me one—with a distinct expression of disapproval. It was the not the first he’d found; a dozen others were on the counter in front of him, neatly folded in one of two stacks. Chica had found the Easy Bake Oven and had brought it to Foxy, holding it while he brazenly cut the packing tape with his hook, grumbling at her good-naturedly to, “Calm yer nuggets, lass, I’m g-g-getting it. Bleeding tape ain’t cutting, just b-b-binding up on me.”

“Why don’t you ask Freddy to pass you a boxknife?” Ana loudly suggested. “He ought to know where I keep them by now, after rooting through my toolchest all last night.”

All three of them looked around, but only Chica appeared remotely embarrassed to be caught. Freddy merely folded her shirt, set it on the larger of the two stacks, then opened the top left drawer of the toolchest and, looking straight at Ana, took out a boxknife and put it on the counter. He picked out another shirt and shook it out—her Mordor fun-run tee—then folded it with a grunt and set it on the other stack, already reaching for another shirt.

Chica quickly stepped away from the knife and put the Easy Bake Oven on the counter, then moved the coffee maker in front of it, and her power drill kit in front of that. “I LOVE TO COOK,” she chirped, tapping her fingertips together.

“Yeah, and I love it when people stay out of my stuff, Freddy. Put that down. Right now. Yes, that. Don’t you eyeball me, put it down and leave my shit alone.” Ana put her pack on the counter, then took Foxy by the arm and picked at the tape stuck to the tip of his hook. It left a sticky residue, which rubbed off readily enough, but only demonstrated just how long it had been since the last time his hook had been cleaned. “Bon, put that stuff…hell, I don’t know. Anywhere you can.
Gross,” she muttered as Bonnie skulked by, his ears low and his eyes lingering on Foxy’s hook in Ana’s hands. “You are covered in mold, you realize that?”

“No, I ain’t-t-t.”

She leaned out for the cleaning wipes, swabbed off his leather cap around the base of his hook and showed him the dark smears and crusty black flakes that one half-assed swab took up. “What’s this then?”

“Blood, most like.” His ears tipped forward. “Ye d-d-do something different with yer hair?”

“Yeah. Hold still. Ugh,” she said, folding the wipe over to scrub at his cap some more. “Well, I can’t do this all night, but as soon as the opportunity presents itself, I’m giving you all a good cleaning.”

“Reek a b-b-bit, do we?” Foxy said without concern, raising his arm when she released him, but still studying her hair more than the shine on his newly-cleaned hook.

“Yeah, a bit. Is that...?” Ana picked up an empty cardboard box lying on the floor beside the oven and turned it to read the words Puke and Rally, Bitches. “Where the hell is all my booze?”

Freddy grunted, opened the cupboard next to him long enough for her to see the bottles neatly put away, and closed it again. He folded her Bitch, Please! shirt, started to put it on the big stack, hesitated, then put it on the smaller one instead.

“Why were you messing with my liquor and why the hell are you doing my laundry?”

Freddy gave her an oddly pointed glance that told her exactly nothing and took out another shirt. I want to die doing what I love, it said, adding, Drugs. He glared at her, folding it, and put it on the tall stack.

“Yeah, you can look at me like that all night,” she told him. “I don’t take fashion criticisms from nudists.”

“D-Don’t take it wrong, lass, but that-t-t look don’t suit ye.”

Ana, now rummaging through the tools strewn over the countertop in the search for her staplegun, looked around in confusion. “What? Nudism?”

“No, I reckon that-t-t look’d suit ye fine. I mean yer hair,” he said as the sound of Bonnie’s ears slapping the top of his head came from the next room. “I like it b-b-better the other way.”

So did she. At least, it didn’t get in the way when she was working. Ana pulled it back and started a quick, messy braid, as from the other room, Bonnie loudly muttered, “I didn’t d-d-do it for you.”

Foxy looked in that direction, ears up, then at Ana. “He d-d-did yer hair?”

Ana shrugged, turning away, weirdly reticent to answer. Her scalp tingled, as if with echoes of those slow, combing strokes through Bonnie’s cracked fingers.

“Oi, Bon! How in the b-b-bleedin’ heck,” Foxy began, laughing through his incredulous words as he folded his arms and leaned against the oven, “did ‘I’m going to see if she needs help-p-p,’ turn into, ‘I’m going to d-d-do her hair’?”

Something heavy—the case of water, maybe—slammed down in the other room. Then he was there
in the doorway, his ears all the way forward, jutting over his angry eyes like horns. “Because shut up-p-p, that’s how!”

Freddy, studying Ana’s velociraptor-and-Rubik’s-cube shirt, shook his head slightly and said, “DON’T FIGHT.”

“We ain’t fighting, I just-t-t be asking. Curious chap, me. Did ye like d-d-doing her hair?” Foxy inquired, squint-eyed. “Because that-t-t would explain a few things.”

Before Bonnie could more than open his muzzle, Ana swung around and pointed a box of industrial staples at him. “I know what you’re implying, and first of all, it is 20-fucking-15 and that shit ain’t cool!”

“BULLYING IS NEVER COOL!” Chica agreed, her hands on her hips.

“Secondly, hair-dressing is decent pay and honest work, which is more than you can say for pirating.”

“YOU SHOULD NEVER TAKE THINGS THAT DON’T BELONG TO YOU WITHOUT ASKING!” Chica chimed in.

“And finally—” Ana dropped her arm, tipped him a wink and turned her attention back to the stuff on the counter, now searching for the roll of black plastic. “—he sure doesn’t kiss like it.”

Chica didn’t seem to know what to say about that. In fact, they all gave that a moment’s thought.

Freddy put the shirt down without folding it and turned all the way around.

“P-P-Please stop helping me,” said Bonnie.

“Where’d-d-d ye take her?” Foxy asked, and if there was a smile in his voice, that smile sure had some teeth in it.

“I d-d-didn’t. She t-t-took me.”

“T ook ye where?” Foxy pressed.

Bonnie didn’t answer with words, but he must have done something. Ana didn’t look, but she could hear the whine of small servos—Bonnie’s ears, doing his talking for him.

Foxy waited, then turned to Ana. “Where’d-d-d ye take him?”

“Party room,” Ana replied, picking through the bags from Lowe’s in search of that fabled black plastic. “Seemed appropriate. Private party and all.”

“It was her id-d-dea,” Bonnie said immediately. “I swear, Foxy, I d-d-didn’t…”

Foxy shook his head and turned around, walking back across the kitchen, his dry chuckle so distorting whatever it was he was muttering that she couldn’t make it out at all.

Freddy grunted, wordless, but in a darkly inquiring tone.

“Sorry,” Bonnie said. “She went-t-t in and, uh, I went after her and…and one thing-ing-ing led to another…It won’t-t-t happen again.”

Freddy turned that same stare on Ana, which was all right, since his eyes were still on and she
needed the light to see what the hell was in these bags. He grunted.

“What?” she asked, amused.

His eyes narrowed, focusing their light into stripes. His next grunt was more of a growl.

“Well, okay, reading from top to bottom,” she began breezily. “No, I’m not sorry, yes, it was my idea, yes, he tried to get me to leave, no, he didn’t fight me off, yes, he makes out like a demon, and yes, it will probably happen again.”

Growling, Freddy picked up her shirt again, folded it and set it on one of the stacks. “THE PARTY ROOM IS AVAILABLE BY RESERVATION ONLY,” he said, glaring at Bonnie as he helped himself to another shirt.

“I know, I know. I said I’m s-s-sorry, but…nothing…happened-d-d.”

“Except us making out,” said Ana.

“You are g-g-getting me in so much t-t-trouble.”

“Yeah, but you’re a bad bunny. Trouble is your middle name, remember?”

“I n-n-never said that. My mid-d-dle name is The.”

Foxy reached the end of the room, turned around and came back far enough to lean up against the mouth of the oven. “If ye were g-g-going to sneak off with anyone here, it sh-sh-should have been me,” he said to Ana, but eyeing Bonnie. “I were yer first-t-t crush, remember?”

“You were. But you left me behind. You always do, you know, even with the ones you actually save.”

Foxy took that in without change to his expression or his posture, and finally said, “Not sure I d-d-deserved that.”

“People only get what they deserve in stories, Captain.” She thought about it, laughed. “Hell, not even then. Think about all those princesses you’ve saved over the years. Think about them, sitting in their towers and dungeons and whatever, waiting for a prince…and they got a pirate. You think they deserved that?”

Freddy glanced at Foxy and his eye lingered. Foxy didn’t answer.

“And when you sailed away at the end,” she continued lightly, loading her staplegun with a shove and a slap, “you think they deserved that?”

Still no word from Foxy. The other animatronics were all looking at him now.

“People getting what they deserve is a fairy tale told at bedtime or in church. We get what we get, Captain, that’s all. If you find some great cosmic justice in it, that’s just you, seeing the face of God in a burned slice of toast. A karmic conspiracy theory. Paradelia of the soul.”

Chica twitched, clicking, and chirped, “WOW! VOCABULARY POWER!”

“Thanks. I used to read a lot. All right!” she announced, turning around with her loaded staplegun in hand. “I’m going to be hanging plastic over the windows tonight and under no circumstances are you to touch it. Got that?”
“Sure,” said Bonnie.

Chica nodded, her eyes straying to the Easy Bake Oven box behind the coffee maker.

Foxy appeared lost in his own thoughts, not looking at her as much as through her.

Freddy folded another shirt.

Ana studied them, unconvinced, and finally clapped her hands. When that got their immediate attention, she said, “Here at Freddy’s, we’ve got a few new rules.”

Freddy’s eyes narrowed. Chica and Bonnie glanced at him—Chica, worriedly, and Bonnie with a smile—then looked at Ana. Foxy merely folded his arms, tapping his hook against his bicep, and cocked his head.

“Rule number one,” she began.

All four clicked hard and chorused: “DON’T RUN.”

“O…kay. Rule number two?”

They clicked again, this time not quite in sync. Freddy was fighting it. “DON’T YELL.”

Ana rolled her eyes. “Rule number three—”

More clicking, now with some hard twitches coming from Bonnie and Foxy. “D-D-DON’T S-S-SCREAM-M-M,” they said, their answers staggered to start with Chica and end with Freddy, who had his angry eyes on.

Ana rubbed at her eyes and scratched her hair. “Okay, I can’t do this all night. How many rules are there?”

They clicked, just a mess of clicking now, but it was only Freddy who said, “THIRTY-TWO.”

“Fine. Rule number thirty-three.” She pointed right into Freddy’s face; he looked at her finger and the other animatronics looked at him. “Don’t touch Ana’s stuff. Ever. Me being able to do the work here demands that I know everything is going to be where I put it. I don’t care if I put something on the stage or in the kitchen or hang it upside down from the damn ceiling, you don’t play with it. You hear me?”

“Oh,” said Freddy, his head tipping to one side while his eyes stayed locked on hers. “OH. I. HEAR. YOU.”

“And what’s the rule?”

Freddy stared at her a long time before he said, “DON’T. TOUCH. YOUR. THINGS.”

“Good, that worked. Great. Okay, then, rule number thirty-four...well, there’s already one of those,” she said to herself with a smile. “We’ll get to that when we get to it. Moving on. Rule number thirty-five. Don’t come into the room when Ana is working. Dust is bad for you, and besides, when the tools are going, I can’t hear you. And if I’m wearing my safety googles—”

“SAFETY FIRST!”

“Yes, thank you, Chica. If I’m wearing my goggles, I won’t hardly be able to see you, so I’ll startle easily, and let me tell you, you do not want to startle me when I’m armed with a bandsaw or a nail
gun. I will straight up cut a bitch if I’m taken by surprise. So even if it doesn’t look to you like I’m working, I’m working, and…?”

They exchanged a group glance and were silent.

“Rule number thirty-five?” Ana prompted.

“DON’T. GO. IN. THE. ROOM,” said Freddy and collected nods of agreement with his eyes. Then he turned to Ana and said, “RULE. NUMBER. THIRTY-SIX. KEEP. YOUR. CLOSED. ON.”

Bonnie blinked, but it was Foxy, laughing, who said, “What?”

Ana rolled her eyes. “No one made you look, prude.”

Freddy pointed at her, eyes flashing. “I. SAID. KEEP. YOUR. CLOSED. ON.”

“Yeah, yeah. Although this is hot work we’re talking about here, and I make no promises to go wrapped up to the neck and ankles. But I won’t angry-strip again,” she conceded, spreading her arms in a peacemaking gesture. “That wasn’t cool.”

As Foxy went off in another gale of laughter, Bonnie looked back and forth between Ana and Freddy and finally said, “Exactly-ly-ly when did-d-d this happen?”

Freddy glanced at him, grunted, and lowered his pointing arm. “RULE. NUMBER. THIRTY-SEVEN. CLEAN YOUR ROOM.”

“Huh?”

“HAVING A MESSY ROOM ISN’T JUST UGLY, IT CAN BE DANGEROUS,” Freddy told her, going straight into that half-remembered routine. “SOMEONE COULD BE SERIOUSLY HURT IF THEY TRIP AND FALL.” His ears could not revolve around and go flat like Bonnie’s or Foxy’s, but they did lower in their grooves with concentration. “SOMEONE COULD BE SERIOUSLY HURT,” he said again, then paused, clicking to himself. “IF. WE. TRIP. ON. YOUR. THINGS.” His ears came up again, just as his eyelids slanted down. “RULE THIRTY-SEVEN. CLEAN YOUR ROOM.”

“I’m always careful where I leave my tools. As soon as I have a place to put them, believe me, I’ll keep them put away.”

He grunted. “AND DON’T FORGET THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE OF ALL, KIDS!”


“I’m not in the band.”

His eyes slanted down.

He looked very serious, Ana decided, and did her best to wipe the smile off her face. “But it’s your name on the building,” she told him. “I won’t forget that.”

He grunted and slowly brought his eyelids up as he leaned back. “FOLLOW ME,” he said, in what had once started off the Fazbear Birthday Parade. He walked out—not marching or waving his microphone like a baton or singing the Fazbear birthday song—and, since the other three
animatronics looked expectantly at Ana and did not move, at last, she followed him.

He took her into the dining room, but not through it in that looping parade-path. He instead went straight to the table under which Ana had spent her first night here at Freddy’s and turned around to watch her come, one hand on the table. “THIS. IS. YOUR. ROOM.”

Ana looked at him for a long time, then said, “That would be a table.”


“Uh, no. I’ll be sleeping in the party room.”

“No. You. Won’t.”

“Freddy—”


Ana covered her face, took a few deep breaths, then gave him a big smile and gently said, “Let me tell you why. Will that help?”

His head cocked, and although he did not say yes, she chose to take his wordless grumble as at least some willingness to listen.

“Okay,” she said, encouraged. “So here are the relevant points. Number one, this building is absolutely caked in mold.”

“Cake! Yum!” chirped Chica, grabbing at the hole in her face where her beak ought to be. “Is there a birthday girl?”

Freddy glanced at her, then grunted at Ana.

“Honestly, I shouldn’t be standing here now without a breather, but whatever. My point is, I need to be minimizing my exposure as much as possible. Still with me, big bear?”

“I’m Freddy Fazbear,” he replied, scowling. “Yes.”

“Minimizing my exposure means I will not be sleeping in any room with a carpet, because carpets are just giant mold-orgies. So the reading room, the puppet theater, the security office and the break room back there are all out, at least until I can pull up the carpet.”

“And Pirate C-C-Cove,” Bonnie interjected.

“Aye, the auditorium may b-b-be, bucko, but the ship ain’t.” Foxy shifted his gaze from Bonnie to Ana and winked. “And me c-c-cabin’s nice and dry.”

“Enough,” said Freddy, still staring at Ana. “Go. On.”

“Okay, well, the store room is going to be full of equipment and the quiet room is going to be full of power tools and sawdust and shit, so what does that leave? Honestly, there’s no place to lay a sleeping bag out in the kitchen without putting myself directly in your way and if I spent the night in one of the bathrooms, the fumes could legit kill me.”

“The dining room is a designated emergency shelter area.”

“No, the dining room is a disaster area. But the party room is relatively clean and clear, the floor
is tiled and it’s got a door. It’s about as close to perfect as a girl could hope to get. What is the problem here?”

“THE PARTY ROOM IS AVAILABLE BY RESERVATION ONLY.”

“Oh come on. No one’s reserved any parties for the next, like, ever.”

“THE PARTY ROOM IS AVAILABLE BY RESERVATION ONLY.”

“Fine.” Ana rolled her eyes and headed for the cashier’s station. “I’ll reserve it. Is there a form or something?”

“THE RESTAURANT IS CLOSED.”

“Well, then I can stay wherever I want, right?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” she asked, laughing through her annoyance. “Either the room has to be reserved, in which case my money’s as good as anyone’s, or the restaurant is closed, in which case I can go any damn where I please. You don’t get it both ways, so…wait a minute, is this because I was making out with Bonnie in there?”

“WHAT?” Freddy’s various moving facial parts shifted minutely. He folded his arms. “YES.”

“Unbelievable. You do realize I can make out with Bonnie anywhere, right? I don’t even care if you’re watching. Like, right here in the dining room, right up there on the main stage with a spotlight on us, I will strip bare-ass and suck the flocking right off every inch of his body.”

“Frisky, ain’t-t-t she?” remarked Foxy behind them.

Freddy and Ana both looked around. The other three animatronics were together in the kitchen doorway, but as soon as Freddy’s eyelight hit them, Bonnie and Chica ducked away. Leaning up against the jamb with his arms folded, Foxy remained unabashedly staring at the scene in the dining room until Freddy gave him The Point of Doom and a warning grunt.

As soon as Foxy had cleared the doorway, Freddy turned the full power of his scowl back on Ana. “MIND YOUR MANNERS. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR CH-CH-CHILD-D-D…FOR YOUR.” He clicked a few times, still pointing at Ana, but looking off to one side in an irritated way. When his eyes locked again with hers, he finished “BEHAVIOR. THE RULES ARE FOR YOUR SAFETY. IF YOU IGNORE THE RULES, YOU MAY BE ASKED TO LEAVE.”

“Even if the rules are your own puritanical, petty-minded heap of horseshit?”

“WHOSE. NAME. IS. ON. THIS. RESTAURANT?”

She blinked. “Wow. I have to tell you five times to stay out of my toolbox, but you pick that one up in one go?”

He waited.

“Yours.”

“WHO. MAKES. THE. RULES.”

“The guy who programmed you,” she said testily. “Who I am dead sure was not intending this
“WHO. MAKES. THE. RULES,” Freddy asked again.

Ana sighed. “You do.”

“THIS. IS. WHERE. YOU. SLEEP.” He started walking. “FOLLOW ME.”

He led her into the East Hall, past her battle plan for the roof’s repair, almost all the way to the signpost, only to unexpectedly stop and turn around to face her. He put his hand out to touch the wall and only when he did so did Ana notice there was another of those nearly invisible doors there. “THE PARTS AND SERVICES ROOM IS OFF-LIMITS TO CUSTOMERS,” he said in his stage-voice. “ONLY BAND MEMBERS ARE ALLOWED BACKSTAGE. SORRY, YOU’RE NOT ALLOWED BACK HERE. YOU SHOULDN’T BE HERE. THE RULES ARE FOR YOUR SAFETY.” He paused, clicking, then leaned slightly forward and said, “IF. I. EVER. SEE. YOU. TRYING. TO. OPEN. THIS. DOOR. YOU. ARE. GONE.”

There was something unfathomably final about that last word, something that put Ana less in mind of being cartoonishly flung out into the parking lot and more like a shallow grave out in the eighty miles of empty desert surrounding this isolated spot.

“FOLLOW ME,” said Freddy and walked on.

This time, he took her to the security office and over to the locked door that Ana presumed to be the manager’s office. Anticipating the next edict, Ana said, “Likewise, I assume.”

“YES.”

“Okay, but you realize that when that roof comes off, I’ll have a bird’s eye view into both those places and if I see rot or mold, which I can almost guarantee I’m going to see, I’ve got to get down in there and pull it out. And I can’t believe I’m explaining this to a giant teddy bear,” she sighed, rubbing at her eyes.

“My name is Freddy.”

“Sorry, but look—”


Ana studied him in a wondering way for several seconds and finally said, “You have gone seriously strange in the last twelve years, haven’t you?”


Ana sighed. “Yours.”


“You are.”

He grunted and, apparently satisfied that his word was law, headed for the hall again.

Ana looked at the employee area, then back at him. “What about the break room?”
“WHAT. ABOUT. IT,” he said without looking or slowing his lurching stride.

“I kind of need it.”

“YOU. HAVE. TWO. ROOMS,” he said, now giving her a backwards glare to show her what he thought of that. “YOU. DON’T. GET. ANY. MORE.”

“Be reasonable, for Christ’s sake! It’s the only room in this entire building that has a window and a drain.”

“So?”

“So that is literally the only room where I can install a shower!”

Freddy stopped walking. After a moment, he turned all the way around to look at her. “ABSOLUTELY. NOT,” he said and pointed. “RULE NUMBER THIRTY-SIX. KEEP. YOUR. CLOSED. ON. YOU. AGREED.”

“Freddy, for the love of God, it’s got to be a hundred degrees in here! You can’t make me go all the way home every time I want a shower!”

“Oh, yes I can!” he said, far too cheerfully for his expression.

Ana performed the first non-ironic facepalm of her entire life. “Look, I realize this is Mammon, but do you have to be such a sanctimonious ass all the time?”

He raised one eyebrow, clicking to himself without speaking while individual notes of the Toreador March dropped disharmoniously into the quiet. At last, he said, “YOU. DON’T. GET. TO. TALK. TO. ME. LIKE. THAT. APOLOGIZE.”

Ana stared at him. “Are you shitting me?” she asked finally, almost politely.

He stared right back at her, silent but for the March, waiting.

“Fuck if I will,” she said, trying like hell to see the humor in this situation. It was like arguing with a toaster and she knew it, but she could feel her temper slipping her grip in spite of herself. “I want a shower. I’m going to be working my ass off in the Utah summer heat, doing a job that would be dirty under the best circumstances, let alone these. A shower is not too fucking much to ask.”

His head tipped forward, making his frown seem to deepen. His gaze shifted away from her, looking restlessly around the break room.

Pressing what she hoped was an advantage, Ana added, “And if the only reason you don’t want me to have one is because it bothers you so much to know I’ll be naked back here for, like, five minutes, then yeah, you are a sanctimonious ass and also kind of a pervert, frankly.”

He looked at her again, eyes narrowed. “WATCH. YOUR. LANGUAGE.”

“Hey, you act like an ass and I’ll call you one. I’m not your bitch.”


“Fine,” she said as Freddy’s eyes narrowed. “I’m deeply, profoundly, heartily, and above all else, sincerely sorry I called you out for your spectacular display of moral assholery.”
One of his eyebrows scraped up before both came down in an ominous V. “THAT. WAS. NOT. AN. APOLOGY. TRY AGAIN.”

“I’m sorry you hyper-sexualized the idea of me rubbing soap over my gleaming naked armpits so much that you’d rather get crushed to death when the roof falls down than allow me to wash up in a back room where literally none of you ever need to go.”

“TRY HARDER.”

“I’m sorry you’re such a supercilious, self-righteous, petty-minded fascist.”

He folded his arms. “LAST. CHANCE.”

“Oh come on. There’s no way you knew what any of those words meant.” Ana sighed, checked the time, and flung out her arms. “I’m sorry! Jesus!”

“I’M. STARTING. TO. THINK. YOU. DON’T. KNOW. WHAT. AN. APOLOGY. IS,” said Freddy, his fingers flexing on his plastic bicep. “DO WE NEED TO SING THE MANNERS SONG?”

“Is that a fucking threat?”

“IT. CAN. BE,” he countered, dead serious. “I. CAN. SING. THAT. SONG. ONE THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED AND FORTY THREE. TIMES. A. DAY. IF. I. HAD. TO. AND. IF. THAT’S. HOW. MANY. TIMES. IT. TAKES. TO. TEACH. YOU. MANNERS. THAT’S. WHAT. I’LL. DO.”

Ana gave herself another non-ironic facepalm. Like sex, driving a stick shift or stabbing a man, the second time was easier. “I cannot believe I’m even having this conversation, much less losing it.”

Freddy’s huge shoulders rolled once in a shrug, but his expression never changed as he stared her down and sang, “WE SAY THANK YOU, WE SAY PLEASE! WE SHARE OUR TOYS AND NEVER TEASE!”

“Okay! Okay! God damn!”

“WE DON’T ARGUE!” he snapped/sang back at her. “WE DON’T FUSS! WE DON’T SHOUT AND NEVER CUSS!”

“Oh, we need to find some kind of compromise here, big bear, because I am a grown-ass woman and fucking nobody tells me how to run my mouth, especially when I’m taking time out of my life and money out of my pocket to build them a fucking roof, so, yeah, fuckity fuckity bitchtits fuck.”

His eyelids evened out at half-mast in the world’s most obvious ‘Really?’ expression, which he held for several sustained seconds before he blinked it away and just looked at her for a while. “OKAY,” he said. “WE GET MORE WHEN WE BOTH GIVE A LITTLE. SO. YOU. CAN. CUSS. IN. FRONT. OF. ME. NOT. AT. ME. THAT’S. THE. LINE.”

“Fine,” she said, then said it again, with a bit more feeling. “Fine. I’m sorry I called you names, but seriously, what is the big deal here? It’s not like I want to install a stripper pole in the dining room. I just want a place I can clean up in. That’s not so unreasonable, is it?”

Again, Freddy looked into the break room. “I. SUPPOSE. NOT.”

“So is it all right?” she pressed.

Freddy’s grumble told her ‘all right’ might be stretching it, but he nodded, then immediately fixed
her with a glare. “BUT. THIS. IS. NOT. YOUR. ROOM. STAY IN THE DESIGNATED SHELTER AREA. WHEN. YOU. AREN’T. WORKING.”

She nodded, but said, “Are you ever going to trust me?” more to herself than to him.

“TRUST. IS. NOT. A GIFT,” he told her. “I. DON’T. PASS. IT. OUT. FOR. PRIZE TICKETS. AND. PIZZA COUPONS. IT’S. EARNED.”

“Okay,” she said after a moment. “Anything else?”

“STOP. CALLING. ME. BIG. BEAR.” Now he pointed straight at her face. “I’M FREDDY FAZBEAR.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes expansively, but was surprised to find she did feel a twinge of genuine guilt, ridiculous as it was. “Sorry.”

He grunted, lowering his arm. “AND. STOP. ARGUING. WITH. ME.”

“I’m not arguing, I’m just trying to figure out the rules.”

“THE RULES ARE F-F-FOR…WHAT. I. SAY. THEY. ARE.” He hammered that in with another grunt, started to turn around, then glanced back. “SIX FEET, TEN INCHES,” he said, not without a metallic underpinning of humor. “FOLLOW ME.”

He brought her back into the kitchen, heading directly for the cupboard where he’d put her booze, opened it up and pointed inside, turning a stern scowl on her. “I. KNOW. WHAT. THIS. IS,” he told her, leaning close and letting his eyes flash. “I. KNOW. WHAT. THIS. DOES. AND. WHEN. I. SAY. STOP. YOU. STOP.”

Ana thought over her potential replies and went with, “Or?”

He managed somehow to lean a little closer, letting his mouth open just enough to show her the glinting round tips of his teeth. “OR. I. WILL. STOP. YOU.”

“Freddy,” said Bonnie, but shut up when Freddy pointed at him, never taking his eyes off Ana.

She nodded a few times, looking at him, but she wasn’t agreeing and he seemed to know it. After a while, she said, politely. “With all due respect, Freddy, you may know what that is, but you don’t know what that does. No,” she said as he opened his mouth, “I’m sure you’ve seen people come in here and drink. You’ve seen them get stupid and smash things, fight and fuck, and piss themselves and pass out, sure you have, but then you saw them get up and leave and that’s where you think it ends. Well, I’ve been there when they come home. I know what it really does.”

Freddy held his stare a while longer, then leaned back and let the light go out of his eyes.

“I don’t drink that often,” said Ana. “I realize how that must sound, all things considered, but seriously, the only reason I have all that shit is because I’m not drinking it. I just figure if it’s here, I won’t have it at my aunt’s house, which is the best location and all the reason anyone could need to drink themselves to death. Having said that, I am a grown-ass woman and if I choose to drink, I expect you to back the fuck off me. If I get sloppy and mean and you feel like you got to step up, that’s a different story. By all means, bounce my drunk ass out of here. Until then, there’s a liquor license posted in the lobby and beer on the menu, so don’t give me that teetotalling horseshit.”

Freddy grunted and shut the cupboard.
“So are we good?” asked Ana after a moment.

“GOOD. ENOUGH.” said Freddy. “YOU. ARE. WELCOME. IN. MY. HOUSE.” He pointed at her. “BE. A. GOOD. GUEST.”

Ana nodded and stepped aside as Freddy limped out and when he had almost cleared the doorway, she turned to Bonnie and loudly said, “He never actually said we couldn’t mess around, as long as we did it where he could watch.”

“P-P-Pretty sure that’s not what-t-t he said.”

“THAT. IS. NOT. WHAT. I. SAID,” Freddy bellowed from the hall. “RULE NUMBER FORTY. NO. TOUCHING.

“Just remember,” she whispered as she collected her staplegun and the roll of black plastic. “I’m a pirate now. We don’t follow rules.”

She meant it for Bonnie, but it was Foxy who chuckled.

“Two rules,” he reminded her as he left. “The second b-b-being, PIRATES STAY IN PIRATE COVE, so I’ll b-b-be waiting on ye, lass.”

She shouldn’t ask, she knew she shouldn’t, but damnable curiosity got the better of her.

“What’s the first rule?” she called.

His voice came back out of the dark, sharp as a cutlass and sly as a wink: “The captain t-t-takes first share o’ the booty.”

Bonnie stared, flat-eared, at the doorway as Foxy’s laughter receded, then looked at Ana.

“In his dreams,” she assured him. “Come on, Bonnie, he wasn’t serious. And even if he was, I’m not going to run screaming from the room every time he walks in, so you need to relax.”

“I’m relaxed,” he said. “Did you see me p-p-punch anyone? I was in c-c-complete control. And I’ll t-t-try not to be a dick about-t-t, you know…” His eyelids drew down in a scowl. “Foxy. But if it se-eeeeee-eems like I’m j-j-jealous, it’s only because I finally have something-ing I really, really, really want…” He shut his eyes all the way and when he opened them again, had somehow managed to achieve a weirdly lost and hopeless expression without changing anything at all. “And he gets everything.”

If she needed more proof that he’d learned everything he knew about sex, romance and relationships from the teenagers breaking into this place to fool around, there it was.

“I’m not here to get ‘got’,” she told him gently. “Not by him. And not by you. When I’m with a man, it’s because I want to be, not because he ‘gets’ me. Okay?”

“Okay, b-b-but—”

“But it’s a bad, bad world out there,” she agreed, nudging at his side in a careful, friendly fashion. “And as long as that’s true, you’ll always be my man. Now come on. Think you can help me hold the plastic?”

“Sure, but I just-t-t want you to know—”

“With the two of us working together, it won’t take as long. And I can think of at least one closet we
can get lost in when we’re done. What do you say?”

“Okay,” he said, taking the roll from her, and the two of them went to work, hand in hand.
Blacking out the windows took longer than she anticipated, in spite of Bonnie’s help (or, tell the truth and shame the Devil, because of it) so that instead of getting a head start on clearing the store room when she was finished, she simply put herself to bed. She was too tired even to get a smoke first, which in turn meant a restless night, rousing at every creaking footfall or the low, static-threaded rumble of voices.

At six, when the animatronics headed for the stage and put themselves to sleep, she rolled out of her precarious bed and into her boots. She meant to fire up the camp stove and get some breakfast going, but somehow going into the store room to get some water ended with taking a load of junk home to the dump trailer and after that, she had a good flow going and it didn’t seem worth it to halt her momentum just for food.

So Ana went to work. She had cleaned abandoned houses before, but not like this. With the windows covered in plastic, her only light came from the battery-powered lamps and they were singularly unsuited for the task. Work that was already laborious became treacherous in the shadows; she couldn’t be careful, so she just tried to be quick. She cut her hands, bruised her arms, strained her back, but when the restaurant ‘opened’, she had the store room completely cleared, swept, scrubbed, and painted with mold-killer. Right on schedule…but only just.

By then, the sun was well up. Outside, heat shimmered over the desert, casting the illusion of water as it rose into the baleful sky; trapped inside, the heat grew sullen and stagnant, and nowhere was it worse than in the quiet room, where sound did not carry and the air did not move. Ana would have welcomed even the hot breeze that blew in off the quarry, anything to push back the suffocating shroud that seemed to lie on her.

There wasn’t much to remove in this room, just a few posters and the remains of the light fixtures, but the canvas that covered the walls, floor and ceiling needed much more vigorous scrubbing and drank in the mold-killing paint like a sponge. In her original estimates, she had allotted only two hours to ready this room and had thought that over-generous. She was certain she’d be done around noon, when she could take a break, get something to eat, recharge her batteries before attacking the dining room. But no, when she emerged at last, head throbbing and clothes itching with sweat, she found half the afternoon gone and herself three hours behind schedule.

So brunch was a Pop Tart, tasting more of sweat and rust and rot than the chemical additives purporting to be strawberry. It sat in her stomach like lead as she cleared the debris filling the hall at the south end of the dining room, but only until she was dumb enough to venture into the restrooms she uncovered, when she lost it entirely. At least she had the satisfaction of puking in the bathroom with Brewster on the door.

But as bad as the restrooms were, the gymnasium was worse. Upon first opening the door, it blew a rancid gust of hot, wet, rotting air at her so foul, she briefly thought she might pass out from the stench alone. She’d had no idea until that moment that could even happen. After daubing a little peppermint oil under her nose and donning her breather, she was back, but even through these defenses, the smell seeped in, coating the back of her throat with the swampy-sweet taste of Death.

She explored her new surroundings without moving from the door, waiting for her eyes to adjust to
the gloom and her stomach to adjust to the smell. The south-facing wall from about a few feet off the floor to a few feet from the high ceiling was made of glass; before time and neglect had blackened the panels, enough sunlight and moisture had gotten in to sprout every grass seed that ever tracked itself in on some kid’s sneakers. A veritable jungle had sprung up, completely covering the floors and crawling up the wall wherever a crack presented a rooting place. On the north end, the jungle had grown clear up to the ceiling in a suspiciously straight-lined, symmetrical shape. But it had all long since died, leaving clumps of brown and black vegetation over every surface, shiny in the light of her lantern, still wet.

Everything was still wet. The windows were steamed and streaked with noisome condensation. The walls bubbled with fungus. Most of the playthings were no more than ominous bumps and bulges in the weeds, but certain objects were big enough that they could not be hidden, even by the jungle’s best efforts. A small carousel, its canopy rusted out to orange lace, with seats shaped like Amelia Owlheart’s adventuring aeroplanes. A climbing maze of plastic ice caves infested with plastic yetis lead to a wavy slide that once might have deposited kids on a trampoline, but now emptied through a rotted ring into a mass of black grass and sludge. A scaled-down model of Freddyland’s Monkey Kingdom, in the form of a great stepped pyramid, ruined first by design and again by time. And overseeing all this from the middle of the room was, of course, another New Face of Freddy’s, overgrown by slimy, black weeds.

At her first step toward it, her boots squished down through a carpet of soggy, dead plant matter and pushed up a brown, bubbly ooze; the floor was thickly padded, she soon realized, to prevent broken kiddie bones should one of the restaurant’s young patrons fall off those monkey bars, and that padding had soaked up twelve years’ worth of stormwater and whatever had drowned in it. It would all have to come out, and if there was a floor beneath it and not just asphalt and earth, it would have to come out too. Gritting her teeth, Ana walked on, squishing and squelching her way to the imitation animatronic and pulling away great, greasy handfuls of dead grass so she could see its fake, stupid face.

It was a weasel or ferret or mongoose, something long-bodied and short-limbed, anyway, with no waist but with a slight suggestion of hips and breasts to indicate this was a girl. Meet Tumble, said the nearby sign. Folks call her a tomboy, but Tumble loves being a girl, she’s just a girl who loves running, climbing, getting dirty and playing sports! She and her twin brother, Rumble, make a great team, but she wants to play with you!

Ana read the last line twice, then raised her eyes to meet Tumble’s, leering at her through a veil of slick, dead weeds. One of the weasel’s paws was extended, but with so much paint eroded, it was difficult to tell whether it was palm-up or palm-down…ready to clasp in welcome, in other words, or to clutch and catch.

The longer she looked at Tumble, the stronger the smell seemed to get, but as much as she disliked the New Faces of Freddy’s, Ana knew the leering weasel was not the source. It was close, though. Very close.

Ana turned and studied the pyramid behind her. Real creepers seamlessly inter-braided with the plastic ones stamped into its mold. Monkeys with shaggy dead-grass pelts cavorted along the sides, their grinning mouths stained black and green, shining as if with fresh drool. It was open on top, except for a complicated network of rusted monkey bars and rotted ropes, but the rest of it was all closed in and had proven remarkably watertight. The bubble-shaped windows through which many a child had once playfully peeked were now covered in algae scales or entirely submerged in dark reeking water.

Ana looked up, and of all the many stained cracks and holes in the ceiling, the largest was exactly
over the Monkey Kingdom. Shreds of insulation wrapped with weeds hung down in clots with ropes of slime dangling even lower, swaying very slightly in the draft that had followed Ana through the open door.

The color of that slime, yellowish-brown, was both familiar and significant.

Ana glanced at the pyramid, then braced herself and climbed the stepped side of the Monkey Kingdom toy. The smell was already so pervasive, but when she actually saw what was inside, it got even worse.

It looked, she thought from a comfortable emotional distance, like skin. Living skin, as opposed to corpse-flesh, as if all the dead things within had simmered long enough to merge together and form a new, leprous life. It was pale and pink, lumpy and tumorous. The seepage of dark water here and there gave the illusion of veins. Her own skin, where it was exposed beneath her goggles and above her breather, registered a faint pulse of heat that she was intellectually sure was just vapor rising, but which she still imagined to be breath. She couldn’t tell how thick it was, only that it completely covered the surface of the water that had flooded out the Monkey Kingdom. She supposed she could get a length of PVC pipe from her stock of materials and see if she could poke through, but was in no hurry. She’d be wading through that shit soon enough.

And on that note, it was time to leave.

Once out of the gym, she pulled her breather down, then all the way off, tossing it in the drinking fountain between the chicken-themed restrooms on her way out to the playground. It was hot, but at this hour, on this side of the building, there was plenty of deep shade and a strong breeze blowing in off the desert. The air tasted of the quarry, but the quarry tasted better than the gym, so she propped herself up against the wall and breathed it in. Her eye wandered, futilely seeking something pleasant to look at and finding only the angry summer sky, the empty desert, the lifeless hole of the quarry…and the stumps of two plastic feet bolted to the ground. She’d thought they belonged to a Foxy statue when she’d first seen them, but she guessed this was in fact all that remained of Rumble.

So that was the last of the New Faces. Or, no…she was still missing one. The white wolf or fox whose poster was next to Foxy’s in the lobby. She still hadn’t found her, which was weird, because now that the gym was open, she’d been everywhere. Except backstage in the parts room, of course, or in the manager’s office, but the white wolf wouldn’t be there. All the New Faces were fixed in place, meant to be seen by guests.

Maybe she’d been planted somewhere in the parking lot and broken apart years ago, like Rumble here. Or, hell, maybe she hadn’t been installed. After all, the restaurant had closed just after opening. And either way, what did it matter? The New Faces were creepy. If it wasn’t for the fact that it would be as good as unfurling a giant banner that said, I AM BREAKING INTO FREDDY FAZBEAR’S PIZZERIA ON A DAILY BASIS and hanging it from the dump trailer for the garbage guys to find when they came to empty it, she’d throw them all out.

The door behind her opened suddenly, driving a short spike of alarm through these exhausted thoughts. She turned, ready to bolt if it was a cop, even though she seriously doubted she had it in her to climb the chain-link fence that penned in the playground, but it was just Bonnie.

“HI THERE!” he said, limping toward her through the light drift of sand that was forever piling up against the building. “THERE’S NO BETTER WAY TO BEAT THE SUMMER HEAT THAN WITH SOME COOL JAMS! LET’S ROCK!”

Hearing his operating-hours greeting reminded her that her day was not yet over. Heaving a sigh,
Ana trudged toward him, then past him, then changed her mind and came back just as he was turning himself around to follow her. She stepped up close without speaking and leaned into his scruffy, scratchy chest. His arms closed around her at once. Her tired eyes stared into his fur, a soothing field of purplish-grey, as he chatted and laughed and twitched and hugged her. It occurred to her that she probably smelled worse than he did, for a change. She almost smiled, then thought of what it would take to install her camp shower, and groaned instead. That was supposed to be done by tonight. The gift shop, the lobby, the reading room, the employee’s break room— all supposed to be done. She couldn’t stand here all night, she had to get back to work.

Ana closed her eyes. Bonnie held her and told her all the things he loved about summer. Desert insects shrilled at the sun and the wind blew in off the quarry, hot and sour.

She did not think she was asleep, not on her feet with Bonnie’s stage voice booming through his speaker just above her ear, but when she first heard the crash, it translated itself in the way of dreams from the sound it was to thunder. With her eyes closed, she nonetheless saw the sky darken and clouds swell. At the second crash, she imagined lightning. At the third, she felt rain and it was that, not the noise at all, that made her open her eyes and see the sky still bleached-blue and glaring above her.

Another crash, and this time, with her eyes open and her exhausted brain forced into reality, she had to recognize the sound of something heavy being dropped into the utility trailer.

Someone was here. She was asleep on her feet with Bonnie right out in the open playground and someone was just around the corner, going through the trash in her trailer.

Ana pulled free of Bonnie, catching at his muzzle to silence him. “Go inside,” she ordered, although God knew, if she could hear whoever it was out by the loading dock, they could hear Bonnie, whose stage voice was calibrated to be heard over a roomful of excited kids. “Go,” she said again and Bonnie went, looking back at her with every step like a puppy being ordered to go walkies in the rain.

Ana went as close to the corner of the building as she could get before the chain-link fence blocked her, but couldn’t get close enough to see the loading dock. It was almost like whoever designed the building hadn’t wanted the kiddies on the playground to be able to see the dumpster, greasetrap and employee’s smoking area or something. Nevertheless, she could see her truck’s nose and the dark blurs in its dirty windows as whoever was there moved around, but the angle and the wind and the open air made it difficult to know exactly where he was… until something crashed down into the trailer and she realized at last what should have been obvious from the start.

No one was rummaging through the junk; Freddy was up on the loading dock, throwing stuff down. What stuff, exactly? That was anyone’s guess. He’d been watching her dump stuff all morning and she knew what their programming was like. She should have been expecting the animatronics to ‘help,’ although of all of them, she would have thought Freddy the least likely to want to.

Gritting her teeth, Ana headed inside, past a pacing Bonnie, through the kitchen, and into the store room where, sure enough, she found Freddy tossing pieces of the fallen stagelights from the dining room into the utility trailer. He’d already dumped the rotting curtains, some broken shelves from the gift shop, and several demolished games from the arcade, but none of her tools, thankfully.

“Stop right there, big… uh, Freddy,” she said, keeping well out of arm’s reach in case he hadn’t heard her come in. “I appreciate the thought, but you can’t just haul off whatever. I’ve only got so much room left in the dump trailer and I have to be careful what goes in it.”
He grunted, looking back at her, but not budging from his position on the loading dock.

“But thanks,” she said, turning away. “I appreciate the thought.” Had she already said that? It kind of felt like she had, but she couldn’t remember. Too hot. Had to be careful about that. Couldn’t have a repeat of the Kellar job.

Returning to the kitchen, Ana took off her shirt and dunked it in the ice chest, wrung it out over her head, then put it on again and straightened up to find Freddy right behind her.

“Don’t start with me,” she said defensively, very aware of the transparent nature of a wet t-shirt and the fact that she was not wearing a bra. “It’s a million degrees in here. I’m covered, aren’t I?”

He put a paw on her shoulder and moved her firmly to one side, then bent and opened the cooler. He took out a bottle of water and shoved it at her. “HAVE A COLD REFRESHING SODA,” he growled.

She thought about telling him the smell in here made everything taste like shit, but he had his I-don’t-give-a-damn face on already, so she changed her mind and just poured some water in her. It did taste like shit, but it was also cold and clarifying, and although she spat out that first mouthful, she drank the next one.

Freddy was still standing there, so Ana moved back to give him room to pass her in the narrow aisle between the wall and the pizza oven that occupied the middle of the floor. When she bumped the counter, she boosted herself up and sat, letting her aching feet dangle as she had another drink.

Freddy watched her and still didn’t move. They studied each other.

“You all right?” she asked finally, just to be polite.

He grunted, then said, “ARE. YOU.”

“Yeah, sure. It’s just a lot more work than I thought it would be. And no, I didn’t think it would be easy, but this place…” She trailed off to shake her head and drink more water. “Even in those damned few places where it isn’t falling down, it’s still bad.”

“MESSY.”

“No—well, yeah, but no. I mean bad. Everywhere I look, I see some fundamental architectural element that’s been slapped up with so many corners cut, it might as well be a paper snowflake hanging in a preschool window. Seriously, this place had to have been falling apart practically from Opening Day. And it can’t be a cost issue because that shit—” She pointed with her water bottle through the wall in the direction of the show stage. “—is not cheap.”

Freddy turned his head to stare at the wall, then looked at her again and said, “YOU. MEAN. THE. DOOR.”

“Of course I mean the door! There’s a ten-dollar deadbolt on the loading dock and there are fucking Jurassic-Park-brand tungsten carbide doors guarding the parts room. And the manager’s office!” she recalled. “If that’s really there to keep people like me from looting your spare parts, why in the hell did they just leave you four behind wandering loose in the halls? That doesn’t make sense. Nothing about this place makes sense.”

Freddy tipped his head forward in a frown, watching her without blinking.

“I knew it was going to be bad, but I was not prepared for the reality of this place. The schedule is
so fucking tight, I can’t afford to get hung up on any one room, but that gym…Christ.” She had another sip of water, thinking. “I gave myself two days to clear out twelve years of accumulated crap in a building this size…not very realistic, is it?”

“No.”

She studied him with a crooked smile. “Do you even know what a rhetorical question is?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re not quite getting the knack of it. Anyway, time to make some hard cuts. I can let the reading room slide, I guess. And the break room. And this room,” she added, looking around the kitchen with a curled lip. “I really wanted to get this room done, seeing as I’m keeping my food here. Although, I am not looking forward to that freezer, let me tell you. But it can wait. The important thing is just to clear what I absolutely cannot work around in order to get at the walls and the ceiling. That’s it. That’s all I need to do. So what is that, in realistic terms?”

Freddy did not answer, but his ears moved.

“The lobby,” she decided. “The gift shop. The bathrooms, both of them.”

“Three,” said Freddy.

“Yeah, I know. When I say both, I mean both sets…wait, three? Not four? Is there another set of bathrooms I’m unaware of? There’s the ones off the dining room, the ones by Pirate Cove, and…?”


“Christ, I knew something was off on that end of the building,” she groaned. Then, a new thought: “Who’s on the doors?”

“I. AM.”

“And on the girls?”

“I. THINK. HER. NAME. IS. CINNAMON.”

“Let me guess. One of the bears from Freddyland?”

“Yes.”

Ana sipped her drink, looking Freddy over. “You think she’s cute?”

Freddy grunted. “I. THINK. SHE’S. A. DRAWING. ON. A. DOOR. WHAT DID YOU SAY? WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?”

“Oh, okay. So all three sets of bathrooms. Pirate Cove, the arcade and the theater…but no, see, now I’m back to the whole fucking building and that’s just not going to happen. I’ve got maybe three more loads before the dump trailer is full and even if I call first thing Monday, it won’t be exchanged until Thursday. So what do I do? What needs it the most?”

She drank, shook her empty bottle and tossed it in the sink.

Freddy handed her another one.
“Like I even need to ask,” she said and then leaned back with a groan to thump her head lightly on the cupboards behind her. “It has to be the gym. Fuck me. How am I going to do that? I’m going to need a hazmat suit to even work in there.”

Freddy grunted.

“No, I absolutely will,” she said, although it was his I’m-thinking grunt and not a mocking one. “That room is beyond wrecked. It is a fucking crime scene.” She opened her second water bottle, swallowing some and pouring a little into her palm to rub over her face. “God, I hope I’m not speaking literally, but I probably am. Something died in there.”

His eyes switched on, their pale glow hitting her like twin spotlights.

“That big toy in the middle of the room is hip-deep in scummy water,” she explained. “And every animal that ever fell in trying to get a drink is still there. I haven’t seen it yet, but believe me, they’re there, just cooking away for twelve years. Think of it…think of it like a Dutch oven. Not the Monkey Kingdom toy, I mean the room itself. The room is the Dutch oven and the Monkey Kingdom is a pot of soup. Do you know what happens when you cook soup in a small pot inside a larger, closed-in oven?”

“NO,” said Freddy, once more struggling with the concept of rhetorical questions.

“Well, if it simmers long enough, the soup becomes vapor and the vapor goes up into the air and collects on the walls and windows and ceiling until it hits the saturation point and starts raining. Only it’s raining soup instead of water. Except in the gym, where it’s raining dead rat and bird and raccoon and…” An image formed in the far back of Ana’s mind, rising up like bones in dark water. “…and whatever else is in there,” she finished. “The more liquidy parts of that rain evaporate when its gets warm and the cycle begins anew, but there’s a sediment that stays behind and it builds up each time it rains. Guess what that sediment is made of?”

Freddy must have gained a point in rhetorical question awareness; he did not guess.

“You got it,” said Ana, raising her bottle to him in salute. “Presently, every surface in that room is half an inch deep in rotten-corpse-jelly.”

Freddy stared at her while she drank, then shut off his eyes and looked over his shoulder at the wall. Through the wall. At the gym.

“Cleaning it is…I just don’t even know the word, you know? But leaving it is not an option, so it’s got to be cleaned and that means the soup’s got to go first. A pump would be my first choice, but I’m not going to find one on the shelves at Lowe’s that can take the solids I’m likely to find at the bottom, and I don’t have the time to order one online and wait for it to be shipped. But let me tell you, Freddy, the thought of hauling it out bucket by bucket is just not working for me. I don’t mind getting dirty doing a day’s work, but even I have my limits and that’s well over the line. And all other considerations aside, it would take all fucking day and I don’t have any extra days lying around to waste on something like that.”

Freddy grunted, still looking at the wall.

Ana thought, kicking her legs now and then like a small child, watching the laces of her boots flop and dance while her mind walked in the gymnasium.

“I think I have an idea,” she said slowly. “I went to the mining museum here in town…gosh, I guess it’s been a couple months ago now. Anyway, they had a little prospector’s camp set up there
with a placer sluice. I could do something like that. Cut out a piece of the wall, build a little channel, cut into the Monkey Kingdom and let it all drain directly into the parking lot. I could pick up some tubs and some, like, furnace filters, jerry-rig a trommel to strain out any…you know, solids. Yeah,” she mused. “That would work.”

Freddy said nothing.

Ana sipped at her water and built a sluice in her mind.

“There’s still the issue of what to do with it afterwards,” she said eventually. “That and the other ten million fucktons of Freddyland crap cluttering up this place. I don’t have room for it in the dump trailer at home, and even if I did, Jesus Christ, as soon as the garbage guys see it, they’ll know where I got it. I can’t spend an entire day driving shit to a landfill in another town…and I don’t want to just pitch it off the bluff. The odds of someone seeing it are slim, but there’s always a chance, you know?”

Freddy nodded.

“A heap of stuff sitting where no heap of stuff ever used to be is as good as a welcome mat, especially in this town, extra-especially outside this restaurant. I mean, call me paranoid, but sometimes a little paranoia is only prudent, right?”

Freddy grunted and nodded again.

“And I can’t leave it here,” she concluded, releasing her frustration in a sigh. “Leaving aside the diabolical stink of the stuff, it’s so big that I can’t work around it and so utterly impregnated in toxic bacteria that trying to paint it in Killz would be like that scene in Willard where he gets a cat.”

Freddy cocked his head.

“Yeah, you probably didn’t see that one. Well, it didn’t end well for the cat, is the point of that little metaphor. Monkey Kingdom’s got to come out. More than any other room in this building, that gym has got to be cleared. So…so fuck it. I can’t take the shit home and I can’t take it down the road. I have to dump it in the quarry. I mean, obviously, right?”

Freddy grunted.

“Right,” she said. “Except it’ll still take a hundred trips to haul it all off piecemeal, plus if I’m caught, I’ll be arrested not just for trespassing in the quarry and trespassing here, but also toxic dumping and pollution, probably…plus I know for a fucking fact there’s a fucking body in that quarry that I can absolutely be tied to!”

Freddy’s ears locked in on her again.

“I didn’t do it,” she told him. “But I sure know it got done. And Mason Kellar knows I know, so if I’m caught and arrested and, by some miracle, released, I can expect that shitstew to bubble up again. And for that matter,” she went on, letting out a cheerily disgusted laugh, “what do I do when I find a fucking body right here?”

Freddy’s brows pulled slowly together. He did not make a sound.

“Don’t look at me like that. All horseshit aside, if I drain that fucking Monkey Kingdom cesspit and do not find a body, I will buy you a new hat. The color of that jelly says it all, big…uh, Freddy. You know how you can tell the difference between a, like, a field fire and a house fire just by the...
color of the smoke? House fire is blacker, because it’s dirtier, you know, with all the synthetic crap like clothes and paint and plastic that’s burning. Well, it’s the same for that sediment I mentioned. They smell about the same, but animals liquefy cleaner than people and the grease that people leave behind is just…greasier.”


“You don’t believe me?”

“I. Didn’t. Say. That.”

She chuckled, then went on, “It is all too easy to imagine some punk getting his urb-ex boy scout badge and falling in, just like the rats and raccoons. Imagine drowning in that shit,” she said, now to herself. “Jesus, imagine not drowning in it…just standing in it day and night until you died of fucking heat and thirst, praying someone would come along and find you. Only, look around.”

Freddy did, to her weary amusement.

“No one would ever find you,” said Ana, watching him. “This is the one place in the whole town everyone knows about and no one ever goes. A body could lie here a hundred years and no one would ever know. At least at Aunt Easter’s, the debt guys got involved eventually, but not here. It got to be a pizza parlor for one week and it’s been a tomb ever since. No offense,” she said belatedly, knowing she was on thin ice with Freddy and she might just be one rude remark away from another backhand.

But Freddy merely nodded, still staring distractedly at the wall behind him.

“I got to get back to work,” said Ana, sliding off the countertop and wincing as her feet took her weight. She had the last swallow of water, tossed the empty into the sink with the first bottle, and headed for the dining room. “Remember what I said. No more helping.”

Freddy grunted, following her as far as the doorway. There, he stood, watching her as she began to dismantle the barricade blocking off the cashier’s station. Even after Bonnie and Chica took the stage for the next set, he stayed put, silent and motionless but for the occasional rotation of his ears or the shifting of his eyes. She wasn’t sure when he left or where he went when he finally did. She just looked back and he was gone. It bothered her for a little bit, but she had heavier things weighing on her mind than a temperamental animatronic bear, and soon she forgot all about him and lost herself in work.

* * *

All day long, from 11 a.m., when the restaurant should have opened, until 9:02, when the sun officially set and Foxy was locked down to wait out the rest of the hour, he was alone. For ten hours (and two minutes), ten Saturday sets (and two minutes of an eleventh), he talked, joked, sang and told stories to no one. He could hear Ana moving around, sometimes close enough to catch her voice, but she never came to the Cove. When she’d stayed over before, she’d been in and out all day—looking the room over, watching the show, or just passing the time with him between sets. Foxy had seen her schedule and he did not expect her to visit just to be neighborly-like, but she had to take a break sometime, didn’t she?

He had the thought, once the sun set and he was forced still and silent for fifty-bleeding-eight minutes more, that Freddy might come by and release him early, but the thought never quite elevated itself as high as a hope. Freddy was that rarest of birds—one who could empathize with
the sentimental needs of others without indulging them. Foxy had to wait it out.

At ten, released, he hopped over the deck rails and jogged off to find her.

The quiet room’s door had been propped open, so Foxy stuck his head in and switched on his eyes. She wasn’t there—she wasn’t likely to be keeping her own company in the dark—but he had a good look anyway. She’d been busy.

The room had been emptied, not that there’d been much to remove beyond a few posters and the sort of general trash that had tracked itself into all the odd corners of the restaurant. She’d left the padding, but painted it white, every inch of it. She’d set up shelves along one wall, her toolchest and tablesaw along the opposing wall, and a worktable in the middle, wiped clean. The sum of these parts was strangely familiar to Foxy. After a moment’s thought, he got it: the basement at Mulholland. Take away the tools arranged on the wire racks of the shelves and replace them with mock-heads, daub a little blood around the room, and tie a girl to the table with the Purple Man leaning over her, and the resemblance was uncanny.

Disturbed, Foxy moved on. He could hear voices—Bonnie’s, mainly—and he figured the girl would be with him if she was anywhere.

She wasn’t.

It was only a minute after ten and Chica was still working her way down the stairs off the main stage, so Foxy went to offer a hook if she needed it.

“I CAN DO THIS!” she said—proud, sweet, stubborn Chica—which brought Bonnie in from the lobby and Freddy from the kitchen to see just what it was she was trying to do, but not Ana.

“Where is she?” Foxy asked, gesturing toward the table with Ana’s bed made up on top.

“I d-d-don’t know,” said Bonnie, now limping toward the West Hall. “She was sitting right-t-t—FOOT IN—there during the last-t-t set, but she left after closing. I c-c-couldn’t tell which way she went. The echoes in here are weird since she c-c-cl-cleaned up.”

“She all right?”

“She’s. Hi!” said Freddy before Bonnie could answer.

Ears flat, Bonnie swung around. “She is not-t-t!”

“She’s. BEEN. TAKING.” Freddy clicked several times, then gestured mutely toward Ana’s bag and mimed putting something small in his mouth.

“You don’t know what she was t-taking-ing-ing. It could have been aspirin! She’s hurt-t-t,” snapped Bonnie in an oddly accusatory tone. “You ought-t-t to know that!”

Freddy’s ears twitched. He turned around without speaking and went back into the kitchen.

“Just help-p-p me find her,” Bonnie grumbled, shoving the West Hall door open. “She’s got to be in the b-b-building somewhere. I never heard her t-t-truck leave. Did you?”

“No, and she’d have g-g-gone—TO DAVY JONES—right by this end o’ the building if she’d d-d-driven off.”

“Did she come through the C-C-C-C—”
“No, she ain’t there,” Foxy said as Bonnie slapped angrily at his stuttering speaker.

Bonnie kept going anyway, limping faster right past the other doors in the hall on his way to the Cove.

“Maybe you didn’t-t-t hear her c-c-c-come in.”

“I would have.”

“Maybe she went-t-t out the side door.”

“I would have heard-d-d that, too.”

Bonnie stopped and looked back at him, eyes narrowed. “Why the hell would-d-d you be listening that hard-d-d?”

First startled, then annoyed, Foxy said, “I were waiting to c-c-carry her off, weren’t I? Don’t be daft, man! What the hell else is there to listen for in this p-p-place?”

Bonnie’s answer was a slow curling of his hands into fists and the jittering of one ear as it tried to get flatter to his head.

“Oh for…look, ye can’t be quiet-t-t going in and out that door,” Foxy said as mildly as he could, which wasn’t very. “And them b-b-boots o’ hers make a hell of a noise.”

“The C-C-Cove is carpeted,” said Bonnie, not moving.

“Not that bloody deep. I ain’t arguing with ye, g-g-go on and look for yerself if ye want-t-t-t to. It be yer t-t-t—TIME TO SAIL—time to waste, ain’t it?” Foxy turned around, opening the reading room door and switching on his eyes for a quick scan, as if unaware of Bonnie’s suspicion drilling into his back. “All I’m saying is, if she were in the C-C-C—PIRATE COVE—I sure as hell wouldn’t-t-t be passing me night pretending to look-k-k for her.”

Bonnie’s head tipped, his cameras whining as they irised a little further open. “And what would-d-d you be doing, Foxy?”

“Oh, for Ch-Christ’s sake—”

“WE’VE GOT A BIRTHDAY GIRL!” Chica sang out in the dining room.

“St-St-Stay away from her.” Bonnie pushed past him and back down the hall to the dining room.

“Freddy gave him a goodish lead, giving himself time to rest the mouth that was forever getting him in trouble, then followed, passing through the West Hall door just as Freddy came in from the East Hall with Ana in his arms, looking like a poster for a particularly stupid horror movie. Her head lolled and limbs dangled, swaying with each step Freddy took, but she wasn’t asleep; her efforts to rouse were lethargic and ineffectual, but they proved she was awake, even if she wasn’t much aware.

“Where was she?” Bonnie asked, rushing over to try and take her.

Freddy didn’t give her up. “OUTSIDE.”

“Smoking-ing-ing?” Bonnie ventured, ears low again, but not with anger.

“IT. STARTED. OUT. THAT. WAY,” Freddy grunted, nudging Bonnie none-too-gently aside to
lay Ana out on the table. She tried to roll onto her side; he pulled her back and pressed her down as he lifted one of her hands and turned his eyes on. Even at this distance, Foxy could see the fresh red marks between her first two fingers. Burns. “TELL. ME. AGAIN. SHE’S. NOT. HI!” he snapped, dropping her arm so it fell with a weak splatting sound onto the rubbery cushion she called a bed.

Ana shifted, half-raised her arm, and let it fall again. Her mouth moved, wordless. Her eyes rolled beneath their lids, but didn’t open.

Freddy watched her until she quieted, then threw Bonnie another glare and went into the kitchen. The three of them waited, finding other things to look at and nothing to do, as the plastic hinges on the new camping cooler in the other room creaked open and ice clacked wetly together. Freddy returned without a drink, but with one hand dark and dripping. He lost a few notes of the Toreador March, but his hand seemed gentle enough as he touched it to her forehead.

She jerked, her entire body all at once, and clutched at the air in spastic grabby motions well away from Freddy’s hand while he washed her face, then dropped limp again and dragged her eyes open at last. Looking right up at Freddy, she said, “Bonnie?”

Freddy grunted and stepped back, folding his arms to watch as Bonnie shuffled forward.

“Yeah,” he said, taking the limp hand Ana groped toward him. “It’s me.”

Her eyes slid shut again. “I thin’ I fell down,” she said and laughed. Even the laugh was thick and slurred. “Pi’ me up mebbe? Can you? Shoul’er…acro…acro…”

“Acromioclavicular,” said Bonnie and he said it without hesitating or stuttering at all. The hand that held hers did not twitch. “You okay, baby?”

“Uh huh,” she said, nodding for good measure. “Jus’ super…like…super-high and don’ wan’ Freddy to know.”

Freddy grunted again. One hand flexed on his bicep, scratching through the unkempt fur to the plastic. He was starting to wear a bald patch there.

“Your secret’s safe with me, baby girl,” said Bonnie, watching him as he stroked Ana’s hair back from her damp brow. “What-t-t-t did you take? Did you t-t-take something?”

Ana’s flushed face twisted into an expression of exaggerated innocence, but the effort to hold it was more than she could sustain. “Vic’din,” she said and shrugged. “Wasn working. Couple Lortab. Nothin’ hurz now. Nothin’ hurz. I’m fine. Jus’ gimme minute, I gotta get ba’ t’work.”

“No, baby, you’re done.”

“I’m not done! I’m not!” Again, Ana tried to rise and actually managed to struggle up as far as her elbows before she collapsed. “I got so much to do,” she moaned. “I been at it all day…I didn’t do anything!”

Foxy looked around as Bonnie petted her quiet. Didn’t do anything. The barricades were gone, the floor swept, the trash either carried out or bagged and set in the corner next to Swampy. He had a feeling if he walked around, he’d see plenty more, but she’d done enough in this one room for a team of three, let alone what she’d done in the quiet room. But she didn’t do anything and she hurt too much to keep at it, so she took herself a handful of pills and wanted to get back to work.

“You’re done,” Bonnie was saying. “Gonna put you to bed now, okay? Lie still.”
Ana stiffened, or tried to. Her eyes, still closed, pinched in fear. “Don’ wanna go home. Don’ wanna go. He’s there. Plush…Plushtra’. He bites.”

“You’re not-t-t going home, baby. You’re staying right here.”

“He bites,” she slurred again, writhing deeper into Bonnie’s arms. “I can’t…I can’t…I’m so fu’ing high, Bon, you have no idea.”

“I got a clue,” sighed Bonnie, rubbing her shoulder as she huddled against him. “Freddy…what do I do?”

“Don’ tell him,” Ana whispered. “He hates me enough asa is.”

“DON’T. LEAVE. HER. ALONE,” said Freddy after a somewhat lingering glance at Ana. “DON’T. LET. HER. SLEEP. ON. HER. BACK. TRY. TO. MAKE. HER. DRINK. IF. YOU. CAN. BUT. DON’T. LEAVE. HER. ALONE. FOR. ONE. MINUTE.”

“I CAN HELP!” offered Chica, waddling closer. “I CAN MAKE THE CUPCAKES! I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS. WHAT DO I DO NOW?”

“C-C-Can you get her boots off? Every time I let-t-t go of her, she tries to get up.”

Shaking his head, Freddy tapped Foxy’s arm and nodded toward the hall, already walking away.

Aye, best leave them to it. She hadn’t even noticed he was in the room. And if she did, she’d only think he was there to drown her. He did that a lot, according to her.

Still, Foxy only took one step back and then just stood watching until Freddy grunted a warning. Ana still didn’t know he was there, but now Bonnie did, glaring at Foxy over Ana’s slowly writhing form until Foxy reluctantly turned all the way around and left.

Freddy walked him to the Cove, perhaps just to be companionable, but more than likely to make sure he went. He did not say, ‘Stay out of the dining room,’ which only proved that sometimes silent words were louder than spoken ones.

The sound of their footsteps filled up the whole of the building. Bonnie was right; the echoes were weird now that she’d started cleaning. Quiet and Foxy were mostly on friendly terms, but tonight, it was hard to take.

“She all right, do ye reckon?” Foxy asked, too suddenly, too loud.

“Well, ask a stupid question…”

“SHE. SHOULDN’T. BE. HERE,” Freddy growled and rubbed a restless hand across his muzzle. “THIS. CAN’T. BE. GOOD. FOR. HER.”

“For her, eh?”

Freddy shot him a scathing and not entirely undeserved glower. “I’M. NOT. A. COMPLETE. GLASS. HOLE. FOXY.”

“I know ye ain’t-t-t,” Foxy said, chastened. God, everything he said tonight was the wrong thing.

“WHERE. THE. HELLO. IS. HER. FAMILY,” Freddy demanded. “WHO. IS. SUPPOSED. TO.
BE. LOOKING. OUT. FOR HER.”

“They look-k-k out for themselves after a certain age, mate.”

“SHE’S. DOING. A.” Freddy stopped there, clicking through sound files.

“Fuck-lousy?” Foxy suggested.

Freddy’s reproachful stare ended on a grudging nod. “JOB. OF. IT.” he concluded, reaching for the door to the Cove. “I. DON’T. WANT. HER. HERE. BUT. I’M. STARTING. TO. BE AFRAID. OF. SENDING. HER. AWAY. ARE. WE. IT. FOXY,” he asked angrily. “ARE. WE. ALL. SHE. HAS.”

Foxy paused just inside the door and looked back at him. “Aye, I think so, mate.”

Freddy stared at him, his expression of frustration slowly bleeding away. “THAT’S. AWFUL,” he said at last.

“Aye.”

“ON. A. LOT. OF. LEVELS.” Freddy looked back down the hall, ears rotating to listen to whatever there was to hear in the dining room. “BUT. ANY. WAY. YOU. LOOK. AT. IT. THAT’S. SAD.”

“Ye coming in, mate, or ye just-t-t going to hold-d-d—HOLD FAST TO THE RIGGING!—the door all night?”

Freddy looked at his hand on the door, then at Foxy again and shook his head. “I. NEED. TO. KEEP. WATCH. IT’S. SUMMER.”

He wanted to offer to come along, but he knew Freddy preferred to patrol alone, so Foxy merely stepped awkwardly back and nodded a goodbye that Freddy didn’t see, having already let go the door and turned around. The door wheezed shut, narrowing the view of Freddy walking away into the darkness until it closed him off completely.

Alone again.

Hell, he was always alone, or if not always, more often than not. It didn’t bother him.

Still, he felt silly just standing here by the door, so he went back to his stage. It felt even sillier standing there, so he went on up the gangplank and settled into his favorite leaning place in the pointed prow of his ship. He looked at the backs of the curtains for a while, then shut his eyes off and didn’t look at anything. He scraped his thumb along the tip of his hook, just to have something to listen to, but the noise got on his nerves, so he stopped.

His internal clock counted out sixteen minutes before he heard Freddy, now in the West Hall, but he only went as far as the door and then went away again. Foxy listened for as long as he could hear the drag of Freddy’s feet, then scraped at his hook some more.

An hour passed. Freddy came and went at regular intervals without ever coming all the way into the Cove. No one stopped in to tell him how Ana was doing. He didn’t really expect anyone would.

At midnight, Foxy pushed himself out of the prow and went into his cabin. He sat on his bunk and put one foot unerringly up on the rounded lid of the Booty Chest in the pitch-blackness. He knew where everything was. He didn’t need to see.
After a few minutes, he reached up for the lantern he’d taken from Ana, oh, months ago now, and switched it on. There was nothing to look at in here, but now he could see it clearly. Treasure maps with great thick Xs inked at the end of a dotted line, with heaps of gold-painted coins, idols and oversized plastic gems to prove past successes; swords supposedly taken from all the enemies he’d dueled, with the lion-hilted cutlass of Captain Blackmane in a place of honor on the wall above them; a wooden table scarcely broader than the chair pushed up to it, with sextant and sea charts artfully strewn across it and glued down to keep them wandering off in little pockets; a dark blue bottle that had been empty when he’d been given it and a tin tankard etched with a skull and crossbones. And beside him in the bunk, a single gold-colored plastic doubloon.

Foxy studied the doubloon as if he’d never seen it before, or any of the thousands like it that had poured through his keeping over the years. After a few minutes, he picked it up. He held it in his palm until he had thoroughly examined each line of his own leering face stamped into the coin, then hooked his thumb under it, gave it a flip, and had a look at the other side. He flipped it a few more times, then balanced it on the back of his forefinger, ‘walked’ it across his knucklebones, flipped it again, and ‘walked’ it again, and so on. There was a time he could have performed this little trick all night, from closing until opening, with nary a hitch, but tonight, he managed no more than a dozen repetitions before the doubloon slipped between his exposed knucklebones and hit the wooden boards of the floor. He picked it up, put it on the bunk beside him again, and resumed staring.

Seconds. Minutes. Another hour.

Foxy hummed. Not one of his show-songs, although not for lack of trying. He started singing, sounds without words along a simple tune, first thinking and then remembering. White walls. Bright light. Sound of a guitar being played, badly, in another room. Two men, one in front of him and one behind. A plastic head on the table beside him, crudely sculpted, sharp-fanged, one-eyed —his.

“Come on! It’ll be funny!”

“Oh. Yeah. Hilarious. He’s singing about raping a girl, for crying out loud!”

“He’s a pirate! Pirates go wenching! It’ll be fine!”

“No. I’m not putting him onstage singing that! This is going to be a kid’s show, Erik!”

“Hell, no kid is going to know what he’s saying. It’ll go right over their tiny snot-nosed little heads.”

“They’ll know. The older ones will know. Their parents will definitely know. And most of all, I’ll know.”

“Come on!”

“I said no. You wanted a pirate that had nothing to do with the other mascots in the band, I said fine. You wanted the hook, I gave him a hook. You wanted the teeth, I gave him the teeth. I’ve gone along with every single part of this whole pirate thing, but I am not putting him onstage so he can sing to a roomful of toddlers about running some girl down and screwing her in the middle of the street. That’s sick, Erik. How can you even defend that?”

“He’s a pirate. Pirates have their own ideas of right and wrong.”

“So do serial killers, by that logic.”
“Yeah, well…oh, lighten up, Freddy. It was a joke. Fine, fine, I’ll take it off the playlist. I don’t care.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I just thought it would be funny.”

“You have a weird sense of humor, man.”

The voices laughed and the laughter faded, sinking back into that internal quarry where his memories buried themselves. In the silence, the same silence that had always been with him here, Foxy again began to sing. He kept it quiet, fighting with each word against his damnable programming that wanted him to be belting it out at top volume, waving his hook and punctuating every pause with Yars and Avasts, because this one was a show-song, the first he’d ever been taught. The first he’d ever taught her.

“For a bottle o’ rum,” he sang, and stopped, listening.

Nothing.

He sang a little louder. “I’d sell me own mum …”

Something moved, not here in his cabin, where there were no hiding places, but on the other side of the hidden door in the back wall that led to the parts room. Something scraped, metal on metal, just where the crawlway opened backstage.

“I were born under black cloth and bones.”

Something heavy dropped with a muffled thump into the unknown nest she had made for herself there. He heard a short burst of static, scarcely discernable, which meant it must be ear-splitting inside that little room.

Foxy sang louder. “Give me rolling seas and a stiff briny breeze, for me ship be me only home!”

A muted screech of feedback, terminating in a series of clangs and whistles and stuttering electronic noise. Something bumped the wall, slid along it, and crashed down into what sounded like a pile of sticks but probably wasn’t. Static swelled and stuttered, and if a man were so inclined, he might fool himself into thinking it sounded like words.

“There’s them what loves land, tall trees and white sand, and a life what’s cozy and quiet,” he sang, getting up from his bunk and sitting down again with his back against the door. He couldn’t hear her much better, but he could feel the vibrations through the metal door as she scratched at it. They were supposed to sing this together, his arm around her waist and hers around his shoulders, hooks high and that bloody puppet parrot of hers squawking along. “But there’s no country as free as the wide-open sea, say hey for the life of a pirate!”

They sang—and she was singing now, he was sure of it, the sound of her static chopped into pieces the same size as his words, perfectly in sync—but she only lasted two verses more of the ten the song comprised before lapsing into silence. He heard/felt her hook scratch once, slowly, down the door, so he kept singing, hoping she would join in again, but as he came to the bit about knaves and liars and cannons a’fire, she suddenly slammed into the door directly behind his head. Her teeth scraped and gouged at the metal, thrashing and screaming static, only stopping long enough to rear back and lunge again. The door, like the walls and the floor and the whole of the parts room, was tungsten carbide and she wasn’t coming through it, but she kept trying, smashing her poor body into it over and over until it was a wonder she didn’t break herself completely apart.
The light began to dim. Foxy forced his eyes open and pulled his camera shutters as small as they would go, but he wasn’t going black. The lantern was. Battery was going, he thought as Mangle bit and bit and bit at the door behind him. He shouldn’t have left it on this long. The light had been yellowing and drawing in for some time now, but he just kept using the blasted thing like he thought it would shine forever.

Foxy did not get up to shut the lantern off. He sat, knees drawn up and arms loosely bound around them, watching it die and listening to Mangle bash herself against the door. She and the light faded together over hours and at last, it was quiet and dark. The darkness was not total; the lantern’s glow was no more now than a reddish-brown blur, like blood on the surface of the black rather than a light, even a dim light, within it. The quiet had the same quality, the same color.

Then she said, clear as a brass bell behind the noise that was her only voice: “Foxy?”

He raised his head, turning toward her as if the wall were not between them…but very glad it was. “Aye, lass. I’m here.”

Her hook hit the door on his first word, scratching and slashing to the last. Then it fell away and there was quiet again.

“It hurts,” she said finally.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m b-b-bl-bleeding.”

Foxy sighed. This again. First time she’d talked in years and it was this. “No, yer not-t-t.”

“I feel-feel-feel myself bleeding.” Static slipped along her words, popping like bubbles in champagne. “I feel it p-p-pouring out my fingers and my-y-y-y eyes.”

“Yer not bleeding.”

“I can hear it d-d-dripping,” she insisted. “It’s all I hear. I t-t-taste it. In my mouth.”

“Ye can’t-t-t bleed, luv,” he told her gently. “Ye don’t-t-t have blood anymore.”

“I’m not d-d-dead! I’m not-t-t! I can’t! I’ve tried-d-d!” Her voice rose on bursts of static to a shrill, distorted howl. “There’s not-t-t enough of me left t-t-to die!”

“Hush now, luv,” he said, speaking softer so that she would have to quiet herself to hear him. Sometimes that helped. “All’s well. B-B-Be still.”

“I can’t build-d-d me back fast-t-t enough. I eat and eat, but the p-p-pieces just fall out. Help me. Can’t-t-t you help me? You said-d-d you’d take care of me. That was you…” Her voice washed out in noise and came back querulous. “Wasn’t-t-t it?”

“Aye,” he said. “It was me.”

She was quiet then. The static came and went, wordless, like labored breaths. Sometimes she shifted, metal scraping against metal as she huddled closer to the door. Sometimes there were rattling sounds, as if she were biting at herself or scratching through skin she didn’t have to the metal bones beneath. But she was quiet, and that could be good or bad, depending on whether she’d pulled herself higher out of the black or sunk deeper in.
He took a chance.

“Foxanne—”

She screamed back at once, speakers blatting and popping, and attacked. Dull thumps were all he could hear as she threw herself against the wall separating them, scrabbling and biting now this way and now that in an effort to find that one weak place in the unfathomable obstruction that would allow her to chew through and rip into him.

Foxy stared into the lantern and tried to wait her out, but he knew she wasn’t coming out of it again. And maybe that was best. God help him, but he’d almost rather she stayed full black and feral than come out just enough to know what she’d become.

“Go to sleep, then,” he said, louder now, deliberately stoking whatever dark fire burned in her. Her attacks increased in violence until he could actually feel the door trembling when she hit it. “Go b-b-back to sleep. It’s late and the nights ar—ARR! ME HEARTIES!—are long here. Go to sleep and d-d-dream of better men than me.”

She bit the door once more, then receded, climbing whatever was back there to climb—he thought he could remember wire shelves, like the ones Ana had put in the quiet room, but it had been a long time and he might be thinking of the parts room in Circle Drive—until she reached the hatch to the crawlway. As she dragged herself up, the lantern flared to a kind of tired life, still not bright enough to illuminate anything, but brighter than it had been in hours. Then, with a dull pop, the bulb went out and left Foxy alone in the dark.
Ana heard a sound like a muffled thump or banging in the night and thought it made her dream of thunder…or maybe she dreamed of thunder and just thought it made her imagine she heard a sound. This was especially confusing because she sure thought she woke up when the noise first started and saw Chica and Bonnie. At first, she thought they were talking, because they were facing each other, but there was an awkward amount of distance between them, if so; she wasn’t sure what made it seem that way, just that it wasn’t conversational. Once she noticed this, other oddnesses revealed themselves, like shadows in fog, taking shape while still remaining insignificant. Bonnie appeared to be leaning sideways against the rear wall. He had a hand up, motionless, not frozen in some stage-gesture as she’d first thought, but resting on the wall for balance. His head might actually be pressed up to it, cartoonishly eavesdropping, but on what? The door to the parts room backstage did not open. Nothing could be back there.

Ana closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep. Bonnie said something. She couldn’t tell what, but his voice, even in whispers, was distinctly his own. She smiled.

Chica did not answer, which was nice, because she didn’t have much in the way of volume control, but she did start walking, the wheezes and clanks of her leg mechanisms as distinct in their own way as Bonnie’s whisper. Ana listened as Chica shuffle-dropped down the three steps to the floor, thinking foggily that she needed to check her email when she for-real woke up, see if anyone had responded to her Craigslist ad yet, because patched was not fixed and those pumps were going. More static, louder than before, other noise that reminded her in her half-asleep way of an old-timey landline dialing up to the internet—all beeps and bongs and scratches—followed by a distant roll of dream-thunder. She opened her eyes again and saw Bonnie onstage and Chica in the middle of the room, motionless, their glowing eyes aimed up at the ceiling. So it wasn’t all a dream; there really must be thunder. Was that worth waking up for? She wasn’t sure she could. Even the idea of the roof falling in on her could not penetrate far into the leaden fog filling her skull.

“Is it raining?” she mumbled or thought she mumbled, but dreams had a way of twisting time out of linear order. And she had to be dreaming, because she could have sworn she said it, and then Chica went waddling past and into the kitchen, where she apparently tried to shuffle together two stacks of pizza baking trays like they were playing cards. The resulting clatter slapped the clouds right out of her head, however, waking her fully and immediately to a state of high alarm.

She rolled over to yell, “Jesus Christ, really?!” and promptly slipped off the air mattress again, although she managed—barely—not to fall off the table too.

Bonnie was there in an instant, trying to help her back into the middle of the mattress while she tried to thrash free of it and kick some chicken butt. At last, she made it down off the table, but the feel of the floor diverted some of her anger to disgust. She thought she’d mopped this. She could remember sweeping it. Why hadn’t she mopped?

That’s right. She’d overworked her back and shoulders clearing the barricades, so she’d taken a Vicodin just to help her hold it together long enough to get the floor mopped, but she’d been taking a lot of Vicodin lately. She might as well have popped an M&M for all the good it did, so she took two Lortab from the vitamin bottle with the lemon sticker on it, and that had worked just fine. She
had a dim memory of watching Freddy and the others onstage, waiting for them to shut down with
the even dimmer idea that she would start by cleaning the stage once they were off it, but the show
went on forever and Freddy’s rumbling baritone…bear-itone…was too sleep-inducing. She’d gone
outside to smoke a joint and watch the sun go down…and that was the last thing she could
remember.

Shouldn’t have had that joint. Shouldn’t have had the Lortab either, or at least not both of them.
Should have gone lighter on the Vicodin these last few months. Should have done a lot of things,
but she hadn’t and now here she was, with a dry mouth, a thick swimmy head, aching muscles and
a filthy unmopped floor. Two days in and she was already so fucking far behind, it wasn’t funny.
And neither was this.

Ana hunted around the table for her boots with Bonnie doing everything he possibly could to get in
her way, and the whole time, Chica merrily continued to bash trays together in the next room, the
sound bouncing around the empty building so that it seemed to come from everywhere.

“Enough, already!” she finally shouted, hopping on one foot as she pulled her boot on. “What the
fuck, woman!”

Chica waddled to the kitchen doorway to peep out at her. “I LIKE TO COOK.”

“And I like to fucking sleep,” Ana snapped. “Do you know what time it is?”

Both animatronics jerked.

“IT’S TIME TO EAT!”

“IT’S TIME TO ROCK!”

“No, it’s not! It’s…” Ana fumbled her phone out of her pack and turned it on. “It’s four o’clock in
the fucking morning! What’s wrong with you?”

Chica hung her head slightly and tapped her fingers. “A HEALTHY BREAKFAST IS THE MOST
IMPORTANT WAY TO START YOUR DAY. I COULD MAKE THE CUPCAKES!”

Somewhere in the ceiling, an animal, startled awake either by Chica’s impromptu cooking session
or Ana’s less-than-understanding reaction to it, moved away through the ventilation duct. It was
hard to know what kind of animal it was, how big or even how many, because at the first shuffling
thump, Chica picked up a pizza tray and threw it like a Frisbee directly into the side of the oven,
still wearing her earnest hangdog expression of apology.

“I LOVE TO COOK,” she chirped, flinging a few more trays around. “ARE YOU READY FOR A
SLICE OF DELICIOUS FAZBEAR PIZZA? MMM! I’LL MAKE ONE JUST FOR YOU!
WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE KIND OF PIZZA? I LIKE LOTS OF HEALTHY VEGGIES ON
MINE!”

“Stop! All my shit’s in there! Damn it, Chica, you’re going to break something! Cut it out! I said
stop!” Inspiration struck. She yelled, “Simon Says stop!”

Chica stopped hurling trays and in the quiet, Ana could now hear footsteps in the East Hall. When
she turned her phone in that direction, two glowing eyes snapped on back at her, and soon after, so
did another one. Just one, yellow and squinty in the dark. Freddy, with Foxy farther behind him,
coming to see what the commotion was all about.

Ana pressed both hands to her face to muffle some choice words, then let them drop and offered
Chica grudging, “Look, I’m not trying to be a bitch here, but come on with that shit!”

“GOSH, I’M SORRY. DO YOU WANT TO PLAY A GAME? DO YOU WANT TO SING A SONG? LET’S READ A BOOK TOGETHER!”

Ana didn’t bother answering. Chica obviously knew she’d done something wrong, but Ana would never be able to make her understand exactly what. She was biological; they were mechanical. Their ability to parse sleep was no doubt limited to ‘If child is cranky, suggest nap and/or remove to quiet room,’ whereas Chica’s love of cooking was well-established and all-inclusive. For twelve years, no one had objected when she’d gotten the four a.m. urge to pretend to bake a pizza or a batch of cupcakes. Ana had no reasonable expectation of quiet in the dining room.

Which was why she’d wanted to sleep in the party room, so if this was anyone’s fault, it was Freddy’s.

Right on cue, Freddy limped out of the dark, his glowing eyes sweeping from Chica to Ana and back again. “WHAT IS IT?”

Chica pointed up.

Freddy looked at the ceiling, his ears rotating.

“No, it’s fine,” said Ana, now looking up too, shining her phone’s light from one hole to the next, but seeing no new damage. ‘The roof’s fine. Don’t!’ she said sharply as Chica reached for a baking tray. “Just leave it alone.”

“What do you want-t-t?” Bonnie asked, which meant Foxy had reached them.

Sure enough, Foxy’s rough growl answered, “Thought I heard-d-d a dragon. Came to see if it needing fighting. Or whatever it needed, eh, bucko? Ye all right, lass? Ye look-k-k a bit done in.”

Ana glared at Chica. Chica tapped her fingertips and looked at the ceiling. Ana turned away, sharpening a few pointed remarks, but let them die unspoken at her first sight of Foxy.

He looked just the same as he ever had. He had to. He was plastic. All the same, he looked awful.

“I’m fine,” said Ana, frowning. “Up too late and awake too early, that’s all.”

“I keep t-t-telling ye, me cabin’s quiet and d-d-dry.”

Bonnie’s ears slapped flat.

“I got to be honest with you, Captain, I have never been more tempted,” Ana said, already patting Bonnie to show him she didn’t mean it, even though she kind of sort of almost did.

“Can’t p-p-promise ye’d get more sleep there than here.” He winked at her, but his heart wasn’t in it and his voice when he said, “But as long as ye ain’t-t-t sleeping, ye might as well not sleep with me,” was as close to truly mechanical as any pull-cord toy.

Freddy pointed at Bonnie without taking his eyes off the ceiling. “DON’T FIGHT.”

“I didn’t say anything-ing-ing!”

“FOXY.”

“I ain’t fighting. I’m just-t-t talking.”
“THEN. SHUT. UP,” said Freddy.

Foxy did, looking away down the hall and scratching his hook along the scars on his chest. In fact, all of them were quiet. Freddy watched the ceiling and after a while, Foxy turned around and took himself back to the Cove without another word.

Ana almost went after him, but another noise in the ceiling distracted her. She looked up, trying to figure out just where it was coming from, but although she was reasonably sure it had to be an animal of some kind in that big air duct, she still couldn’t tell what. Even when she went to stand directly beneath the duct, she could barely hear it, as if it were padded on the inside. At the same time, the sounds she could make out indicated something heavier than any animal could possibly be. Yet there were no footsteps, only a series of labored dragging sounds, as if this enormous beast trapped in a padded airshaft had broken all four limbs and were dragging itself along, bone by bone.

Whatever it was, it soon crawled out of earshot and Ana couldn’t even tell in what direction. It could have been anything, though. The duct was big enough for a person to move around in. Hell, even Bonnie could have fit in it.

And she was still missing one of the New Faces, wasn’t she?

God, there was a disturbing thought. For a moment, she could almost see it…the filthy glow of its eyes gleaming on its naked metal bones, pulling itself along through the air conditioning system by its teeth…but no. All the New Faces were no more than statues fit with speakers and simple mechanisms that might allow them to wave or blink or flap their otherwise mute jaws, but they weren’t real. They couldn’t walk, couldn’t talk…and couldn’t skulk through dark places in the middle of the night, looking for unwary prey.

Ana forced her eyes down, rubbing at them. Still a little stoned, she guessed. Despite what the movies insisted, even the biggest ventilation shafts couldn’t hold the weight of a person, let alone one of the animatronics. It was probably just a stray cat or a raccoon, its echoes blown out to mammoth proportions by all the flat surfaces and empty spaces up there. Or even just the wind, buffeting into duct walls and turning on itself in corners.

That only reminded her of the mess awaiting her in the gymnasium. God, the day hadn’t even started and it already felt like it was never going to end.

“SHOW’S OVER, KIDS,” said Freddy with a last narrow glance upward before turning his attention on the scene before him. “IT’S QUIET TIME. AN-N-A. GO. BACK. TO. BED.”

“No,” she sighed. “I’m up. I might as well get started.”

“Are you sh-sh-sure?” Bonnie asked.

“NO,” said Freddy even as Ana nodded and rubbed her tired eyes. “GO. TO. BED.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“IT’S TOO. EARLY,” said Freddy. “AND. YOU’RE.”

“I’m what?” she interrupted, getting right up in his big bear face. “Go on, say it.”

“Freddy—” Bonnie began.

Both Ana and Freddy raised a silencing hand at exactly the same time. Bonnie backed up, ears low,
eyes darting between them.

“You got something to say to me?” Ana demanded. “Let’s hear it. Loud and proud.”

Freddy clicked a few times. His expression, even given the physical limitations of his features, seemed hard. “YOU NEED A NAP.”

Too tired and too full of residual opioids for tact, Ana snapped, “You don’t set my fucking bedtime, Freddy.”

His eyes narrowed. “MIND YOUR MANNERS. WHEN. YOU. SPEAK. TO. ME.”

She backed up, literally and figuratively. “Well, you don’t. Now I’ve got work to do and unless you’ve got some more ideas about what I need, you better step off me and let me do it.”

Freddy’s hand flexed on his bicep, but he didn’t answer. He watched, silent, as she defiantly made her bed and then walked past him into the kitchen. Breakfast was the most important meal of the day, so Ana started with two swallows of Redline, and then took a bottle of water with her out to stare at her schedule, her head still stuffed with Lortab, but her heart racing and energy pumping through her reluctant veins.

When the footsteps first came up beside her, she thought they were Bonnie’s and reached without looking to take his hand.

“DON’T. TOUCH. ME.”

Ana looked at Freddy, startled, then past him to Bonnie, still well back in the dining room, then faced forward at her schedule again, wondering how she could have mistaken one for the other. Maybe she really did need a nap.

“WELL,” said Freddy finally.

Still weirdly embarrassed for trying to hold hands with the wrong animatronic, Ana snapped, “Well, I’m already fucked and I can’t catch up. Is that what you want to hear?”

“NOT. IN. THOSE. WORDS.”

She glanced at him. He was already looking at her. His gaze was just as firm, as Freddyish, but not without a glint of humor. It was amazing the difference the angle of an eyelid or the tilt of a head could make to their expressions.

“Sorry,” she said. She wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for—her attitude, her language, her careless disregard of rule number six, or just for being there at all—but she figured it was the best way to put it all behind them. The fact that she actually did feel a little bad, she chalked up to the Lortab.

If this were one of his stage acts, he’d apologize back at her and they’d be friends. Freddy merely acknowledged her with a nod and looked back at the schedule.

“Well, the deadline isn’t moving,” she said, tapping unnecessarily at the day marked 4 on her hand-drawn calendar. “So I’m just going to have to do the best I can with the time I have. Let’s see, I’ve got…nineteen hours and thirty-eight minutes max left in the day. I’ve got to get what I need to build my sluice—I think I can get that here in town without too much drama—start the Monkey Kingdom draining—that’ll take all night, I can leave the actual shoveling out for Monday—cap the sewer pipes in the bathrooms—might as well get all the smelly work done at the same time—and
hook up the shower. If I can get all that done before, let’s say ten o’clock, I’ll go ahead and take the measurements tonight, but that isn’t very likely. At midnight, ready or not, I have got to go to bed, because I’ve got work in the morning.”

Freddy grunted once, which was frankly all the answer she was expecting to her rambling rundown of the day, then said, “HOW CAN I HELP YOU?”

She didn’t know. She looked at him, feeling the enormity of the job pushing down on her aching shoulders. Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow she had to go back to work and then she had only five days—not even days, just the evenings—to prep the entire building for demolition. She had only one more weekend to fully dedicate to the job and four half-days after that, she had to be ready to build. How could he help? How could anyone help?

But Freddy was waiting for an answer, so Ana gave him the only one she had, the one she could always depend on: “You can help me best by leaving me alone.”

“NO.” He folded his arms. “WHAT. ELSE.”

“Can you at least tone down the constant interruptions about stupid stuff like—”

“EATING. AND. DRINKING.”

That was exactly what she meant, but somehow she didn’t think it was wise to agree.

“I can take care of myself,” she said instead. “So you do your job, I’ll do mine, and we’ll get along just fine. Okay?”

He grunted. This time, the sound held some humor. “YOU. DOING. YOUR. JOB. MEANS. I’M. NOT. DOING. MINE.” he said, but before she could ask what that meant, if it actually meant anything at all and wasn’t just some weird response to a conversational trigger she hadn’t intended, he went on, “IF. YOU. NEED. MORE. HELP. THAN. THAT. LET. ME. KNOW.”

“I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS!” Chica interjected, ducking her head even as she spoke as if afraid of drawing too much attention to herself too soon.

Ana gave her a Look, just to let her know she hadn’t forgotten or entirely forgiven the whole pizza-tray-into-the-oven incident.

Chica tapped her fingertips and shuffled back. “I SAID I WAS SORRY.”

“COME ON, CHICA,” said Freddy, taking her wing even as his gaze strayed one last time to the ceiling. “LEAVE. HER. ALONE. BONNIE. YOU. TOO. LET. HER. WORK.”

Bonnie hesitated, moving toward Freddy as he looked back at Ana.

“Go on, my man.” She smiled for his sake, without much feeling it. “You know I can’t work if you’re here distracting me with all that raw rabbit sexuality. We’ll talk later.”

She’d made the same promise last night, but she didn’t feel too guilty making it again. The way she looked at it, the more she made a promise, the better her odds of eventually keeping it.

* * *

She said they’d talk later, but they never did. Bonnie understood and tried to be patient, but it had
been hard to stand back and see her struggle by herself when he was right there, wanting to help and knowing the time he could help was slipping away.

She didn’t talk to him, rarely even looked at him. Ana at work was Ana alone on Earth. She returned to stare at her schedule from time or time, but no longer appeared to be following it. Instead, she meandered from room to room, bagging smaller debris or carrying it off whole to one of several heaps around the building. She worked too fast, carried too much, bumped things, dropped things, cut herself, bruised herself, swore at herself, and kept working.

At six, Bonnie’s programming forced him onstage to power down and wait until the opening hour. His hopes that she would take advantage of this quiet time and go back to sleep were soon dashed. If anything, she worked harder. He could no longer see her, but he could still hear her as she came and went—her labored breaths, soft mutters and curses, the rustle and thump of shifting bags—and he marked each stumble and yawn.

At nine, her phone sounded a tone. It seemed to be expected. She didn’t answer it, just shut it off, then immediately gathered her keys and left. Her truck’s engine started, idled, and withdrew.

When it was gone, Freddy left the stage. Bonnie could hear him moving around, but wasn’t sure what he was doing and Freddy didn’t bother to narrate his actions for the benefit of those blind, paralyzed and anxious onstage. At one point, Freddy went into the gymnasium, where Ana hadn’t gone at all this morning. He stayed there a long time and emerged, growling to himself, to return to the stage.

At eleven, the restaurant ‘opened’ and Freddy led off with the usual Sunday morning monologue. Bonnie, who’d had several decades to familiarize himself with all their routines, immediately recognized that Freddy was preoccupied, letting his program do all the work, even blinking in the scripted places. It disturbed him, like performing with a puppet that was only wearing Freddy’s face. He wished he knew what Freddy was thinking. Even after so many years, that hadn’t gotten any easier.

Just before the set ended, Ana’s truck returned. The loading dock door rattled and banged open. For several minutes, she moved around, taking some bags and lumber down the hall to the quiet room, but leaving most of it in the back. The last thing she moved was the generator and he could just tell by the way she pushed it how heavy it was. He wished she would have asked him to move it for her. Even if she asked now, he might be able to do it and Freddy definitely could, but she didn’t even look in at them.

The quiet room door shrieked as it shut. Soon he heard the faint purring of a motor and then the only slightly louder shrilling of a power saw. Bonnie couldn’t help imagining her fingers guiding a board into that spinning blade…and she, so tired.

He kept singing, twitching and stuttering as he listened for the scream. It never came, but he couldn’t stop listening. Even when she walked by, carrying the cut boards into the gym, he didn’t feel better for seeing her.

The morning set ended. Before Bonnie had even put his guitar down, Freddy said, “LEAVE. HER. ALONE. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

‘She needs help,’ thought Bonnie, shivering with obedience. ‘She needs me.’

Freddy couldn’t hear his thoughts, but he’d lived with Bonnie a long time and that level of forced intimacy granted a kind of telepathy of its own. “RULE THIRTY-FIVE,” he grunted, heading for the stage steps. “LEAVE. HER. ALONE. WHEN. SHE’S. WORKING.”
Rule thirty-five. It wasn’t a real rule, not until Freddy made it one, which he had. Bonnie had to keep his distance, unable even to talk to her while she was working. He lingered in doorways as often as he could, wanting her to see him, but once Ana was on the job, she did not mess around.

He never saw her eat. Once in a while, she went into the kitchen and came out with either a bottle of water or one of her Redline drinks, but even that was a rare sight. She took only one break, if it could be called that: during the four o’clock set, after mopping out the party room and checking on the situation in the gym, she came back to her bed on the table and the duffel bag she used for a pillow. Freddy, working the room while Bonnie and Chica did their joke routine, immediately homed in on her. When she came up with a plastic bottle, he was right there, plucking it out of her hand.

“Do you mind?” she said, but she sounded tired more than angry and Freddy was not intimidated.

“WHAT IS THIS?”

“Ibuprofen.”

Freddy gave her a narrow stare.

“It is,” she said, this time with a little more edge. “I have to work tomorrow. I don’t get to get high tonight.” She took the bottle back and Freddy, apparently convinced, let her take it. She shook a few pills out, washed them down with a wince and a few swallows of water, then got up and got right back to it.

Bonnie didn’t see her again until Freddy started his closing monologue, and then only for a few minutes. She came in, walking like her joints were locked, all her attention on just her feet and just the floor until she reached the table that was her bed. There, she pushed herself up on one corner and sat, watching Freddy bring down the empty house with dead eyes and no expression. It was his last picture of her before his eyes closed.

In the quiet that followed the last goodbye, Ana fell onto her feet again. Her footsteps were slow, dragging, heavier than she was. Bonnie listened as she rustled around her table, dragging things, dropping things. She used the staple gun for a while and took almost five whole minutes just to carry it into the quiet room and put it away. When she made it back, Bonnie heard the squeaking of a marker writing, then the soft tap and rattle as she dropped the pen. She took one step, said dully, “Fuck it,” and then rustled some more and fell silent.

A minute later, less than that really, Bonnie heard snoring.

Then he heard Freddy’s eyes open and the faint click as their lights switched on. He grunted, the sound-bite braiding with the rev of his fan as he sighed. He shut his eyes off and closed them, waiting out the hour with Bonnie and Chica while Ana slept.

At ten, finally, the restrictions lifted and Bonnie opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was that she’d moved the rubbery mat that she slept on from on top of the table to, presumably, underneath it. She had then stapled a curtain all the way around it, closing off the little space so that she herself could not be seen, although she could certainly be heard. There was something on the wall, white and black; he couldn’t make it out clearly from here.

Freddy was already on the stairs and heading that way, so Bonnie put his guitar down and went to help Chica.

“I CAN DO IT,” she said, as softly as she could through her speaker. And she was walking better
since Ana had cleaned out her legs and worked on her knees, but better was a relative term and the
stairs were still steep.

“Then you c-c-can help me,” said Bonnie, offering a hand anyway.

Chica rolled her eyes, but took his hand.

They took the stairs together, one at a time, and by the time they reached the bottom, Freddy was
peeking beneath the curtain. He reached in, adjusted something—Ana moaned softly and resumed
snoring—then straightened and looked at the white thing on the wall.

She’d cut up a cardboard box, painted it over with some of that mold-killing stuff, and onto this
white square, had written a few words in big block letters in black marker: ANA’S ROOM! KEEP
OUT! NO BEARS ALLOWED! Underneath, in parentheses, she’d added, (bunnies okay).

Freddy’s jaw was open slightly. Smiling. When he noticed Bonnie coming up behind him, he
stopped. “LET. HER. SLEEP,” he ordered, like he needed to. Bonnie would cut an ear off before
he woke Ana up now. “I. NEED. TO. LOOK. AROUND.”

Bonnie nodded and stepped back, watching Freddy go.

Chica waddled closer, bent, and picked up something from the floor—a black Sharpie. It had rolled
all of six feet from the table, too far for Ana to retrieve. Chica found the cap and fit them together,
squinting with the effort of holding something so small and not crushing it between her unfeeling
fingers, then put the pen in Ana’s day pack, casually rooting through its many compartments as she
did so. “BE PREPARED!” she chirped.

Under the table, Ana shifted.

Chica, both hands over her speaker to muffle her voice, gave Bonnie a look of frantic apology.
“SHHH!”

Bonnie waved her back with one hand while the other played at the edge of the curtain. He told
himself to leave her alone. If the light from his eyes woke her, she’d probably get up and clean
something. She needed to rest and he needed to let her. He knew it and still he lifted that curtain
and peered behind it.

His eyes were bright in this small space, as bright as they’d seemed that night in the closet,
throwing a shine like moonlight over every strand of hair, every curve, every bruise. She did not
wake. She didn’t even move. She lay like a dropped doll over her mat, wearing an oversized tee
with a plain white sheet tangled around her bare legs. Her eyes were shut, sunken, lashes fluttering
as she dreamed—that little movement and the steady pull of her snores were the only signs that this
was a sleeping person and not a dead one. She looked exhausted even as she slept.

Bonnie watched her for a while, then raised his gaze just beyond her. She had taped a number of
cardboard boxes together to form a kind of cubby-hole wall on that side of the curtained table. He
could see her keys, her phone, her clothes…her life. Shirts on the left, pants on the right, socks and
underthings in between, everything neatly folded and in their proper place.

Bonnie straightened and let the curtain fall, shaking the fabric until it lay right. Like Freddy, he
found himself reading the sign again. Unlike Freddy, he didn’t smile. He’d thought it was funny
the first time he saw it, but she’d genuinely taken a table and turned it into a bedroom. She did it
like she’d done it before.

Chica was still there, watching him. He didn’t know what to tell her. “Can you k-k-k—KEEP HER
IN A PUMPKIN SHELL,” he blatted suddenly and grabbed at his speaker, muting his next low words to a dull buzz of static. “Keep an eye on her? I want t-t-t—TO ROCK—to look around too.”

Chica nodded, clicking, then hesitated a quiet, “HOW DOES IT TASTE?”

“I d-d-don’t know,” said Bonnie, answering the real question—How is she?—rather than Chica’s closest possible approximation. “I g-g-guess she’s fine, but…she doesn’t look g-g-good.”

“SOMEONE NEEDS A NAP.”

“Maybe,” said Bonnie, unconvincing. “I don’t know. She d-d-doesn’t just look tired to me, she looks…”

Chica touched his arm. “EVERYONE NEEDS HELP SOMETIMES.”

He shook his head, not in answer, but in mute summation of everything that felt wrong. He started to speak, stopped to look for Freddy and, not finding him, softly said, “I wanted-d-d her here…so much.”

Chica’s fan revved. She nodded.

“But if this is what-t-t it’s going-ing to do to her…What do I do, Chica?” he asked suddenly, helplessly. “What’s the r-r-r—RIGHT FOOT IN—right thing? I’m supposed to want-t-t her safe more than I want her with me, right-t-t? Where’s safe? If this is what-t-t she does here, what does she d-d-do when she’s alone?”

Chica clicked, her eyes mirroring thoughts she had no way to express with the limited options available to her,

In a sudden rush of frustration, Bonnie said, “I miss you,” in a voice that broke on its own edges.

Chica blinked. Her hand on his arm twitched.

“I miss you so-o-o-o much. You were always-ays the best of us, you know that-t-t, right? You know just-t-t what to say, to her and me b-b-both…hell, to Freddy.”

Chica looked at the table, then at Bonnie. “SOMETIMES YOU’VE JUST GOT TO DO THE BEST YOU CAN.”

“I know what you’re saying-ing-ing, I just…I’d g-g-give anything to hear your voice again, your real voice. Don’t t-tr—TRY AGAIN! I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT!—try. I know it hurts and I d-d-don’t want to hurt you.” The words twisted in the air, like the things Chica said, hinting at deeper levels of meaning than the sounds alone could make. “I don’t want-t-t to hurt you,” he said again, haltingly. “I’m-m-m—GOSH, I’M SORRY!—sorry if it-t-t—IT’S TIME TO ROCK—hurts.”

Chica looked at the table again, not clicking, only staring. When she looked at him again, her eyes were sad. “A LONG TIME AGO,” she said in her story-time voice, “IN A LAND FAR, FAR AWAY.” She touched a finger to his chest and moved it up and down. Three peaks, like mountains, like a heartbeat. Ana’s name. “AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.”

He laughed, without much humor or hope. “You think-k-k so, huh?”

She shrugged. “ANYTHING’S POSSIBLE.”

Bonnie lay his hand over hers over his heart, searching her downcast eyes. “We c-c-can still be
friends, can’t we? I mean, that’s a thing-ing-ing, right?”

She had dozens of preprogrammed ways to answer that. She nodded, silent, staring at her hand under his.

Beneath the table, Ana’s heavy breaths caught and trembled into a groan as she rolled over in her sleep. One foot pushed itself out under the curtain. Chica pulled gently away and bent to tuck it back in.

“Thanks,” said Bonnie, backing up.

“THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR.”

“Ev’buddy nee’ sumbunny,” Ana mumbled and snored.

Leaving her in Chica’s capable care, Bonnie limped into the South Hall and opened the gym door for the first time since the day Mangle had been shut up in the crawlway.

At first, he didn’t even see the…whatever that thing was she built to drain the pyramid in the gym. The idea that the pyramid had even flooded, let alone flooded so deeply Ana could only deal with it by first constructing a drainage system, did not even register yet. The last time he’d seen this room had still been the first year or maybe the second after the closing ceremonies. The restaurant had already begun to show its neglect then, and God knew how bad the rest of the building had gotten since that day, but Bonnie was not prepared to open that door now and see a jungle right next to the room where he spent most of his life. It was like opening a closet and seeing the ocean.

Stunned, he shuffled forward, staring at the brackish water that squished up through his feet with such fascination that he bumped into Tumble. He hadn’t seen her. He’d known she was there—he could remember pulling toddlers off her and gently chiding them not to climb or pull on the animatronics—but even looking right at her, he’d only seen a tree. She was completely covered in vines and weeds, like the carousel and the climbing wall and…well, everything!

But Ana didn’t seem too interested in clearing the overgrowth. She just built her thing—and she’d cut a hole in the wall to do it, Bonnie realized with a shock. A big hole. Freddy had to have seen it, and now that Bonnie had some visual frame of reference for all the noises he’d heard come out of this room, Freddy must have actually stood in the doorway and watched her do it. But having built it, she’d then left it alone ever since. It was Freddy who kept coming in and out, but Bonnie couldn’t tell what he’d been doing, just that his Freddy-sized footprints seemed to be heaviest around the pyramid.

Bonnie went over and climbed onto the lowest step, the reinforced one, but he couldn’t even tell what he was looking at. Some kind of greasy, pinkish-greenish-greyish-yellow, hairy, slimy, lumpy mold was growing on top of the dark water trickling out of the pyramid and through the gauntlet of filters Ana had installed. The filters closest to the pyramid were already clogged with unidentifiable wads of black gunk. Bonnie picked at one, but the resulting gush of water was not worth the disgusting, snotty sight of the stuff hanging from his finger as he attempted to flick it off onto the floor. He ended up wiping his hand on Tumble’s new grassy hair, then backing out of the room and shutting the door.

He must have stood there for some time, because the next thing he knew, Chica was behind him, trying to whisper, “WHAT IS IT?”

Yeah. What was it?
“It’s g-g-gross,” Bonnie decided and shuddered. Not a glitch, a real shudder. He hadn’t known he could do that. “Don’t go in there,” he warned her, heading off to see the rest of it.

There was a lot to see. Some rooms she’d merely emptied of trash, some she’d swept out, some she’d mopped, and some she’d cleared right down to the bare walls and floor, swept, mopped, painted over the mold, and then filled up again with bagged debris from other parts of the building. But it was in the break room that Bonnie stopped again and stared.

He’d been aware of her working back here for a good part of the afternoon, but his pathing programs didn’t allow him to come into this part of the building, so he had no idea what she’d been doing. Having seen the gym, he thought he was prepared for anything, but then again, he could see the point of building a drainage channel in the gym; he had no idea what she’d built in the break room.

She had removed the cabinets, sink and refrigerator from the employee’s kitchen area, although she only removed them to the other end of the room. She broke out the window that had been above the sink and put a wooden box in it, disguised (that was the only word he could think of) with a painted metal casing to look like the air-conditioner that used to be in the office window way back at the first pizzeria. But it was open on top and on the inside, of course, so that Bonnie could see it held a bulging black bag, like an oversized water balloon. This was attached to a hose, which was in turn attached to a nozzle that had been looped over a plastic hook that had been fixed to the new plastic panel overlaying the wall. There were two more plastic panels adjoining it, and a square plastic tub at the bottom with a drain in the middle. It reminded him a little of a big sink, although he couldn’t understand why she’d take one out and build a bigger one in exactly the same spot, especially since the water didn’t work anymore.

“YOU SHOULDN’T BE HERE.”

Bonnie jerked around, clutching instinctively at a heart he didn’t have and which wasn’t pounding. “Jesus, you sc-sc-scared me!”

Freddy tried to hold onto his frown, but his eyebrows rose, betraying a certain surprised smugness. “What-t-t is that?” Bonnie asked, thumbing back at the window.

Freddy glanced at it and scowled. “A. SHOWER.”

Bonnie knew what that was. The Purple Man had a shower down in the basement at the other sites. The things he did down there…got messy. So Bonnie had seen showers before and now that he knew what it was supposed to be, he could sort of see a similarity. He guessed the work Ana did was messy too, in a different way, and obviously it was sweaty, so a shower was probably a normal enough thing for a human to want, although he was surprised Freddy had let her break a window to build one.

“Is she moving-ing-ing back here?” Bonnie asked, unsure how he felt about that. There was no real difference between her sleeping in the dining room or sleeping in the break room, except that the break room would be quieter and already had a closet and now the shower and was generally better for her all around. He just wanted to be close to her.

But Freddy said, “NO. THE. BREAK. ROOM. IS. TOO. CLOSE. TO. HIM. I. DON’T. LIKE. HER. BEING. BACK. THERE.”

“Then why’d-d-d you let her?”
“SHE. SAID. IT. WAS. THE. ONLY. PLACE. SHE. COULD. PUT. THE. SHOWER.” Freddy walked awhile, grunted and said, “I. SURE. DIDN’T. WANT. HER. DOING. THAT. IN. THE. DINING. ROOM. I’M. MADE. OF. PLASTIC. NOT. STONE.”

“Oi.”

They both turned.

Leaned up against the jamb of the open door to Pirate Cove, Foxy picked grime out of the scars on one arm and said, “Ana still working?”

“Why?” asked Bonnie.

“NO,” said Freddy. “SHE’S. A. SLEEP.”

“Oh.” Foxy shrugged off the jamb and headed back into the dark, switching off his eyes as he went. “Good-d-d on her, then. She needs it.”

The door creaked shut on his retreating footsteps. Freddy grunted and continued walking. Bonnie stood for a moment, ears flat, daring the door to open again.

Within the Cove, somewhat distant but perfectly distinct, aware of an audience, Foxy sang, “Oh, she ran like a hare, but I chased her down there and I were the quicker, ‘tis true. When she found herself collared, she fell ’pon her honor. Aye, and I fell on it too. On it and in it and through.”

The memory-echo of Ana’s voice reminded him, smiling, that jealousy was not attractive, that when you say you don’t trust another man around your girl, you’re really saying you don’t trust your girl around other men. And she was right. Of course she was right, but…

“That one,” Bonnie growled now, turning around. His hands flexed into fists as he walked away. “Not other men. That one.”
Chapter 11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The last time the subject had come up in Foxy’s hearing, Ana had mentioned she had to be at work by five in the morning, so when the four o’clock hour rolled around, Foxy picked himself off the deck of his ship where he’d passed the night and headed for the dining room so he wouldn’t miss her. He didn’t bother turning his eyes on at first, but the East Hall sounded different enough to be unsettling in the dark, so he switched on his lights. She’d cleaned it, scrubbed it maybe. Seemed like a waste to his way of thinking, if she was really planning to pull the roof down in two short weeks, but what did he know about building and un-building? She’d been hard at work, though. That much, anyone could see.

The others were in the dining room already. Bonnie, he expected, and it wasn’t so unusual for Chica to stick close to the stage as six o’clock drew nearer, but it surprised him some to see Freddy lurking in the back end of the room. Not patrolling, not passing through, just standing and watching the table where the girl had obviously denned herself down.

Bonnie had not taken his eyes off him since Foxy had stuck his head through the plastic sheets walling off the dining room from the Hall, but at least he’d kept quiet. When Foxy came all the way inside, however, Bon thumped his guitar down and got up to come meet him. “What d-d-d—DO YOU GET WHEN YOU CROSS A—do you want?”

Before Foxy could answer, the sound of a body shifting and then coughing came from under the table.


The glow blinked off. Another came on, bright enough to throw her silhouette on the fabric walls of her little room and show any wandering eye at all the playful curves of her body as she stripped out of her night-clothes. “I could have sworn I brought more shirts than this,” she muttered, pulling fresh ones on. Then she came crawling out on her hands and knees, pushing her lamp ahead of her and pausing only briefly when she saw the set of them arranged around her.

“The gang’s all here,” was all she said.

Caught unawares by one of his own catch-phrases, Freddy triggered. He let out part of his distinctive laugh, but the effort of suppressing the rest of it was a telling one. One hand hit the restroom door behind him as he convulsed, knocking it open, and Ana, climbing to her feet, immediately dropped to her knees again with both hands over her mouth and nose.

“Shut it!” she called through her fingers. “Jesus tap-dancing Christ, I forgot to cap those pipes! Fuck me! Shut the door!”

“You ok-k-kay?” Bonnie asked, still glaring at Foxy as he went to offer Ana his arm.

She took it, nodding. “Could have used another half-hour’s sleep, but whatever. Just means I’ve got time to go home before work.”

“Home?” repeated Foxy, ears forward. “Ye ain’t serious!”
“Uh, yeah? Why?”

“I ain’t seen ye at-t-t all this go-round! Blast, woman, what do I have t-t-to do?” he asked, laughing but only half-joking. “Carry ye off at the p-p—POINT O’ ME SWORD—to get a minute alone with ye?”

“Sorry, Captain. I told you I was working. Poor Bonnie hasn’t gotten any alone-time either.” She patted Bonnie’s arm absently as she rubbed her eyes, then stepped into her boots and did up the laces. “But to be honest, if I’ve got the chance to grab a real shower at home rather than a two-minute lukewarm drizzle here, you haven’t got a hell of a lot that can tempt me away.”

“If only ye knew, luv.”

Bonnie’s ears snapped flat.

“Put ‘em up, my man,” Ana said evenly, heading into the kitchen. “We talked about this.”

The pins in Bonnie’s ears creaked as he pushed them up to half-mast and no higher.

Ana rummaged in the cupboards, muttering to herself as she knocked things around. Then she said, “Oh!” and laughed. When she came out soon after, she had a candy bar in one hand—breakfast of warriors, that—and a long-necked bottle in the other. “I got this for you the other day,” she announced, holding the bottle out to Foxy. “And then completely forgot. Sorry. I got the best intentions, but my memory is for shit. Took a lot of hits to the head as a kid.”

Foxy came to take it, eyepatch flipping up so he could read the label. Kraken-brand spiced rum, it said. With a scrimshaw-style drawing of a giant squid tangling up a sailing ship. “Oh, aye,” he said at once and deftly scratched off the plastic seal. He hooked the cork out with a flick of his wrist and pretended to take a deep, savoring breath.

“How long has it been since there was rum in the captain’s bottle?” Ana asked.

“C-C-Couldn’t tell ye, lass. But th-this here is the end of a long d-d-dry dock for sure.” He fit the cork back in and slapped it home with the cuff of his hook. “Though it be a bit wasted-d-d on me, don’t ye reckon?”

“I love it when you talk like a pirate.”

Bonnie’s ears hit the top of his head again.

Without looking back, Ana said, “Something you want to say, Bon?”

Muttering, Bonnie pushed his ears back up, but folded his arms across his chest, looking impressively huge and pissed off for a pastel-colored bunny.

Foxy was not impressed. “Why d-d-don’t ye come on by the C-Cove later on, lass?” he offered, looking straight at Bonnie. “Convince me t-t-to share it with ye.”

“Sharing isn’t very piratey,” she pointed out.

“Maybe I j-j-just want ye drunk and disadvantaged.” He winked his eyepatch at her. “Don’t get-t-t more piratey than that.”

Bonnie’s fingers scraped on his arm casings as his hands clenched, but he kept quiet.

It was Freddy who said, “FOXY. MIND YOUR MANNERS.”
“Hey, if the shoe fits, right, Freddy?” Ana tucked her candy bar into the side pocket of her duffel bag and shouldered the strap, fetching up her keys and phone and other humanish geegaws from under the table as she readied herself to leave. “I might swing by now and then, but like I say, I don’t usually drink when I’m working and I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight, so, you know… maybe, maybe not. Pencil me in for a hard maybe.”

“Hard’s the only-ly-ly way I come, luv,” Foxy replied, tapping his hook on his plastic chest casing to pretend that was what he meant by it.

Bonnie’s eyes opened up black and slowly, slowly shrunk back into their colors.

Ana laughed. “I got a dirty mind,” she murmured and turned to Bonnie. “Want to give me a kiss goodbye?”

“No.”

“Aw, come on.”

“Any k-k-kiss but that one.”

She shrugged. “How about a kiss see-you-later?”

“Sure.” He limped a few steps toward her, took her arm and pulled her that much further away from Foxy. He bent his head and let Ana press her lips to his muzzle.

Foxy waited politely until they separated, then said, “We all g-g-get a turn now, aye?” putting a particular emphasis on the word ‘turn’. It wasn’t nice and he knew it, but eh. Pirate.

As expected, it triggered a reaction, but it was Chica, not Bonnie, who twitched hard and blurted out a cheerful, “IT’S MORE FUN WHEN WE ALL TAKE TURNS!”

Ana laughed again, but now Freddy was glaring. Fun was fun, but there was a line and that was over it. Foxy folded his ears back, glancing at Chica who was staring at him without accusation but with dignified hurt across her sunny, frozen features.

“Nope,” Ana was saying, unaware of the silent drama playing out all around her. “These lips are a bunny-only playground. Tough break, Chica. Oh, shit, right. Speaking of breaks. Chica?”

“HI THERE, I’M CHICA!”

“Yeah, I know. My Easy-Bake Oven? It won’t work without power. So don’t mess with it, because you’ll break it. A friend of mine gave that to me and, for the immediate future, it’s going to be my only source of hot food, so I’m going to be royally pissed if it gets broken before I even get to use it. You hear me?”

Chica tapped her fingertips together, shifting her weight from foot to foot, and finally hung her head and nodded.

Ana made it a few more steps toward the kitchen, then sighed and looked back again. “Chica?”
“HI, I’M CHICA!”

“Uh huh, I remember. Look, once I get the generator going, I’ll…show you how to use the Easy-Bake, okay? You can play with it all you want, just not today.”

“I LOVE TO COOK! I CAN MAKE THE CUPCAKES! I ALWAYS MAKE ENOUGH TO SHARE WITH MY FRIENDS!”

“You can look at the little recipe book, but don’t try to take the oven out of the box. Promise me.”

Chica clicked several times and finally said, “A BUNCH OF BANANAS IS CALLED A ‘HAND’. A SINGLE FRUIT IS CALLED A ‘FINGER’. MY FINGERS LOOK A LOT LIKE BANANAS, DON’T THEY?” She held up her hands, then slowly turned them over and looked at the cracked plastic and bare metal bones. “A STRAWBERRY ISN’T A BERRY,” she said as her eyelids slanted back at a sorrowing angle. “IT’S A MEMBER OF THE ROSE FAMILY.”

“Uh-huh,” said Ana, looking puzzled. She shook her head and turned around. “Bye.”

“BYE-BYE! COME BACK SOON!”

Ana went through the plastic, stopped, and came back. “Before I forget, new rule. What are we up to? Number forty?”

“FORTY-ONE,” said Freddy, looking at Chica, who was still staring at her hands.

“I’m not counting your stupid no-touching rule. I’ll touch Bonnie anytime I goddamn want. Rule number forty,” she said as Foxy chuckled and Freddy took in an extra pull of air and blew it slowly out his joints. “If I’m sleeping over, don’t wake me up. No singing, no comedy routines, no banging around in the kitchen—”

Foxy glanced at Chica, who sighed and spread her arms in what was either a What? or a Bring it! or possibly something in between.

“—and just in general, no loud noise. Okay? Rule forty…?” Ana prompted.

“NO. NOISE. WHEN. YOU. ARE. SLEEPING,” said Freddy.

“Great. I’m going to work. Stay out of my stuff, all of you.”

She left.

Freddy grunted, giving Foxy and Bonnie together a hardish stare before he followed her.

Foxy leaned himself up against the back wall next to the animatronic alligator and folded his arms, scratching thoughtfully at his chin with his hook as he listened. The loading dock door opened and shut. Soon, the truck’s engine started. Foxy rotated his ears, following it through the building’s walls as Ana took herself away. So that was that, then.

Bonnie had been listening, too. Now he swung himself clumsily around with his ears flat to his head and his hands in fists.

“Something on yer mind?” Foxy drawled.

“Quit-t-t flirting-ing-ing with her-r-r!”

“Ye c-c-can, but I can’t-t-t?”
“No, ye c-c-can’t! D-D-Drop yer bleeding anchor somewhere else!”

Foxy’s smile, such as it was given his limited range of expression, snapped shut into a scowl. “Don’t make fun of the way I t-t-talk, bucko.”

“BE NICE,” said Chica, but without much hope. “LET’S BE FRIENDS. PLEASE.”

“And leave her out-t-t of it!” Bonnie snapped, pointing at her. “You pull that-t-t shit again just to score p-p—POINTS REDEEMABLE FOR COOL PRIZES AT THE PRIZE COUNTER!—points off me, and I d-d-don’t care if Ana’s right there watching, I will knock you through a fucking-ing-ing wall!”

He hadn’t meant to catch Chica in that net, but damned if he’d apologize to Bonnie for it. “Any time ye want-t-t to try, mate,” he said, shrugging one shoulder. “Ye know where t-t-to find me.”

Bonnie looked as though he wanted to keep going and God knew, Foxy was willing, but just then, they both heard footsteps in the kitchen, headed back this way.

Soon, Freddy pushed through the plastic into the dining room. He went to Chica first, reaching out to pat her shoulder as she nodded, answering his unspoken concern, but his eyes were already tapping back and forth between Bonnie and Foxy. “WHAT IS THIS?”

“Nothing-ing,” Bonnie muttered, slouching over to the table. He put a hand possessively on it and glared at Foxy.

“Can’t handle a little healthy c-c-competition, is all,” Foxy supplied. And winked at Bonnie. “It be almost-t-t like he knows he wouldn’t win, what with the weapon he ain’t-t-t got.”

“THAT’S. ENOUGH,” said Freddy with an immediate point. “MIND YOUR MANNERS.”

Foxy raised his hook and open hand in a token gesture of submission, then turned to the East Hall and started walking.

“WAIT. ALL. OF. YOU. STOP. AND. LISTEN. WE…” Freddy clicked, his eyes skipping back and forth minutely as if he were reading from a list of available vocabulary words. As he hunted it out, he took his hat off and scrubbed his fist across his brow in an absent-minded gesture. Little things like that had a way of coming out in all of them when they were distracted, but Freddy was not often distracted. This was serious.

“WE’RE. IN. TROUBLE,” Freddy finished finally. He put his hat back on, giving it an extra push to secure it to the worn-out Velcro tab up there, and looked at them, all of them, including Chica, who did not as a rule make trouble. “AN-N-A.”

“What about-t-t her?” Bonnie asked, still sullen and looking for a fight.

“SHE’S. MOVING. IN.” Freddy raised both arms in a heaving gesture and let them bang down against his sides again. “SHE. DOESN’T. CALL. IT. THAT. BUT. THAT’S. WHAT. SHE’S. DOING. AND. WE. HAVE. TO. BE. BEAVER DAM. SURE. WE’RE. READY. FOR. IT.”

“We’ll watch her,” Bonnie said at once and Chica chimed in with an urgently cheerful, “YOU CAN DO ANYTHING WITH HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS. I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS. LET’S BE FRIENDS.”

Freddy nodded, patting at Chica’s arm, but his expression lost none of its severity. “SHE. WANTS. TO. BE. OUR. FRIEND. I’M. WILLING. TO. LET. HER. BUT.” He stopped again, clicking as he
looked around the newly-mopped and still rotting room, and finally just had to point over at the
gym. “I. THOUGHT. THIS. PLACE. WAS. CLEAN,” he said. “FOXY. AND. I. HAVE. BOTH.
GONE. OVER. IT. BUT. I. FORGOT. ALL. ABOUT. THAT. ROOM. AND. SHE’S. RIGHT.
THERE’S. A. MESS. IN. THERE. SOME. WHERE. WE’VE. GOT. TO. CLEAN. IT. UP.
BEFORE. SHE. GETS. BACK.” His eyes flashed briefly, underlining his next words. “WE’VE.
GOT. TO. BE. SURE. WE’VE. GOT. EVERY. THING. THIS. TIME. WE. MAY. NOT. GET.
ANOTHER. CHANCE.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Bonnie, but he was frowning. “But...you know, I’m not-t-t a hundred percent
sure she’d c-c-call the cops, even if she found a b-b-b—BUDDY!—body.”

“KNEE. THERE. AM. I. BUT. I’M. NOT. TAKING. A. CHANCE. LISTEN. TO. ME. BONNIE,”
Freddy said suddenly, raking his gaze across them. “LISTEN. TO. ME. ALL. OF. YOU. SHE.
CAN’T. KNOW. THE. TRUTH. ABOUT. US.”

“LET’S BE FRIENDS,” Chica said again, tapping her fingertips together. “SAFETY FIRST!
SOMETIMES WE HAVE GOOD SECRETS, LIKE SURPRISE PARTIES, AND SOMETIMES
IT FEELS GOOD TO TELL SECRETS WITH YOUR BEST FRIEND, BUT SOME SECRETS
HURT IF YOU KEEP THEM.”

“SHE. CAN’T. KNOW,” Freddy said again, staring hard at Chica. “WE. CAN. ONLY. LET. HER.
LEAVE. IF. SHE. CAN’T. HURT. US.”

“Not sure I like what yer not-t-t quite saying,” Foxy remarked.

Freddy glanced at him, then turned all the way around again to face him fully and said, “I’M.
SAYING. I. WILL. K-K-KILL. HER. IF. SHE. GIVES. ME. A. REASON. AND. YOU. DON’T.
HAVE. TO. LIKE. IT.” He paused a moment, staring down each of them in turn in silent challenge,
but silent or not, none of them had the capacity to challenge Freddy and he knew it. So he waited,
but the time he gave them only acted to further emphasize his absolute authority, an authority given
to him by the very man contained below the pizzeria, and he knew that too.

“What do ye want-t-t us to do?” Foxy asked quietly.

“WE. HAVE. TO. BE. CAREFUL. WHAT. SHE. SEES. WHAT. SHE. HEARS. AND.
ESPECIALLY. WHAT. SHE. KNOWS. NO. MORE. TALKING.” Now Freddy looked at Bonnie.
“NO. MORE. TOUCHING.”

“You c-c-can’t be serious! She already knows we-e-e—” Bonnie gave his speaker a smack.
“—talk!”

“And t-t-touch,” remarked Foxy. “The rate yer g-g-going, she’ll know there’s some of us what
fuck-k-k before long.”

Freddy growled warningly, but Bonnie did not back down. Instead, he stepped right up, snarling,
“You shut-t-t up! It wasn’t-t-t like that!”

“Ah, ye don’t need-d-d to tell me what it were like, lad. Ye need me to tell ye. Now, fucking’s a lot
harder-r-r—ARR!—than it looks,” he began in his educating voice, “and humans are a breakable
lot. I realize ye ain’t-t-t got the equipment to get in there and d-d-do a proper job-b of it, but there’s
still plenty ye can do to get a right sh-sh—SHIVER ME TIMBERS—shiver out o’ her. So c-c-
come on by the Cove sometime, eh? I’ll tell ye just-t-t what to do to curl them pink little t-t-toes.”

Freddy covered his eyes and heaved a short, impatient sigh.
“I said-d-d, shut up! You d-d-don’t know anything about it!”

Bonnie had always been the sort to let his emotions lead him, down good paths or bad, but over the years, his moods had become more erratic and ever since that medical chatter had starting splicing itself into his speech, his self-control had eroded even further. Foxy knew better than to provoke him when he was already this angry, and maybe if Bonnie had just told him to fuck off again, he could have laughed and let cooler minds prevail, but he didn’t know what he talking about? After six years at Mulholland, he could say that to him? Foxy honestly didn’t know whether that was funnier than it was infuriating, but he couldn’t ignore it.

“I know more about women than ye ever will,” he said, not quite laughing. “I know fucking them’s hard-d-d on the hip bearings, for one. And ye, with yer whole f-f-f—FIVE FATHOMS DOWN—five minutes experience stealing kisses in a d-d-dark room, what is it ye think ye know b-b-better than me, who’s fucked-d-d ‘em by the bleeding hundreds?”

Bonnie lowered his head, less like a bunny than a bull. “I know she did-d-dn’t pay to be with-th me.”

‘Well, I had that coming,’ thought Foxy, so clearly that he genuinely believed he was calm, right before he swung.

Chica caught his hook. “PLEASE DON’T FIGHT,” she said. “PLEASE.”

He looked at her, but it was hard to see her. In spite of the fact that her eyes were on, the room was dark. But no, the room wasn’t dark; he was. He might not be all the way in the black, not yet, but he was for certain tipping that way.

Dimly, even more dimly than he saw the room, he could hear Freddy telling Bonnie to be calm, to open his eyes. It helped. He focused on the sound of that voice, letting it speak to him, making his programming shore up his self-control for a change instead of fraying at it.

He came out of it before Bonnie and at last could see him. Freddy had him pinned to the wall, his hands on Bonnie’s shoulders and his face so close, it had to be all Bonnie could see. He wasn’t struggling at the moment, but he was twitching. His ears tapped and skittered across the back of Freddy’s head; his hands spasmed as they clutched Freddy’s wrists; his eyes were shut, which was a good sign. If they were all the way black, Bonnie wouldn’t be able to close them.

Foxy retreated to the show stage and sat to wait. Chica came to stand beside him, close enough that he could feel her pressing against some of his sensor plates. Her presence was abrasive at first, but gradually grew comforting.

“Ye shouldn’t gr-gr-grab at me, lass,” he said at length. “I’ll hurt-t-t ye one o’ these days.”

“I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS,” Chica replied. And then, with just a hint of reproach around her eyes, she added, “STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK YOUR BONES, BUT WORDS CAN HURT FOREVER. BULLYING IS NEVER COOL.”

“Aye, I know, I know. What-t-t can I tell ye? I ain’t a nice g-g-guy.”

“WE ALL DO BAD THINGS SOMETIMES, BUT IT HELPS TO SAY I’M SORRY.”

“Never in a million years, luv.”

Across the room, Freddy finally released Bonnie and stepped back. Bonnie’s pupils might have fluxed when his eyes met Foxy’s, but maybe not; it was a fair distance and the room wasn’t well
“ARE. YOU. CALM,” Freddy asked.

It wasn’t clear which of them he addressed; they both nodded.

“GOOD.” Freddy looked back and forth between them, then pointed at Bonnie, maybe just because he was closer. “DO. THAT. AGAIN. AND. I. WON’T. LET. HER. COME. BACK. AT. ALL. DO YOU UNDERSTAND? I. AM. TIRED. OF. THIS.”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie sullenly.

Freddy grunted and turned a narrow stare on Foxy.

He tried to shrug, but Chica gave him a not entirely undeserved smack to the back of the head, so he said, “I’LL keep me d-d-distance;” without waiting to be threatened. “It’s easy for m-m-me, ain’t it? But how l-l-l—LONG JOHN SILVER—long do ye really think ye c-c-can pretend to be a machine and not lose yer d-d-damn mind? And what d-d-do we do when she t-t-talks to us as she’s b-b-been doing, eh? Ignore her? How will th-th-that make her less suspicious?”

Freddy thought that over with a sour expression, then relented, sort of. “IF. SHE. TALKS. TO. YOU. THEN. YOU. ANSWER. BUT,” he warned, holding up one finger. “JUST. BE. FRIENDLY. ENTERTAINING. AND. BRIEF. IF. MORE. NEEDS. TO. BE. SAID. I’LL. SAY. IT.”

“Aye. But th-th-that’s going to get d-d-damned annoying after a week or t-t-two.”


“You Can Do Anything With Help From Your Friends!” Chica insisted.

Freddy uttered a low, bearish snort. “She. Doesn’T. Want. Help;” he said with just a hint of Freddy-ish disapproval. Perhaps he heard it in his voice. His expression betrayed a moment’s exasperation and then he said, so neutrally, it would have been funny if not for the words themselves, “And. Even. If. She. Does. We. Are. Animatronics. We. Sing. The Helping Hands Song! And. We. Walk. Away.”

Foxy couldn’t exactly say he approved, but he held his judgment for the moment, waiting to see where this odd edict had come from and where it was going before he decided whether or not to stand up for the girl, unlike Bonnie and Chica, who were both blatting out protests, talking over one another so that neither one of them could be heard.

Freddy gave them a few seconds to vent, then raised his open hand and silenced them with a simple, “ENOUGH.”

Chica obeyed, looking unhappy. Bonnie tremored himself silent, but his eyes were fluxing again. Foxy caught Chica by the arm and pulled her a little closer, putting her on his hook-side to keep himself between her and Bonnie if he went all the way black.

“Stake,” Foxy murmured.

“You can t-tr-trust her!” Bonnie insisted. “I trust-t-t her!”

“I. DON’T,” Freddy said simply. “AN-N-A. LIKES. US. AND. WANTS. US. TO. BE. SAFE. THAT’S FINE. BUT. AN-N-A. GETS. HI! AND. MAKES. BAD. CHOICES. LISTEN. TO. ME. BONNIE. IF. SHE. SAYS. SOME. THING. TO. THE. WRONG. PERSON——”

“Or the right one,” Foxy inserted.

Freddy nodded again, relentlessly seeking Bonnie’s gaze until he had it. “IF. THEY. KNEW. WE. WERE. HERE. YOU. KNOW. THEY. WOULD. COME,” he said, meaning, of course, all the bleeding kids in this entertainment-starved little town. “YOU. KNOW. HOW. IT. WAS. YOU. KNOW. WHAT. WE. WOULD. HAVE. TO. DO. BECAUSE. IF. THEY. EVER. FOUND. A. WAY. DOWN. TO. HIM. IF. THEY. LET. HIM. OUT. IT. WILL. ALL. START. AGAIN. LOOK. AT. ME. BONNIE.”

Ears low, shoulders slumped, Bonnie obeyed.

“I. CAN. NOT. LET. THAT. HAPPEN,” said Freddy. “I. WILL. NOT.”

“She’d n-n-never hurt us.”

“She. MAY. NOT. WANT. TO.” Freddy shrugged and shook his head while his eyes stayed locked with Bonnie’s. “I. DON’T. ALWAYS. WANT. TO. HURT. PEOPLE. BUT. I. DO. LOOK. AT. ME. LISTEN. TO. ME. I. WANT. TO. LET. YOU. HAVE. THIS. BUT. I. WILL. K-K-K- KILL HER. IF. I. HAVE. TO. AND. IF. SHE. KNOWS. WHAT. WE. ARE. THEN. I. HAVE. TO.”

“Can I s-s-say something?” Bonnie asked angrily, because he had to ask and what was worse, Freddy didn’t have to allow it.

But Freddy nodded, although he visibly resigned himself first.

“You know she g-grew up in this town. She knows all ab-b-bout us. She b-b-blamed Foxy for her f-f-friend’s disappearance,” Bonnie snapped, flinging out one arm to indicate Foxy. “Not R-R- Reardon, not some rand-d-dom creep, Foxy! She knows everything-ing about us already! She c-c-could say anything to anyone at any t-t-t—TIME TO ROCK!—time! And even if she says nothing, you c-c-can point at the next dumbshit who b-b-breaks in here as p-p-proof that she did! So y-y-you can st-st—STEREOGNOSIS SEVERELY LIMITED—stand there and s-s-say ‘if’ as m-m-many times as you want-t-t, but you d-d-don’t mean it. You’re al-al-ready hunting-ing her, you j-j-just want something from her first——”

“Easy,” murmured Foxy, looking uncertainly at Freddy, but Freddy merely listened, ears low but gaze steady.

“—and th-th-that makes you no b-b-better than him!” Bonnie finished in a staticky rush and then had to turn away, covering his eyes to shut everything out until he could bring himself away from the edge of the black.

“Right,” Foxy said heavily. “Now me. If she stays here for any length of t-t-time, she’ll be bound to stumble on something, b-b-because we can’t h-hi-hi—HIGH WINDS AND ROUGH SEAS—hide everything. Have ye seen her map? She d-d-drew it up from idle memory, and she’s already got K-K-Kiddie Cove blocked out, even if she ain’t-t-t found the door yet! She’s talking about-t-t taking measurements. She’s going to know to the bleeding inch how b-b-big these rooms are and
"SHE. CAN’T," Freddy interrupted. "THE. DOOR. IS. CLOSED. SHE. AGREED. IT. IS. OFF-LIMITS."

"There’s a d-d-damned window, Fred! She ain’t going to need more than a g-g-glance! She’ll know that room ain’t t-t-big enough by half! And ye heard her t’other night-t-t! Foundation-bone connected to this and such. Is she g-g-going to look at the foundation and know there’s a b-b-basement? She already-dy-dy knows that ain’t right!” He pointed his hook up at the crawlway snaking across the dining room ceiling. "It be j-j-just a matter o’ time before she wants to pull it down or c-c-climb inside it!"

Freddy sighed and rubbed at his brows. "I. KNOW."

"Then ye know d-d-doing nothing’s not an option here!"

Freddy was quiet a long time, but at last, he nodded. "I. KNOW."

Odd, that Foxy felt no victory, none at all, only a growing sense of unease. “So yer g-g-going to tell her,” he said, but although it didn’t sound like a question, it was one.

Bonnie looked around, his ears slowly shifting forward and tensely quivering at the tips.

"NO," said Freddy.


“We’ll move her then. We can put-t-t her…”

“The f-fr-freezer,” said Bonnie and Chica nodded. “It’s solid-d-d enough and there’s no w-w-way to open it from the inside. If it c-c-can hold me, it can hold-d-d her.”

Freddy was already shaking his head. “SOONER. OR. LATER. AN-N-A. WILL. OPEN. IT.”

“Then we c-c-can…” And now Bonnie trailed off, ears low and avoiding Foxy’s eyes, because there really was nowhere else, no place the girl couldn’t find and no door the girl wouldn’t open.

“Yer asking m-m-me to choose between-n-n them,” Foxy said finally.

“NO.” Freddy sighed, but did not flinch. He reached out and rested his hand on Foxy’s undamaged shoulder, metal fingers lightly scratching at old plastic. “I’M. TELLING. YOU. I. ALREADY. HAVE.”

Foxy looked away.

“CAN. YOU. GET. HER. OUT?”

“Aye.” The word was a scratch through his speakers. He tapped at his throat like that was the problem and said it again, louder. “Aye. I’ll g-g-get her out.”

“NOW. IT. HAS. TO. BE. OVER. AND. DONE. BEFORE. THE. RESTAURANT. OPENS. AN-N-A. WILL. BE. BACK. BEFORE. CLOSING. TIME.”

“Aye.” He would have liked more time, but he didn’t argue. Not because Freddy was Freddy, but just because sooner or later, Ana would find a way up into those ducts. Had to clear them while the opportunity was there, because it might not come again before the girl stuck her squirrely head into the crawlway…and Mangle bit it off. He had only one question and he wasn’t sure how to ask.

Chica asked for him, bless her: “AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?”

Freddy did not speak or move until Foxy looked at him again.

“I. WON’T. MAKE. YOU. DO. IT,” Freddy said, as gently as possible with the sound files available to him. “JUST. BRING. HER. TO. ME.”

“No. I’ll d-d-do it. She don’t know ye.” Foxy scratched his hook over the side of his muzzle and turned away. “It ought to b-b-be someone she knows, at least.”

“DO YOU NEED HELP?” chirped Chica, touching Foxy’s arm once in sympathy. “I CAN HELP! I LIKE TO HELP MY FRIENDS!”

He patted her hand and kept walking. “It’s all r-r-right, lass. We all knew this d-d-day had to come, sooner or later-r-r.”

“YOU CAN HELP ME,” Freddy grumbled, glaring over his shoulder at the door to the gym. “I. NEED. A.” He clicked, gesturing vaguely. “THING. TO. GET. THE. MESS. OUT. AND. A. BUCKET. OR. SOMETHING. TO. PUT. IT. IN.”

“ARE WE GOING SWIMMING?” Chica asked, following him into the kitchen and on through to
the store room where Ana kept the cleaning supplies.

“GOD. I. HOPE. NOT. BUT. IF. I. HAVE. TO. CAN. YOU. LIFT. ME. IN. AND. OUT.”

Foxy left the question and Chica’s answer behind him and went to Pirate Cove. He considered briefly going to his cabin, to put the rum away and maybe get his sword, but his heart knew that for the weak delay it was. The minute or two it would take to tuck up the rum and buckle on his belt would find some way to stretch out and out until it got too close to six to go chasing after Mangle. That might spare Foxy the job of it, but it wouldn’t spare Mangle. Freddy would go up after her himself if he had to. He wasn’t as quick or dexterous as Foxy, so it would be a bad job, but he’d go and he’d probably get her down eventually. And she’d be taken by a stranger, pulled from her den into a place she wouldn’t know by hands that had never once held her gently. She had to die; she didn’t have to die like that.

As Foxy began to shift the props blocking off the door, he heard the East Hall door creak open. He didn’t need help and he didn’t want company, but in all honesty, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be alone either, so when the footsteps approached, Foxy made room for Freddy.

But they were Bonnie’s hands that reached for the first barrel beside him.

They worked without speaking for some time. The props weren’t authentic replicas, but they were real wood, heavy enough in their own right, and any of them that could be opened and filled had been, with rocks and sand if nothing else. Even those that weren’t loaded were too unwieldy to be shifted any way but one by one, not so much to keep Mangle in—the door alone did that—as to keep those out who might remember this room being here. And there had been a few over the years, but it was slow-going and not quiet work, and Foxy had always gotten to them before they’d gotten to the door.

Memories. He shouldn’t be thinking such things before a job like this. Or should he? Somehow, it seemed just as wrong to think of better days, early days, him and her at Mulholland…or earlier yet, in the basement at his house. Foxy, still uneasy in the new hard plastic skin he’d been given and unsure about the strange new device that had been installed behind the new sliding panel under his abdomen, watching the two of them build the body that would be Foxanne, both of them laughing as they talked about nipples and nethercheeks and silicone sleeves—one because he thought it was just a joke, ill-humored but harmless, and the other because he knew it wasn’t. Memories.

Foxy moved props and tried not to think at all.

In a short time, the door was cleared. It had rounded corners and a wheel-latch, with a porthole made of thick glass set high up. The glass was cracked from the inside, but not broken. Foxy lit his eyes and cupped them, his muzzle tapping right up against the door in an effort to try and see something inside. Beyond the blackness and the wreckage, more sensed than seen, there was nothing. It wasn’t very likely that Mangle—Foxanne—could have dragged herself all the way back here in the short time it had taken to expose the door, at least not without him hearing, but moving the cargo made a bit of noise itself and she could be quiet when she wanted to be.

“Watch the d-d-door,” said Foxy, gripping the wheel. It gave him a moment’s resistance, rusted tight, then reluctantly spun. The hinges shuddered as he forced them to move. The noise was tremendous. If she was anywhere on this end of the building, she had to have heard it. “If she c-c-comes, don’t ye wait for a j-j-jump, slam it. She d-d-don’t move quick on the g-g-ground, but if she g-g-gets the leverage, she’ll lunge and if she g-g-gets a bite on ye, she won’t g-g-give it up easy.”

“I’m s-s-sorry about th-this, Foxy.”
Foxy nodded without taking his eyes off the dark opening where the ventilation shaft had once been covered. “Just keep w-w-w—WEATHER EYE OUT—watch and don’t blink.”

“Foxy—”

“I know yer sorry,” Foxy said, a bit more harshly than perhaps he ought to. “I know it-t-t had to happen anyway-ay-ay and I know why it has to b-b-be now. I don’t b-b-blame ye, but I’m k-k-killing a girl and she’ll stay d-d-dead long after Ana’s moved-d-d on, so just shut it with yer sorries, would ye? I don’t want-t-t to hear it!”

Bonnie’s ears lowered, but not with anger. He said nothing.

“Watch-ch-ch,” ordered Foxy and went inside.

It was all torn apart and thrown around now, but at the time of the Grand Opening, this version of Kiddie Cove had been a great improvement on the original model at Mulholland Drive. It was fully enclosed, for one thing, which enabled it to have fully padded walls and floor so little knees and elbows couldn’t bruise if a child fell or, as was more common with the ruthless wee blighters, got pushed. The toys were made for toddlers—giant foam blocks for the building of seaside fortresses and pedal-power pirate ships to plunder them, plastic spring-powered cannons that fired sponge-soft balls, ride-upon sea serpents, giant plushie krakens and eels, and a reading nook with dozens of books catering to those too young to read. All this, but the star of the show was Polly Pull-A-Part, as she was known for that short time this restaurant had been open.

Nothing was blocking the vent that led to the crawlway, but looking around at the thick fuzz of dust laying over the room, Foxy didn’t think she’d been back. She’d been the first of Mulholland’s creatures and the worst of them in a lot of ways, not the least of which being her mental state. Confusion, fear and rage seemed to be the only things she could feel, rage most of all, but clearly she did have memories. The bad ones, anyway.

Foxy picked his way across the ripped pads, shredded toys and scattered books to dig his hook as high in the wall as he could reach. From this height, he grabbed the edge of the vent opening, and carefully chinned up to peer inside. He saw nothing but dust and scratches.

He went in.

The crawlway had been made mainly for Rumble and Tumble, whose long bodies and short limbs could easily navigate these passageways. Mangle had also been pathed for it, although Foxy suspected her inclusion had been more of an aesthetic thing; he’d known the Purple Man would enjoy the thought of her up here, in pieces, and especially how those pieces would look lurching closer out of the dark and into the camera’s limited view. None of the others had ever been meant to use the crawlways, but they hadn’t been prohibited from entering either. Foxy’s man-shaped dimensions made him a more awkward fit than the twins would have been, but being small had its advantages and he could move just fine on hands and knees.

What he couldn’t do was remember where to go. This wasn’t one of his killzones and he hadn’t been programmed with the layout. He’d been up here before, but not from this end and for damn sure, not since Mangle had been shut up here. He had no internal compass and all the twists and turns looked the same to him. The crawlway seemed simple enough from the rooms below, but up here, it was a maze of many levels. No passage led directly anywhere. What would be the fun of that? You had to see the danger coming, let the fear and the panic build as they drew nearer, try and fail to predict where they’d go next, close off the wrong passage and then plead with the system to charge faster, hitting that button right as Death popped out of the hatch and fell on you, jaws open for the bite.
He couldn’t just hunker here and wait for her to find him. Foxy started slowly forward, ears in constant motion, trying to listen beyond the noise he made. Not that there was much noise. The bottom of the crawlway was heavily reinforced and coated on the inside with a thin layer of canvas padding. His weight alone would never buckle out the sides of the duct and even his metal parts never made more than a dull scratch or thump as he crawled along, but even the slightest sound rolled out in echoes. And Mangle was used to the quiet. Keyed to it. She’d hear him coming long before he heard her.

He had to find a way to use that to his advantage before she made it her own.

Foxy crawled as far as the first crossways, where the duct opened into the upper level of the maze and split off into four passageways and a narrow shaft continuing up. Too narrow for him to climb, but skin-less Mangle might be able to squeeze through. He stood cautiously, listening down each dark tunnel around him and especially the shaft overhead, but all he heard was his own servos whining as his ears turned.

“Come ye, lads and lasses,” he sang, and at once caught a pulse of static in answer, but from where? Fighting the ears that wanted to flatten, Foxy aimed his microphones down each passageway in turn, singing, “Down where the waves hit the docks. Come sit with me by the shore of the sea—”

She was coming, still on one of the levels above, so that the noise of her broken speaker and broken mind had no clear direction yet, but he could tell it was coming closer and coming fast.

He didn’t want to leave and risk losing himself in the maze, but if she dropped down on him from above, he was done.

“—And hear the ballad of the Flying Fox,” he finished, boosting himself up into the tunnel where her scratchy, screamy voice seemed loudest. He crawled on, faster now, wanting to get to another wide point in the crawlway, one without a dropshaft. “Her captain was a sailing man, a pirate proud and free. And there weren’t no maid, be she precious as jade, he loved like he loved the sea.”

The crawlway shuddered as something heavy fell into the level of the maze just above him and no more than a body’s length ahead of him. He heard her scratching and biting, ripping at the canvas as she tried to dig through to him, and then she wheeled herself noisily about and crashed away.

“The Flying Fox be his ship, for the uncharted deeps she’s bound. And there’s chests of gold locked up in the hold, such be the treasures he’s found.”

His eyelight caught a glint of metal where it ought not to be, far ahead where the tunnel came to a T-end. Low to the ground and off to one side. She was hiding, waiting for him, ready to pounce. Foxy hesitated, singing mechanically as his eyes darted around to every other opening. Any one of them might loop around and give him a way to come at her from behind. Any one of them might come to a sudden end—a dead end, once Mangle cornered him there.

He crawled forward on the tips of his toes and the fingers of one hand, keeping his hook up and ready, singing softer the nearer he came to that twist of metal and cloth and wire, hoping to disguise his distance. “Adventure be the song he sings,” he crooned, flexing his shoulders and his hips, preparing to spring. “And cannons…set the tune…”

He leapt.

His hook slammed down between the metal bones of whatever appendage this had once been—an
arm, a leg, a tail—and hooked her. He pulled it to him and knew at once the thing moved too freely. It flew up and back at him, shedding dry leaves and bones and bits of plastic before it hit him in the snout. Not Mangle at all, just the limb, dropped off years ago and forgotten here. Loose wires tangled up around his teeth; bloodstained twists of cloth slapped over his eyes. He fumbled with it, swearing, and got it away just in time to see one yellow eye flicker in the dark as she lunged.

He threw himself back, folding himself flat to the floor of the crawlway with his knees and legs both bent beneath him, and grabbed at her blindly as she fell over him. Her jaws snapped open and shut, their screeching hingepins and her roaring voice deafening against his microphones, and yet he could still hear the brittle crunch and playful clatter as she broke away chunks of his casing and swallowed them to spill out through her skinless throat.

She still had the bleeding parrot, he thought dazedly, seeing the mass of metal bones and wires bobbing back and forth behind her howling head. She’d torn out one of its eyes and tried to fit it into her own socket. The surviving eye still glowed through the layers of filth and blood that coated it. It winked at him over Mangle’s shoulder as she snapped and screamed and clawed.

Foxy bucked to jostle her and free his hips, then rocked to loosen his shoulders. It was all the better leverage he was ever going to have in this position. Ramping up the volume on his speaker, he let out a screech of his own, hoping to startle her. She recoiled and in that split-second of indecision, he seized her by the framework of her muzzle and one flailing limb and rolled. He pushed her down beneath him, his limbs twining and thrashing with hers in a horrible mockery of the time they’d shared in Mulholland, and at last his reflexes and lucky chance put his hand around her jaws just as she snapped them shut and he had her.

She pitched and heaved and howled, twisting her head back and forth and bucking him against the crawlway’s sides, but he rode it out and slowly, her struggles died. At last, she slumped, sprawling herself out like a starfish, her voice fading to a mere scratch of static and a few pops and pings.

“Oh, luv,” whispered Foxy, stroking the curved side of his hook along the top of her head where the plastic still covered part of the frame. “Hello, me pretty girl.”

“Hi, Foxy.” She squirmed a little, pulling her mangled body open where she’d managed to crudely wrap it in old shirts and bits of curtain. Through these dry wounds, strange blood dripped out—bedraggled feathers, snips of wire, plushie stuffing, human hair. “Why…Why…Why does it take p-p-pirates so long to learn the alphabet?”

“Because they only know I, I, R and the seven Cs,” he replied.

She shivered.

He held her, but he held her jaws tightest.

“I don’t like this place,” Mangle said. “It’s d-d-dark.”

“I know. I’ve c-c-come to take ye out.”

“I’m hurt.”

“I know.”

“I’m bleeding.”

He closed his eyes.
“I taste it-t-t,” she said. “In…my mouth.”

“Hush, luv. Hold on t-t-to me now. Ar—ARRR!—Are ye holding me?”

She twitched a foot crookedly inward. One of her limbs lifted and dropped again. The parrot’s eye rolled and blinked. Her head moved in his hand, trying to nod.

“All right-t-t. Come on, pretty girl. Lay yer head-d-d on me shoulder and I’ll carry ye to bed-d-d.”

He gathered her up the best he could with all her bits coming loose, and she trembled quiet in his arms as he crawled on his knees back through the maze to Kiddie Cove, but when the room opened up, she heard it or sensed it somehow. She thrashed, screaming and spitting static, struggling to pull herself back into the hatch as Foxy unhooked her many limbs one by one and pinned them to her ruined body. It took a long time. He could see Bonnie through the discolored porthole glass as a blob of purple around the pale glow that were his eyes, so it stood to reason Bonnie could see him, but he didn’t open the door and come blundering in to help, and for that, Foxy was grateful.

At last, he got Mangle on the ground again and kept her there, singing softly and keeping his grip tight on her muzzle until she calmed. Then and only then, did the hatch-wheel turn and the door creak open.

“Don’t t-t-talk,” said Foxy calmly. “Don’t ye say a word-d-d.”

Mangle heaved, moaned, and crashed back to Earth. Static swelled and faded, swelled and faded, steady as the tide.

“There ought-t-t to be something out there—FULL O’ DOUBLOONS!—big enough t-t-to fit her in. Bring it in here. Not too c-cl-close. She can’t see ye—”

“Bleeding,” Mangle moaned. Her hand flung out, slapped weakly along the walls and floor, struck an oversized plushie whale, and disemboweled it in a single vicious slash. “Out…my eyes!”

“—but she can hear ye fine,” Foxy continued, stroking the cracked curve of her head. “Be just-t-t as quiet as ye can and k-k-keep clear o’ her. I ain’t-t-t sure how many o’ these bits are still working or how many are j-j-just tied on, but there’s enough o’ her still t-t-together to take ye right apart, and that’s a p-p-promise.”

Bonnie shut the door when he went to look through the props, proving that while he might be a fool where Ana was concerned, he was no idiot.

Foxy lay with Mangle and hummed into her ear, stroking her body where she still had it and her bones where she didn’t. He waited.

The door opened again, opened wide. Bonnie limped in, carrying a wooden trunk with a high domed lid, much like the one he kept in the cabin for birthday boys and girls to dip themselves out a special prize. Paper hats. Plastic jewels. Joke books and eyepatches and little walking wind-up sea monsters. A treasure trove of cheap shit.

“Oh, me pretty girl, that-t-t it’s come to this,” he whispered, and held her straining jaws tighter.

Bonnie put the trunk down just beyond Mangle’s grasping, rolling arm and opened it. Foxy folded her gently up and put her inside. She screamed, but only until the lid came down and the lockplate clicked tight. Perhaps the confinement was soothing to her, after so many years in the crawlway. She bumped around some, but didn’t rightly struggle and only had a half-inch or so to wriggle anyway. Her fingers and teeth and toes scratched along the sides wherever they could reach, but
then even that little sound stopped.

Foxy and Bonnie watched the motionless trunk as minutes passed in silence. At last, she began to sing.

Servos whined briefly as tense joints relaxed.

“That was way t-t-too easy,” whispered Bonnie.

Foxy nodded. “Been t-t-t—TEN TICKLES!—ten years for her, too, ain’t it? We ain’t-t-t none of us at our best. And a g-g-good thing.”

“Why…um…” Bonnie raked a hand through the scruff of fur between his ears.

“Why d-d-didn’t I bash in her battery case when I had-d-d her pinned?” Foxy asked for him, but couldn’t put much fire in it. He sighed, his ears lowering. “Thought I’d t-t-take her outside, is all.”

“Why? I mean…ok-k-kay, that’s a nice thought-t-t, but—”

“I said, I’m taking her out-t-t,” interrupted Foxy calmly. “She’s d-d-done her time, mate, harder time than ye have.”

The trunk rocked slightly as Mangle bumped around inside it. The tarnished brass banding the old wooden boards together protested the strain, but held. For now.

“How long is that going-ing to hold her?”

Foxy’s fan revved. He scratched his hook along the hole in his casing nearest his heart. “All the rest-t-t of her life.”

With that, he bent, fit his hook around one corner of the trunk’s broad bottom and worked his fingers beneath the other, and lifted her back into his arms.

Bonnie went ahead of him through the building to open doors. Ana had already cleared the way. It was easy walking, easier than it should have been, to take his pretty girl to her grave. He left Bonnie on the loading dock and walked out across the lot under a greyish sky where a few stars still stubbornly insisted on night. He met Freddy in the desert, coming back from the quarry with his head down and an empty bucket dangling from one hand, thick black clots sticking to its sides. Freddy clasped his shoulder without speaking as they passed and both continued on, each carrying their respective burdens.

At the quarry, Foxy stopped. The pit opened up below him. At this in-between hour, no light reflected off the water he knew was there. He stood at the mouth of Hell itself, as Hell truly was—not a place of fire and leaping demons, but emptiness and silence.

In the trunk, Mangle shifted.

Time to do it, Foxy thought. Time and indeed, well past time. Open the lid and tip her out, smash through the glass case that housed her battery before she knew where to bite, then just get back and wait for her to power down. Shouldn’t take long. The other-Freddy at Mulholland had been immobile in less than a minute and the last mechanisms silenced just a few minutes after that. If that was death for them, he’d been dead that fast. Foxy couldn’t swear it was painless, but it was fairly quick.

He set the chest down, touched his thumb to the release-tab on the lockplate, and Mangle said,
clear as the Devil’s bell, “Foxy?”

“Aye, luv. It’s me.”

“I c-c-can’t see you. I th-thought… I thought-t-t you left-t-t me.”

“No,” said Foxy, touching the lockplate. “No, I’m right-t-t here, luv.”

“It’s quiet-t-t, isn’t it?” She shifted within her coffin. “Is… Is… Is the show over?”

“Aye. Restaurant’s closed-d-d.”

“Was I… Was I…” Static surged into a squeal of feedback. Metal bumped hard against the lid, teeth scraping along the wooden boards for a moment before she settled back. “Was I all right-t-t?” she asked weakly. “I d-d-don’t remem-m-m-ber. Somet-t-times…I’m not all right-t-t.”

“Ye were fine, luv.”

She hummed a little, just static in the rhythm of song. Sail on, little hearties, sail on.

He couldn’t do this. After all the death he’d dealt out, all the blood and tears and last breaths he’d seen with his eyes wide open, he could not open this damned box and stop a machine.

Foxy rolled off his knees and sat beside the softly humming chest, staring into the quarry. If he waited here long enough, Freddy would be back and do it for him, but he wasn’t sure he wanted that either. Freddy had lived out his time at Mulholland in the parts room. She was not Foxanne to him and never had been, not even as she’d been playing the Purple Man’s game; she was Mangle. That was how Freddy saw her, that was how he’d kept her all these years, and that would be how he’d kill her.

Foxy gouged at himself with these thoughts a little while, but could not scrape up resentment. Dangerous as Mangle was, Freddy had kept her and would have gone right on keeping her, had not Ana wrote herself into their story. And Foxy didn’t blame her either, not exactly, but still the thought came back on him that someday, Ana would leave. Even Bonnie, love-stupid as he was, knew that. Soon as she’d found whatever she was looking for in this Godforsaken place, she’d move on, and Foxy wished her well, but Ana would be away and alive and his pretty girl would be dead and buried at the bottom of this stinking pit. Maybe there was justice in that, considering how many bones she’d be lying aside that bore the marks of her own teeth, but just or not, Foxy couldn’t do it.

He got up and lifted the trunk back into his arms. He did not then know what he was doing—he would have sworn to that—but on a deeper level, he must have had some idea, because he knew that Freddy would be back eventually to empty another pail of people-slop, that all he had to do was wait. He didn’t wait. He started walking back to the bluff, telling himself that if…when he met Freddy on the way, he’d pass the responsibility over to him what had been built and programmed to carry it.

But as Fate would have it, he didn’t meet Freddy, and if that was Fate’s hand in the matter, who was Foxy to act against it?

When he reached the foot of the trail that led to the paved lot, he did not start up, but just kept walking, circling the base of the bluff and reminding himself with every step that Freddy had never ordered him to kill Mangle. It was just that there was nowhere in the pizzeria safe enough to keep her at the moment, nowhere he could swear that Ana wouldn’t go until she was done tearing the place down and building it up again. So Foxy would put Mangle somewhere else, somewhere close
enough that Foxy could keep an eye on her, not so close that Ana found her.

There was a rockpile at the lea-side of the bluff left over from the scraping and paving. He could easily hollow out a place for her, cover her over so that the trunk was reinforced and hidden from view. As places went, it wasn’t the best, but it would do until he thought of a better one.

And no one else had to know, Foxy told himself grimly, painting over that faint voice of doubt with the vibrant colors of this fact. Ana would stay her small while, safe as houses, and be on her way. Freddy would be mad as hell when Foxy brought Mangle back, but he would let her in again, because it was never about killing the one as much as it was keeping the other safe. Foxy would see her safe, all right, both of them.

Mangle sang as he carried her like a bridegroom to her new home. She sang as he lay her down in her secret bed. When he covered her over with sand and stone, she quieted and perhaps—he prayed—she slept.
Ana worked from five to five, like everyone else on Shelly’s crew (excepting Wyborn and Slater, still on part-time punishment), even when all she was doing was sitting behind the counter in an empty building watching a phone not ring for twelve hours. Normally, she would resent being ordered to work nothing but her ass, but after busting it all weekend at Freddy’s, she welcomed the break. Still, by ten, she was already restless and each hour that followed seemed longer than the last.

She cleaned the bathroom. She cleaned the workshop. She cleaned the reception area that had become a break room and the former break room that had become a workshop. She even cleaned the trucks and vans parked out in the lot behind the building. If it wasn’t for the lottery-like odds of the phone ringing, she would have gone even further out to mow the stripe of a yard and prune back the overgrown shrubs, mid-day summer heat notwithstanding.

By four, she was back in her ass-flattening chair, staring at the clock on the wall and willing the minute hand to spin faster, when the phone rang.

She knew it would be Shelly and it was, but she thought he would be calling—as he called every day whenever he got bored—to ask if he’d gotten any calls, but to her surprise, his usual easy-going bossman greeting was replaced by a terse, “How are you at plumbing?”

“I’m not licensed, but I hold my own. What’s up?”

“What’s up is I’m on my way to get you. Make sure the van’s in good order and give it a spritz with the hose. Run a brush through your hair, change your shirt—”

“Change my shirt?”

“Get one of the company shirts out of the back room. Long sleeves. Want you to keep your arm covered and your mouth shut, got that, missy?”

Ana glanced at her tattoo and rolled her eyes. “Check, boss.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes. You have the van out front and you in it.”

He hung up.

Ana took a moment to calculate the odds of a late night hip-deep in a busted septic tank, and found them good. Oh well. Monkey Kingdom wasn’t going anywhere and sure wouldn’t be cleaner work.

The plumbing van was already washed down and inventoried, owing to her earlier boredom, so she had plenty of time to locate the work shirts—winter weight, God almighty—and put one on over her tee. Her hair would not be tamed, but there were a couple caps in the back emblazoned with the Shelton Contractors logo, so she put one on. She transferred her toolbox from her truck to the van and made sure she had her tablet and other essential work-toys in it, just in case she was called upon to entertain a client with the roombuilder, and climbed up in the passenger seat to wait.

Shelly rolled in fourteen minutes after telling her he’d be there in twenty, sunburned and harried-
looking, with sweat in a dark V down his back and under both arms. He was out of his truck almost before it had stopped rolling and into the building at a jog. He was out again two short minutes later, attempting to button up a clean shirt—summer sleeves for him—and finger-comb his freshly-wetted hair on the run. He made an impatient, flapping/rolling gesture with one hand that Ana realized with some amazement meant he wanted her to scoot over and actually drive.

She did, and Shelly swung himself up into the passenger seat mere seconds after she’d vacated it, harrumphing to disguise how badly he was out of breath.

“Go,” he ordered, falling back in his seat to wipe a wrinkled and none-too-clean-looking handkerchief across his face. “Take us out to Canyon Road and drive south until I tell you to stop.”

Ana drove, all the way through town and then out of it, stealing glances at her boss out of the corner of her eye and mentally refreshing herself on the symptoms of a heart attack.

“What’s up?” she asked again, once his breathing had slowed and his color had faded out of the brick range and back toward his usual weathered tan.

“Got an emergency call from a client. Need to install some equipment in the bathroom, ASAP.”

“What kind of equipment?”

“He didn’t specify, which is why we’re coming loaded for bear. Could be a sink. Could be a full remodel, as far as I know.”

Ana nodded, weighing her curiosity against her better judgment, then mentally shrugged and said, “Doesn’t sound like much of an emergency.”

“This man put me in business forty years ago and has kept food on my table when damn near all my competition went tits up and left town. If we get there and find he’s stopped up his toilet or dropped his ring down the sink, that’s an emergency and you give it all of your attention and none of your lip.”

“Okay,” Ana said mildly.

Shelly wiped his face again, examined his handkerchief, then put it away. “I don’t know what he’s going to think about a lady plumber. He’s from a different time, you understand. Good man, but old-fashioned. I wouldn’t have brought you, but every other man I got is presently caked in work-dirt and stinking to high heaven, so you’re up. I’ll get the job done. You just help me with the shifting and don’t cause trouble.”

“Got it.”

“And keep your mouth clean,” he warned again. “He’s old-fashioned, like I say. You been a good worker and normally I don’t care what the mouth does so long as the hands are skilled, but I hear one cuss out of you today and I’ll put your ass on the bread-line, see if I don’t.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. Turn here,” he said.

Ana turned off Canyon Road past a series of signs—No Outlet, Private Road, Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted—and onto a narrow paved lane that first took her to the edge of the canyon and then followed its scenic curves for several miles. The client liked his privacy.
They eventually came to a tall stone fence with an extravagant wrought-iron gate. Whatever else he was, this client was money, but that was Ana’s second thought on seeing it. Her first was a fuzzy sort of question mark: Had she been here before?

On the surface, it was a stupid question. She’d been aware of this private road’s existence—if you lived in Mammon longer than a week, you’d driven past all of it—but she had never been on it and the gate certainly was not visible from the main road. Nevertheless, the sense of déjà vu was strong. Maybe she and David had biked out here as kids, at least far enough to see the gate, which was certainly memorable enough.

There was a small, clean-looking guard shack situated at the side of the road, but it was empty. The only guard on duty now was a speaker box with a single button below the open, watchful eye of a camera.

Ana started to roll down her window, but Shelly grunted, “I’ll handle this,” and got out of the van. She backed up so he wouldn’t have to squeeze his bulk between her door and the shack, but he still leaned all the way over the speakerbox, like he thought it wouldn’t see him if he wasn’t all there was to see. She heard the tinny mumble of an inquiry, followed by Shelly’s loud, slow “Lee Shelton. From Shelton—”

The gate began to swing open.

“— Contractors,” Shelly continued, either oblivious to the access being granted or just determined to get all his credentials out. “Been asked out to see about some, uh, work you want done in the, ah, bathroom?”

The voice in the speaker spoke again, sounding very patient.

“All right then,” said Shelly. “We’ll be right there.”

He jogged back to the van and heaved himself up, pointing at the well-open gate. “Go on. Not too fast. They don’t want you kicking up dust or making ruts in their driveway.”

Right.

Ana drove carefully forward onto a crushed gravel lane and around another hairpin loop, following the canyon on and ever upward. She did not stir up dust. She did not make ruts. She did find herself idly wondering where he got his gravel, because that was some nice shit, although she doubted Shelly would let her ask. In his progressive opinion, women in the workforce should be seen only rarely and never heard.

Another quarter-mile and dozen turns and she could see it—the distant silhouette of a house. It perched at the topmost plateau of the canyon ridgeline, overlooking the still waters deep in the gorge to the south where Mammon River began. And far to the northeast she saw, with some interest and surprise, the bone-white remains of the old military complex, which made the view equal parts breathtaking nature and industrial wreckage. She guessed the client must just keep the blinds on that end of the house shut.

And what a house! Sprawling where Aunt Easter’s house loomed, brutally modern, all unnecessary corners and glass. Not Ana’s taste at all, but still it struck that half-remembered chord of familiarity. Maybe there had been a picture in one of the museums she’d visited, a background detail only subconsciously absorbed on first viewing, come back to haunt her now that she was seeing it in person.
‘There’s a swimming pool around back,’ she thought, smiling because she made it sound so prophetic in her head, like it meant something, when there was nothing more natural for a wealthy homeowner to have in the desert than an in-ground pool. Nevertheless, she pretended she could remember it—a wide, oblong pool with white steps leading down into its shallow end. There were lounge chairs—real ones, not cheap plastic—and at the blurry edges of this not-memory, something that might be a cabana or a bar.

In short, she told herself sternly, she had just described half the swimming pools in the world. Hell, throw in a barbecue pit and a couple tattooed guys with their shirts off, and she could have been describing Rider’s backyard on any given weekend.

“Around the side there,” Shelly ordered, breaking her from her thoughts. “We don’t use the front door here. There’s a servant’s entrance.”

Of course there was. Ana found it and parked. She opened the van’s door, but stood on the somewhat higher vantage of its runners, shading herself against the sun with one upraised hand as she peered across the vast expanse of desert to the high blue ridge of Coldslip Mountain. Her house was somewhere at the top, although she couldn’t see it. And between them, hidden in the blinding glare of sunlight and long afternoon shadows that stippled the rocky desert hardpan, was the quarry. And Freddy’s.

But of the town of Mammon itself—its many museums, its modest homes and Mormon gardens, its family parks and historic civic center—there was nothing. Maybe at night, in the dark and the quiet, there would be a glow of streetlamps and the hush of distant traffic to prove it existed somewhere out of sight, but here, in the daytime, there was no Mammon.

After a moment’s debate, she dropped onto the gravel and went out to the corner of the house, following the sound of music, just far enough to get a good look at the pool.

Wide. Curvy. White steps. Cabana. And lounge chairs. There were half a dozen young men taking advantage of them, enjoying a late afternoon pool party after the fashion of their breed—by drinking and playing on their phones. None of them were familiar to her, but they were all essentially the same: No shirt, damp shorts, Utah-tan evenly distributed over a body that was either in its teens or not too damn long out of them. As she watched, one of them glanced up from his tablet and saw her.

Ana raised a deferential hand and returned to the van for her toolbox. Shelly was already buzzing at the door and looking up into the camera mounted above it when the young man from the pool came around the corner and said, “Hey.”

Shelly jumped, recovered, and managed half a belt-hitch and a smile. “Morning. Afternoon, rather.”

“Almost evening,” the young man agreed, tousling his blond hair in a rehearsed, over-casual way as he strolled closer to Ana. “Hate to call you out so late. I guess it’s not exactly an emergency, but I wanted to get it done while he was out. It’s been kind of a bone of contention between us for a while. My grandfather,” he confided in Ana. His eyes were baby-blue and he used them like he thought they were his best feature, but their color reminded her uncomfortably of David and she was not charmed. “He’s gotten fragile and doesn’t like to admit it.” He smiled, a smile that subtly suggested he was hung like a camel and looking for a hump. “Hi.”

“Hi,” said Ana. She also smiled, a smile that said she was working and not as a fucking babysitter, so grow up, kid.
“Anytime,” said Shelly. “Anytime is just fine. Your family’s always been good to mine.”

“I’m Chad.” The man’s smile widened.

“Hi, Chad,” said Ana. Her smile remained unchanged, but she thought of David, thinking his hair might have deepened to just that color, if he’d ever grown into it. And maybe it was her own fuzzy memory, rewriting what she thought David looked like, but that was his chin, his brow, a stranger’s nose, but David’s mouth. If this guy were only ten years older, she’d be tempted to think it was David; ten years younger, and she’d wonder if this was his kid.

Chad waited.

So did she.

“So he had a doctor’s appointment today,” said Chad, turning away with a your-loss shrug to wave at the camera above the door. It opened with a low buzz when he put a hand on the latch and he went in without looking to see if he were followed—a man well-accustomed to having others trail in his wake. “Which would have been the perfect time, but there was some hassle picking up the stuff. The whole point of ordering it through your guy down here was convenience, but that idiot acted like he could barely read, much less work a register. It’s like he doesn’t even realize, you know? Grand-dad owns the lease on that hardware store, which means I practically own it, which means there is no line ahead of me, there’s just me, you know?” Chad laughed.

Shelly flushed and mumbled something about Hank Junior’s kids.

“Not my problem. My problem is getting this stuff installed during the incredibly narrow window my grandfather’s out of the house, and thanks to Hicktown Hardware Harry, I spent half an hour sorting out a mess that should have taken just two minutes to walk in, pay, and walk out again. And then you take another half an hour just to get here, even though you could stand on one side of town, spit, and hit the other side—"

Shelly’s flush deepened. “I came just as soon—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, man. I’m just saying, I had this great plan, but there’s been one thing after another, and long story short, he’s back.”

“Well,” Shelly hemmed, “would you rather us come back when—"

“No. At this point, I just want it done. Just keep in mind that he’s here, somewhere, and he doesn’t know you’re coming or why, and he may get a bit upset when he sees you, so I’m counting on you to back me up on this.”

Shelly hitched at his belt, plainly uncomfortable. “Well now, if this is a…a family dispute—”

“No, it’s a safety concern,” Chad overrode him smoothly. “He’s a proud old bird and all that, but I don’t need a broken hip on my conscience. We want him to keep his dignity and his independence as long as possible, right?”

Shelly hedged a bit, but never got a chance to answer. As they came out of the spotless mud room into a pristine kitchen, the grandfather walked in.

Her first impression was that of age, although she wondered why almost at once. He certainly was old and not particularly well-preserved, but he wore it mostly in his face. He moved like a much younger man, albeit a young man carrying a heavy weight at the end of a long, trying day. His step was sure; his hands did not shake; his eyes were concealed at the moment behind a pair of dark
glasses, but she had the strong feeling that if she could see them, they would be clear and cognizant. His hair was white, still thick despite his years, trimmed short and lacquered into place so it did not move at all as he walked. His cheek was as stubble-free as Ana’s own, although Time had carved a permanent expression of worry into his brow and grief into his mouth. He was dressed in black slacks held up by a black leather belt and black suspenders, and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and only the topmost button undone. His shoes were polished to a higher shine than the kitchen stove. Throw on a jacket and a tasteful tie and he could have fit right in at the opera. Or a funeral.

“What an astonishing co-incidence,” this man said, briefly holding up a smartphone before tucking it away with a casual familiarity Ana was, frankly, not used to seeing in a man of his age. “I had a call from the fraudalert line about a fifty-two thousand dollar home theater system I appear to have purchased. If you’re here to deliver it, you may take it upstairs to the room at the end of the hall on your right. I don’t watch that much television anymore apart from the science channel, but I dare say I’m looking forward to counting Morgan Freeman’s freckles in high-def and hearing that glorious voice in theater-quality digital surround-sound…and who is this?” he asked, at first in that clipped lilt that meant someone was trying to be polite while in a state of supreme irritation, and then the color dashed out of his face all at once. He staggered and grabbed onto the closest countertop, his voice a sudden, shaking rasp. “Who is that?”

“Don’t worry, he gets like this,” Chad said, although he looked just as taken aback as the rest of them by the suddenness of the transformation. “Grand-dad, you remember Mr. Shelton. You’ve met him lots of—”

“Who are you?” The old man moved forward, thirty years older than the man who had come into the kitchen just seconds ago, catching at Shelly’s shoulder with a shaking hand only to push him aside, looking at no one and nothing but Ana. “Tell me who you are!”

“This is my assistant,” Shelly said, plainly uncomfortable, holding the old man’s arm like he expected it to snap off in his hand. “Stark, maybe you better wait in the van.”

“Stark,” said the old man at once, then again, nearly whispering. “Stark.”

“That’s right, this here is Joe Stark’s little girl, grown up.” Shelly grimaced around the room with his help-me eyes on, but Chad was enjoying the show and damned if Ana knew what to do. “I don’t know that you ever knew old Joe.”

The old man was quiet for a long time. Then he took his arm from Shelly’s grip and slowly straightened, shedding age and infirmity like snakeskin. “By reputation,” he said, calm, steady.

“Yes, he, ah, he had one of those.” Shelly tried on a gameful chuckle, but was too nervous to make it fit. “Perhaps you also heard of Mellie, his wife. Perhaps not. Bit of a party girl.”

The old man turned a cold stare on Shelly, made even colder by being filtered through the impenetrable black of his glasses.

“Well now, this is their girl, Ana,” Shelly stammered. “Moved away when she was just a mite, but she’s come back.”

“When?”

“What’s it to you?” thought Ana, but in a curious rather than offended mental tone. “A couple months ago,” she said.
“Where are you staying?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, stepping back as if he could defuse the question with more physical distance between them. “That was impertinent. At my age, one loses one’s ability to recognize impertinence, except in the very young, of course. Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No,” said Ana, marveling somewhat that it was the truth. “No, and it’s fine. I’m staying at…at the family home.”

“You have family here.” He said it oddly, neither quite a question nor a statement.

Yes would be the simplest answer, if a lie; no, the most honest, but would lead to more questions. She hesitated and Shelly jumped on the silence to say, “She’s living in her momma’s sister’s place, you know the one, up on Coldslip.”

“Yes,” the old man said, his gaze sliding away, unfocused. “I know the one.”

“Marion’s place, I guess I should say,” Shelly continued. “You must remember Marion.”

“His memory’s not—” Chad began.

“I remember.”

“That’s great, Grand-dad.” Chad looked meaningfully at Shelly, mouthing ‘He doesn’t remember,’ while the old man stared at the wall.

But Ana thought he might. When he looked at her again, she said, “People say I look like her.”

“You do. When I saw you… I thought I’d seen a ghost.”

The old man did not introduce himself. He stared at her while his grandson grinned and Shelly hitched at his belt and Ana’s toolbox slowly doubled in weight, and finally he stirred and said, “Would you like to come in?”

She tried not to react, but she felt an eyebrow slide up on its own while Shelly looked around the kitchen in which they were all four standing and Chad smothered a short laugh.

“Would you like… a drink?” the old man asked next, waving in an unfinished way toward the refrigerator.

“No, thank you.” Ana gave the toolbox hanging off her arm a discrete rattle. “I’d really like just to get to work.”

“Work.” The dark glasses aimed themselves at the toolbox, then at his grandson. “What are you doing?”

“They’re here to install the safety stuff I got you, Grand-dad. You remember the talk we had?”

Irritation briefly thinned the old man’s mouth. “As I’ve told you many times, I neither requested nor require that device. However…” His masked gaze returned to Ana and his hard tone faltered. “…since you’re here…it’s upstairs.”

The young man sobered up fast and adopted a deeply concerned expression. “I’ll show them,” he offered. To Ana, he added, “He’s been having more of these episodes lately. I’m really concerned
about a fall. All these hard floors. And at his age…”

‘Why are you telling me this?’ thought Ana, but she didn’t need to ask. Living in Rider’s stable as she did, money was rarely one of her problems. She either had it or she didn’t; if she had it, she spent it until she didn’t, then slept hungry in her truck until she got more, no problem. Money that was always there was always a problem, especially when there were old hands on the purse strings and young ones grasping for it.

Grand-dad may or may not be confused, but Chad here wanted his concern on the record. It was perhaps unfair and cynical to suggest he wanted witnesses to the old man’s previously existing infirmities just in case he should end up at the bottom of some stairs with a broken neck…but it wasn’t unheard of either.

“Chad, you have guests. Kindly see to them. Preferably all the way to their cars,” said the old man coolly. “For now, I am perfectly able to manage myself on the stairs. Should I ever require health care assistance in my home, I will hire a home health care assistant.” The old man’s taut jaw relaxed slightly as his grandson turned away and he reached out with a self-consciousness that struck Ana as uncomfortably genuine to touch the young man’s shoulder. “I had your room made up, on the off-chance. When your friends go, will you leave for to the ranch straight away or will you stay the night?”

“Sure, if you want me to stay.”

“I have business in the morning, in relation to next weekend’s plans. You’ve expressed an interest in the past…I thought you might like to sit in. We could breakfast afterwards.”

“Yeah, sure.” A little color rose in the young man’s face. He glanced at Ana, who looked at the stove, and at Shelton, who took out his phone and frowned at the buttons, then ducked in to drop a swift, embarrassed kiss on the old man’s cheek. “Look, about that TV and stuff…I was going to tell you.”

“I know. I know.”

“It’s just the guys got a little rough with the old one…”

“Things get broken. It’s all right. I should not have been terse with you.”

An awkward silence fell. Ana stared at the stove and thought disjointed thoughts about David and Freddy’s and the grandfather clock in Aunt Easter’s foyer. Shelly cleared his throat and hitched at his belt.

The old man glanced at him then turned around. “Thank you for coming out at this inconvenient hour. Let me just show Miss Stark upstairs and I’ll be right with you. Chad, please show Mr. Shelton to the parlor and make him comfortable.”

Shelly blinked. “Uh…Well now, I’m not sure my assistant—”

“She’s safe with me,” the old man said, already at the door and showing no signs of stopping.

“But…But…”

“Come on,” she heard Chad say, having recovered some of his equilibrium. “You can’t argue with him when he gets like this. You’ll only make him more confused and that just makes him more upset.”
Shelly blustered, pacing, then called, “She’s going to need some help up there, don’t you think?”

The old man sent Ana a glance. “Will you?”

“Depends on what we’re installing,” Ana said tactfully, sending her red-faced boss a shrug of apology as she trotted to catch up. “Lifting is usually a two-person job even if nothing else is.”

“Weight shouldn’t present you with a problem, but if it does, I have a pneumatic arm downstairs.”

“Those aren’t exactly portable,” said Ana, startled.

“This one is. It weighs less than thirty pounds and can lift over a thousand to a height of fifteen feet without compromising stability. I keep it very well maintained and precision-calibrated. Can you use one?”

“Probably. I’ve used them before. Similar ones, anyway.” She hesitated, aware of Shelly still within earshot and likely embarrassed as all hell and looking for a reason to take it out on her later, then went ahead and said it. “You’re the first person I ever met who had one at home.”

“It’s a useful machine.”

“I’ll say. I sure as…sure could use one. Where’d you get it? Do you mind me asking?”

“I stole it.” He uttered a small, dry laugh. “Spoils of my misspent youth. I worked at the base…You knew of the base?”

“Everyone knows about the base.”

“Ah yes. Of course. No secrets in a small town.” And he laughed, an old man’s laugh, one that knew both why it was funny and why it was bitter. “Well, I worked there many years and things had a way of traveling back and forth, you see. When the base closed, the arm was here, among…other things. I decided not to bring the oversight to their attention, reasoning that they had things of mine and…and so forth. I had an over-inflated notion of fair exchange in those days.”

He brought her to the foot of a wide, formal stair and gestured up it. “I need to make a phone call and speak with your employer. The room at the end of the hall on your right, if you please. You’ll find the infernal thing crated beside the watercloset door. Feel free to look around and do whatever needs doing to prepare your workspace. Everything is…is quite clean.”

Ana went up, her back prickling under his stare, and tried not to think she was about to be alone with him. She didn’t exactly feel threatened—and her threat-radar was finely calibrated indeed—but she sure felt something off about the whole situation and wanted it over as soon as possible.

She found the master suite where indicated and correctly identified which of the two doors belonged to the shitter by the small pile of boxes parked beside it. As she had a utility knife in her toolbox, she went ahead and opened them so she could see what she was getting into.

A couple handrails. A traction mat whose installation was as simple as ‘unroll and put on floor’. A pretty nice-looking bath chair that needed some assembly. A ceiling-mounted manual bath lift with support sling and cradle that needed more assembly. And a power-assist toilet with a seat that would tilt up and give you a little nudge on standing. That also needed some assembly and she’d never seen one before, but heck, it seemed pretty straight-forward.

She stuck her head cautiously into the bathroom to see what she had to work with. Spacious and, as promised, very clean. Marble floor. Walk-in shower kitty-corner to the double-wide whirlpool
bath. A spice-rack next to the sink loaded with prescription bottles; Ana did not snoop, but even a casual glance showed her an impressive array of anti-depressants and some pretty hardcore sleep-aids.

In fact, the pills were the only personalized things she’d seen yet. The bathroom, like the kitchen—heck, like the whole house, was modern-minimalistic, with an industrial palette unsoftened by art or photos or personal touches of any kind. Even the towels were plain grey, however expensive they might be. The overall effect was aggressively empty; this was not a home where people lived, just a place someone slept. And judging from those pills, he didn’t sleep much.

Still, she wasn’t being paid to review the man’s taste in interior design. Ana got her tablet and her laser tape, powered up the roombuilder app and started taking measurements.

She didn’t hear him come in. The carpet in the master suite was thick. He stayed in the doorway, where his shoes couldn’t tap across these natural stone tiles. He was just there, silent, watching. And yes, it was his house and no, he wasn’t exactly hiding, but it wasn’t typical client behavior. Creeper, yes; not client. And yet, she didn’t get creeper-vibes off him either. She was well-acustomed to harmless old-man lechery (and the not-so-harmless kind); she’d know it if she saw it, and she wasn’t seeing it now, even if he did lurk in dark doorways and stare at her.

“Just in time,” she said, offering the tablet, where the bathroom had been recreated. “Want to show me exactly where you want those rails?”

“I defer to your professional judgment,” he replied, showing the same casual interest in her toy as Ana herself might show a similar one. Seen it, in other words. He nodded toward the boxes containing the various pieces of equipment. “How long is this likely to take?”

“Not long. It’s only the lift and the john that need any real work and it should go pretty quick. You wanted the lift over the tub, I’m assuming?”

“What I want scarcely figures in the matter, but yes, I suppose that was his idea.” He looked at her, thinking his own thoughts. She wished she had a better sense of what they were. At last, he asked, “Can you do that?”

“Oh heck yeah, no problem. One question. Sorry if it’s a bit indelicate, but is there a wheelchair I should know about? I only ask because the length of the chain on the sling has to be sized up at the ceiling—”

“Yes, of course. And no, there is not.”

“So there’s no other equipment that factors into any of this?”

“None. I have the usual wear and tear that comes from evading death for this long, but no major health crises and no mobility issues, much to my grandson’s dismay.” He smiled thinly. “What has he been telling you?”

Unwilling to wade any deeper into a family cesspit, Ana said, “He mentioned you were supposed to be at the doctor today and this is all medical assist stuff. I may have drawn the wrong conclusion. I don’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m sure you drew exactly the intended conclusion.” He gestured toward his dark glasses. “An eye examination. Glaucoma test, you know the one. They dilate the pupils. I’ve always been… sensitive to bright lights and the test leaves me in some discomfort for several hours, but it’s hardly a medical emergency.”
Ana elected to overlook whatever confused episode had taken him in the kitchen and just went on. “Then I don’t see why I shouldn’t be out of your hair by—” She checked her watch. “—six-thirty. Seven at the very latest. And someone can always come back and do this first thing tomorrow, if that’s better for your schedule.”

“You?”

Ana listened closely to her creeper-senses, but they still weren’t tingling, so she answered truthfully. “I’m pretty available at the moment, but summer’s a busy time for him and he has to put me where he thinks I’ll do the most for him.”

“That sounds like a very polite way of saying it probably won’t be you if he can spare anyone else at all. He’s rather upset at the moment, in fact. I’m afraid I may have pinged his male ego. Are you actually his assistant?”

“I guess I’m whatever he tells me I am,” said Ana, mulling over his words and the odd way he put them together. His speech was light and quick, but came with strange inflections now and then, not an accent exactly, but more like a man who’d learned to talk by reading. “If you’d rather have him up here doing this, that’s fine, but I have built a hundred bathrooms from the ground up, and I assure you, I’ve got this.”

“I know.” She must have twitched another eyebrow because his smile slightly widened and he said, “You were the one who brought a toolbox in. It’s obviously seen a great deal of use and you seem quite comfortable in that belt. You’ve been doing this sort of work much longer than you’ve been working for him.” He nodded toward her chest, not in a sleazy way. “Your shirt has never been worn and the hat is much too big.”

Ana blinked and laughed. “Yeah,” she said, taking the hat off and showing him the elastic back. “They say one-size-fits-all, but they never mean it.”

“How long have you been in Mr. Shelton’s employ, then?”

“Not long,” she admitted. “About a month, I guess.”

“And he still introduces you as his assistant.”

“You know how it is,” said Ana, dredging up some half-felt loyalty. “I’ve been in construction half my life. I know what I can do and I think he knows it too, but there’s always a trial period. He can’t play favorites.”

“Can’t he?” He lapsed into a short silence, resting his eyes on her while his thoughts turned in private. At length, he glanced in that direction, frowning, as if he had forgotten the whole reason they were up here having this conversation. Perhaps he had. For an old guy, he was impressively together, but obviously his grandson’s concerns, mercenary as they might be, were not entirely without merit.

“You’ll want to get to work now, I suppose. Do you mind if I watch?”

“It’s your house,” she said with a shrug.

“May we talk? I’m old,” he said when she turned a puzzled eye on him. “Old people really only have two great recreations left to them, conversation and reminiscence. My memories are not pleasant. I try not to dwell on them. May we talk? Will it distract you?”

“I should be fine. What do you want to talk about?”
Everything, as it turned out. Everything and nothing, because although they talked together ceaselessly over the next hour and a half, his side of the conversation was almost exclusively questions. He did not talk, but directed the talk. She talked.

She told him a much-edited and prettyed-up version of the story of her life, omitting all mention of her family. She tried not to put too much of a spotlight on the exclusion, but he noticed. He asked once about her mother. Ana’s answer was colorless enough to be no answer at all, which was probably enough to tell him what he wanted to know; he did not ask again. But he asked about everything else—Where did she grow up? (California, she told him, adding that although she’d moved around a lot since, that was always where she kept ending up, but not mentioning that was because it was where Rider and his stables were waiting to take her in) Did she go to college? (Too expensive, she replied, leaving out the part about never graduating high school.) Was she married? (No, she said, thinking of David, who had grimly promised himself to her when they were six.) Did she like to travel? (She’d done enough of that for a lifetime, she told him. She was actually looking forward to a time when she could settle down for good.) Here in Mammon?

And, lulled by the conversation and preoccupied with her hands as she ran a line of caulk around the bottom of the newly-installed toilet, Ana unthinkingly laughed and said, “Shit, man, does anyone want to settle down in this Godforsaken town?”

Too late, she realized what she’d just said, but the old man—still un-introduced, and now it was far too late to just ask—chuckled and said, “I suppose not. I certainly never intended this to be the place I lived out my life. It’s rather like a pitcher-plant, isn’t it? It lures you in with the smell of rotten meat and swamp water, then traps you forever.”

“Boy, when you put it that way…” Ana finished with the toilet, wiped it down, and got up. Just the lift to go. She left the bathroom—the old man held the door for her—and sat down on the floor beside the mostly empty boxes to assemble it. “Still, I guess it’s hard to leave when you’ve got family in town.”

“I have family.” He seated himself in the chair by the window and turned against its arm to face her. The upholstery protested, unused to use. “Beyond that, I have family ties. You know about them.”

“The ones that bind.”

“Yes. Descriptive phrase, isn’t it? We are bound. Not strengthened, not fastened, not supported by, but bound.” He was quiet, watching her work. When she had both parts—the lift itself and the mounting bracket—assembled and ready to go, he stirred and said, “Chad grew up in California as well.”

“Small world.”

“So the song goes. And goes and goes and goes, as I recall.” He rose as she climbed to her feet and went ahead of her to hold the bathroom door again. “His father grew up there also. I was not very much a part of his life. At the time, I felt strongly that was for the best. I don’t imagine he would agree. He lived badly,” he said, although Ana would not have inquired. “And died too young.”

“Sorry,” Ana said mechanically, carrying the lift past him, careful not to bump him as she squeezed by.

Old guys bruised easy.

“Chad was living with his father at the time of his death and unprepared to be launched, as it were.
He descended upon my wife, who, being a sensible woman, sent him on to me. And I suppose I should be grateful it’s just the one, because God knows there must be others out there. Somewhere. A terrible thing to admit. One should know where all the ties are bound, how shackled and how anchored, how tightly woven. Do you have children?”

“Nope. I don’t want ‘em, either.”

“No?”

“I mean, they’re fine in theory, they’re just not my thing.”

“Refreshing.”

“What is? Not wanting kids?”

“Not apologizing for it.”

“Yeah.” She laughed as she climbed the ladder in the tub and settled herself, speaking around the whirr of the drill. “Seems like you need a better excuse the smaller the town is where they ask. I was at the store the other day and the cashier asked the girl in front of me when she was going to get married and make her mom a grandma. I’d have told the guy that if my mom wanted a baby around the house so damn bad, she could have it herself, but this girl must have spent the next fifteen minutes expounding on what a terrible mother she’d be. And there I am with my ice cream melting, thinking, ‘Lady, they don’t just give ‘em out if you’re good at it.’”

“True.”

“I’d probably do all right,” Ana mused, holstering the drill and fitting the mounting bracket against the holes. “I don’t hate them or hit them with cars or anything, I just don’t want to take them home and hemorrhage food, money and freedom for the next eighteen years as the world’s worst door prize for having s—uh, a kid.”

“The world’s worst door prize,” he echoed, smiling. “I like that. It would be ill-advised to agree, circumstances being what they are, but I empathize. My own childhood was atypical…or perhaps I was merely an atypical child. Possibly both.” He brooded on this for a moment before brushing it away like an errant spider. “I like children, as you say, in theory. They have an inherent curiosity and a drive for discovery I find particularly inspiring, but in proximity, they are distracting and too often underfoot. I never intended to have any of my own when I was a younger man. I think if I’d had more conviction or more condoms, I would have led a very different life.”

She laughed, even as she told herself not to, that it wasn’t professional, and for all she knew, Shelly was out in the hall, eavesdropping.

“I don’t regret the child, you understand. Never that. But the child is the only good thing that came of that entire regrettable situation. And I was not in the best position to deal with it. I’m aware how that sounds, given—” He indicated the house and the money that had built it with a careless one-handed wave. “—all this. But there’s more to consider than one’s worldly position. My father was…” He paused. Ana, working with her back to him, could almost hear the clicks as he tapped through sound-files. “…not a man to inspire much faith in fatherhood. You understand.”

“I do, actually,” said Ana with a snort.

“I do not consider myself a bad father, although I acknowledge I could have been a better one. I don’t regret those choices. I think I would make them again. Yet it does not escape my notice that I always seem to find myself in the midst of other people’s offspring and separate from my own, and
that is regrettable. Chad’s unexpected arrival has given me a second chance, but I don’t think I’m doing any better. I’m old and bitter,” he said amiably, “and selfishly set in my habits. If he were younger, I might make a better effort. I feel a due sense of obligation to be sympathetic to the chronic needfulness of a toddler, but it pales considerably once they learn to drive. I suppose that paints an unflattering portrait of myself, but I have reached the age when I feel it is better to set practical, achievable goals than to sell the world on your idealism. I should like to be fond of him and feel that he is genuinely fond of me. What do you think?”

“It’s practical.”

“Achievable?”

“You never can tell with emotions, can you? I fell in love in a single night once.”

“Oh yes. It’s easy to fall. It’s the landing one has to beware of. Have you landed yet?”

“Yeah,” said Ana, now thinking of waking up in the quiet room after the Kellar job ended, of days and nights detoxing under Freddy’s watch, and Bonnie right there with her. Silly to think of it like that, but she did. Whether or not he was programmed to do it, he stayed with her. Even if it wasn’t really love, it was good enough for Ana.

“And how hard did you hit?”

“I didn’t,” she said, still smiling. “He caught me.”

He studied her as she set the last screw and climbed down to fetch the lift. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said at last, and finally stopped talking, now that the job was all but done.

Ana mounted the lift, adjusted the tension in the joints, fixed the length of the chain to the height of the bath chair, and gave the whole thing a few testing pulls. Solid as a rock. She removed the ladder to the hallway and came back to sweep one arm out at the finished job—handrails, chair, lift and john.

“What do you think?” she asked.

He looked at it with a polite expression, then went over to the tub and put one hand on one chain. He gave it a spin, then another, and another…winding it until the chains wrapped around themselves and began to shorten. Before Ana could speak—before she even knew what he was doing—he hopped up onto the cradle, crouched, and rode the whirling lift like a kid on a tire swing.

Ana froze, open-mouthed, expecting at any moment to hear the ungodly crash of a bath lift coming out of the ceiling mixed with an old man hitting the tiled floor and breaking his hip, neck, left wrist, nose and skull.

Of course, it didn’t happen. Ana Stark did not half-ass a job and this was a simple one, but still. Jesus Christ, old man.

His spin slowed. The chains straightened, wound themselves a few turns in the opposite direction, spun out again, and then just swayed. The old man dismounted with great dignity and gave the cradle an approving pat. “I’ll never use it,” he declared, then stooped and picked up a few baggies with unused bolts and casters and such.

“Oh, I got that,” said Ana, immediately gathering the nearest empty boxes and styrofoam blocks. When she straightened up, he had all the assembly instruction booklets in his hand, fanned out like Freddy’s magic cards.
Was it an accusation? He was smiling. Still, he had to have noticed she’d never looked at them. The ones for the lift and the toilet were still wrapped in plastic of their own, unopened.

Uncertain and not quite recovered from his little joyride, she said, “It was a pretty straight-forward job. If you build one, you’ve built ‘em all, you know?”

“Yes. I do know. Devices such as these…” He looked again at the lift, touching it with his eyes, climbing each link of the chain and tapping at each screw. “The track aligns, the wheels turn, the supports support, and every part fits together in only one way to make a working whole.”

“I used to think that, but holy…uh, wow, have I met guys who could f…mess up a simple assembly.”

“Oh yes, so have I. I never understood that when I was a child. For me, it was like sight…a special kind of sight.”

Ana laughed and when he looked at her, smiling, she said, “Other-vision. I call it my other-vision.”

“Yes. I used to think everyone had it. In fact, I strongly disbelieved they didn’t, even after I was told. When something seems so obvious, so vibrantly visible, it is impossible for a child to comprehend that not everyone sees as you do. That even those who want to see it, who try to see it, are just…colorblind. From the moment my father left me unsupervised with the brand-new vacuum cleaner, I never wanted to do anything but take things apart or put them together.”

“Toaster,” agreed Ana. “It was a toaster for me. A broken toaster.”

The spring had come out and her mom had burned the toast. After the screaming and swearing, little Ana, too young yet to know to be invisible, had asked what was wrong, and her mother had yanked the toaster out of the wall and thrown it at her. Later, wanting desperately to fix the badness and make her mother happy, still thinking there was a fairy wand or magic toaster that could make that happen, little Ana had slipped a screwdriver out of the junk drawer by the stove and taken the toaster apart. Still later, she had crept into her mother’s room with a piece of toast on a plate and when her mother took the plate, she had that brief moment of thinking it was all right now, all better, and then the plate had smashed against the side of her head, cutting her ear and cheek. *Don’t steal food,* was the lesson of that day. *Don’t you fucking touch my food.*

But she’d fixed the toaster.

“And now you’re a plumber?”

She shrugged. “Plumber, electrician, handyman, mechanic, construction, repairs…the list goes on and on. It’s all the same, isn’t it?”

“Do you like working with machines?”

“I’d rather work with them than people,” Ana answered honestly.

“Yes. Their needs are simple, their works are marvelous, their flaws are obvious and often reparable. You will never find a man as hardworking or as honest as the least machine.”

“My grandfather said,” Ana heard herself say unexpectedly. She frowned, listening in some amazement as she went on, “…something, something…not a servant so faithful he found.”

“I beg your pardon?”
Ana’s hand fluttered up, dislodging her cap as her fingers rubbed restlessly through her hair in search of that old scar. She hummed, eyes shut, hunting out more of that teasing tune, but could only scratch up a few more words. “For it…wasted no time…and had but one desire…at the close of each week to be wound.”

Emptied, she listened, but her memory gave her nothing more. When she opened her eyes again, the old man was watching her, eyeless behind the glasses, too intent.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s from a song, I think. It’s been creeping around the back of my brain for months now, but I can’t get it to come any closer. Something you said reminded me…and I thought I had it…” She strained one last time, but the silence persisted. She shook her head. “It got away. Sorry, you were saying?”

“Oh, I’m sure I was blathering on about nothing in particular. One of the many privileges enjoyed by the elderly, I’ve enjoyed your company…” He faltered there. His voice did not come back as strong. “…very much.”

“Are you all right?”

“Oh yes. It’s been a tiring day. Old men tire easily. It’s not death I fear so much as the weariness,” he said suddenly. He raised a shaking hand and pressed it over his eyes. The act pushed his glasses askew. She caught a glimpse of one yellowed, bloodshot eye before he covered it. “But as the poem goes, I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep. More miles, I fear, than I can walk.”

“Can I…Can I get you something? Should I get your grandson up here?”

He smiled wanly, adjusted his glasses and reached into his pocket for a slim leather wallet. “No, thank you. You’ve been very patient. I won’t keep you any longer. Please—”

“Nope,” said Ana, refusing the bills he offered. “Shelly handles the finances. I’ll get him.”

“Come now. I tip all my servicemen.”

“And I’m glad I could be of service, but I’m not taking your money for doing a job I’m already paid to do.”

He looked at her for a moment, but put his wallet away.

Ana finished cleaning, although at the old man’s insistence, she did not take the empty boxes out, but only stuffed them full of packaging material and left them in an out of the way corner. She hated leaving it, even if she hadn’t brought it—the job was not done until her space was clean—but he said he had a maid and he wanted her to feel justified in stealing from him, since she was going to do it anyway. He walked her downstairs, left her in the kitchen while he collected Shelly, then took them both out to the van and watched them drive away.

It was a quiet ride back to town. Too quiet.

“Nice guy,” said Ana.

Shelly ignored her.

“Want to stop?” she asked, seeing as they were on Majestic and about to pass Gallifrey’s.

“Eat on your own dime.”
Her temper rose. She tamped it down and said, calmly, “Seeing as it is two hours past the bell, I thought that’s what I was offering.”

“I got things to do tonight. I waited around on you long enough.”

Her temper inched toward the red-line again and again, she suppressed it, but it took more effort. “If you have a problem with the work I did—”

“The work,” he scoffed. “Some dirty old man wants to watch a little girl jiggle for two hours, that’s all that was. That’s closer to your momma’s work than mine. In fact, I wouldn’t be a damn bit surprised if I found out that’s what you were doing.”

‘Take it up the ass with a smile. Jobs do not grow on trees in this town. Hell, trees barely grow,’ Ana warned herself and, while nodding at the wisdom of that, yanked hard on the steering wheel and whipped into the parking lot. She took the keys around back, got her toolbox and belt, came back to the driver’s door, stripped out of her long-sleeved shirt and slapped it, the hat and the keys down on the captain’s chair.

“Drive yourself, asshole. I’ll walk,” she said and slammed the door on his red-faced blustering reply.

Shelly slammed some doors of his own changing seats, then revved the engine and peeled out, coming within an inch of clipping her when he roared by. Ana did not flinch. She didn’t throw a hammer at him either. She was a goddamn professional.

And now she was walking.
Chapter 13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ana hadn’t lived at the restaurant long enough for Bonnie to know much about her schedule, so he wasn’t sure when to expect her back. Noon was too early, he knew that, but still found himself wandering out into the West Hall after the twelve o’clock set ended. She’d covered all the windows too well to let him watch for her, which didn’t help his peace of mind, and when the top of the hour rolled around, he was back on stage, restless and annoyed with himself because he knew it was too early.

Shortly afterwards, Freddy came back from yet another trek out to the quarry. Water splashed and plastic thunked as he rinsed the bucket out and replaced it wherever it was he’d found it. Bonnie listened, doing the Hokey Pokey yet again, and finally Freddy came into the dining room.

He had cleaned up to the best of his limited abilities, scrubbing himself with sand to get the greasy mess off, but his fur was obviously darker from the knees and elbows down. Maybe Ana wouldn’t notice.

“I HOPE. I GOT. IT. ALL,” Freddy said, heading to the gym. He did not go in this time, only pulled the door shut, his ears and eyelids showing his discouragement. “THERE’S. NO. WAY. OF. KNOWING. FOR. SURE. EVERY. TIME. I THOUGHT. I WAS. DONE. I FOUND. SOMETHING. ELSE. CLOTHES. HAIR.” He clicked a few times, settling with obvious frustration on a sing-song: “DEM BONES.”

Chica twitched, her head snapping back at a break-neck angle, inner teeth chattering with the effort to speak.

“IF. SHE. DOESN’T. GET. TO. IT. TONIGHT. I’LL. LOOK. AGAIN. TOMORROW,” Freddy told her, and maybe that was what she wanted to know, because her twitching eased. “IF. SHE. DOES. AND. SHE. FINDS. SOMETHING. I. MISSED. WELL. I’LL. WAIT AND SEE. WHAT. SHE. WANTS. TO. DO. ABOUT. IT.” Freddy reclaimed his hat from Ana’s ‘bedroom,’ running his gaze over the sign posted on the wall as he felt for the attaching tabs and fastened it on. “ANY. IDEA. WHEN. SHE’S. COMING. BACK.”

Bonnie couldn’t talk, but he and Chica both managed a head-shake no as they turned themselves around.

Freddy grunted, picked up his microphone, and limped toward the stage. “FIND. OUT. TONIGHT,” he ordered Bonnie as he climbed the steps. “I. NEED. TO. KNOW. THESE. THINGS.”

Freddy took center stage, slumping slightly forward as he waited out the rest of the act, then switched off his eyes and slipped into character, but not all the way. His expression remained brooding and distracted as he laughed and waved and chatted up the empty room. His ears kept turning, scanning for traffic, and when the one o’clock set ended, it was Freddy, not Bonnie, pacing in the West Hall.

Hours passed, one by one by one. At five, Freddy must have heard something on the road, because he stopped in the middle of a song to listen and grunt his ‘It’s about damn time’ grunt. He started singing again almost right away, but as the minutes stretched out and Ana failed to appear,
Freddy’s singing first fractured and eventually faded out. There, in the middle of the act, he climbed down from the stage and went to the hall. A few minutes later, he passed by again, this time going into the kitchen. The loading dock door opened…and closed.

Freddy returned, only to stand in the middle of the room, staring at the wall. “DID. SHE. SAY—BONNIE. TELL ME. DID. SHE. SAY. SHE. WAS. GOING. TO. BE. LATE.”

Bonnie, freed, shook off the tremors of conflict, and said, “No.”


“Maybe. I don’t-t-t know. She just said she’d see me later.”


Chica twitched.

Freddy grunted, as if in agreement, then shook his head and got back on stage. “She’d. Better. Be. At. The. Story.”

Hours passed and kept right on passing. The afternoon became evening and still there was no sign of Ana. At the top of the nine o’clock hour, the sun went down. Freddy would have finished his opening song and gone immediately into the closing monologue if he’d been onstage. He wasn’t. He was still in the gym, where he’d been since the end of the eight o’clock set. Bonnie wasn’t sure what he was doing—his ears were pointed right at that wall most of the time and he never heard anything—but he stayed there while Bonnie and Chica slumped on stage, playing dead as they waited out the hour.

At ten, released, Bonnie set his guitar aside and headed for the gym, too.

“Are you sure that’s how the song goes?” Chica asked, watching him go without making any move to follow him, a sure sign she knew where he was going.

Bonnie hesitated. “If he really-ly-ly wanted to be alone, he’d be outside,” he reasoned, convincing himself as much as her.

Chica clicked through sound-files, tapping her fingertips together in counter-rhythm.

“I know he’s upset,” said Bonnie, backing toward the plastic sheets that shut off the South Hall from the dining room. “I’m not going-ing-ing to argue with him. It’s just-t-t…if he wants to t-t-talk…”

Chica’s answer was a skeptical squint. Freddy had never been one to talk about his feelings and over the years, he’d only grown more distant. Since Ana’s arrival, he’d been forced to revert to speech to make his orders clear, but before her coming, it was not at all unusual for him to go days without saying anything outside of his scripted routines.

“I’ll g-g-go if he tells me to go,” Bonnie promised, slipping through the plastic. His ears got caught. He untangled them casually, still nodding as Chica solemnly watched. “What-t-t—Do You Call A Bear With No Teeth?—Whatever he tells me, I won’t-t-t argue. I’ll just listen. I’m a g-g-great listener. Heh. All ears.”

Her eyes showed him the tired smile her absent beak could not.
Bonnie closed the plastic on her and turned toward the gym door. It wasn’t quite closed, but didn’t want to open either. The waterlogged mat and tangle of dead weeds that had once grown out of it made it difficult to move the door. It took a lot of shoving and made a lot of noise, but when he finally scraped through, he could see Freddy at the far side of the room, staring out the wall of glass as if unaware Bonnie was there. He did not move or speak once in all the time it took Bonnie to make his way toward him, and that took a long time, given the treacherous terrain the gym had become. A fall in here might not do any actual damage, given how spongy the mat-covered floor was, but it was gross. The thought of face-planting in the yellow-grey muck squeezing up through the weeds around Bonnie’s feet made him want to throw up and he wasn’t even sure how that would work.

Freddy still had not moved, not so much as the wiggle of an ear or a grunt to acknowledge all the squishing and muttered swearing that prefigured Bonnie’s approach, but as Bonnie rounded the carousel and limped up behind him, he suddenly spoke: “I’M. GOING. TO. K-K-KILL. HER.”

Bonnie halted mid-step.

Freddy glanced at him and shrugged, still glaring. “NOT. REALLY. BUT. I. CAN. NOT. BELIEVE. HOW. MAD. I. AM. WHERE IS SHE?”

“You d-don’t think she’s in t-trouble, do you?”

Freddy growled through his speaker and turned his attention back to the window and through it, presumably to the road beyond the edge of the bluff. Bonnie couldn’t see it, between the growing darkness and the scum coating the glass, but he guessed he’d be able to make out headlights if there were any. And there weren’t. “YOU. DON’T. WANT. TO. KNOW. WHAT. I’M. THINKING. RIGHT. NOW.”

‘Leave it alone,’ Bonnie told himself as he followed Freddy’s footsteps out. ‘Don’t push. If you corner him, you know what he’ll do, so just…just let it be.’ And then he said, “But you’re not-t-t mad at her, right?”

“NO.” Freddy sighed. “AND. YES. WHERE IS SHE? THIS. IS. NOT. HER. HOUSE. IT’S. MINE. SHE. DOESN’T. GET. TO. COME. AND. GO. WHEN. EVER. SHE. FEELS. LIKE. IT.”

“You said-d-d she could.”

“WELL. I. DIDN’T. MEAN. IT.”

A shiver rattled through Bonnie’s body. His pinkie fell off. He picked it up and fidgeted it back into place, but it wasn’t going to stay long. It needed a screw. He shivered again.

Freddy did not appear to be watching him, and the window-glass was too filthy to offer up a reflection, but at the second shiver, he sighed. “I’M. NOT. MAD. AT. HER. NOT. REALLY. IT’S. JUST.” He stopped there, not clicking, just quiet.

“Just what-t-t?”

“SHE. SHOULD. BE. HERE,” said Freddy. His arms lifted and dropped. “AND. I. HATE. THAT. I’VE. STARTED. THINKING. THAT. OF COURSE. SHE. SHOULDN’T BE HERE. NO. ONE. SHOULD. BE. HERE. BUT. I. DON’T. LIKE. THAT. SHE’S. NOT. HERE. NOW.” Freddy’s gaze swept the road one last time before he turned around. Grumbling low in his throat, he started walking, leaving deep depressions in the undergrowth to slowly fill in with ooze. “I. NEVER. SEE. HER. EAT. SHE. ALMOST. NEVER. SLEEPS. SHE. WORKS. TWELVE. HOURS. AND.
THEN. COMES. HERE. AND. WORKS. EVEN. MORE. I’D. ALMOST. BE. HAPPIER. IF. I. K-K-KILLED. HER. MYSELF. THAN. WATCH. HER. DO. IT. LIKE. THIS.”

Bonnie opened his mouth to tell him not to say things he didn’t mean, then closed it again without talking at all, just in case Freddy did actually mean it.


“She’s not doing-ing it to piss you off. She’s got-t-t stuff to do.”

“SO. DO. I.” Freddy surely knew what that sounded like, because he grumbled to himself as he pulled the door open, but he couldn’t leave it alone any more than Bonnie could, it seemed. “IF. SHE’S. GOING. TO. BE. HERE. SHE. SHOULD. BE. HERE. AT. A. REASON. ABLE. HOUR,” he stated. “THAT’S. ALL. THERE. IS. TO. IT.”

“Oh c-c-come on.”

“NO. IT’S. DISRESPECTFUL. TO. SAY. SHE’LL. BE. HERE. AND. THEN. STAY. OUT. ALL. NIGHT.” Freddy grunted, his eyes moving restlessly from toy to toy within the gym, still monitoring the playground years after the kids had all gone home. “LET. ALONE. WHAT. SHE’S. OUT. THERE. DOING.”

“You can’t-t-t give her a c-c-curfew, Freddy.”

“THE. HELLO! I. CAN’T.”

“She’s not a k-k-k—KIDS UNDER FOUR EAT FREE—kid,” Bonnie argued.

“I. DON’T. CARE. HOW. OLD. SHE. IS,” Freddy started to say. He stopped, cupped his muzzle and shook his head into his palm, then dropped his arm and boomed, “AS. LONG. AS. SHE. LIVES. IN. MY. HOUSE. SHE. OBEYS. MY. RULES. GOOD. GOD. BONNIE. WHAT. AM. I. TURNING. INTO.”

“Kind of a jerk-k-k, to be honest.”

Freddy laughed. Not just a grunt, not even that exasperated puff of air that had stood in for his fleeting moments of humor these last few years, but an actual laugh.

“You like her,” said Bonnie, but felt his certainty crack even before the words were out of his speaker. “You d-d-do…don’t you? A little.”

Now Freddy grunted, although he might still be smiling. It was hard to tell when they were walking. “YOU. LIKE. HER,” he said, giving Bonnie a brief shoulder-clasp before he opened the plastic flaps and ducked through into the dining room. “THAT’S. WHAT. MATTERS.”

“No. No, this m-m-matters.” Bonnie stopped in the South Hall, ignoring the opening Freddy held for him. “T-T-Tell me you like her.”

“BONNIE. IT’S. BEEN. A. LONG. DAY.”

“You’re worried-d-d about her! You want-t-t—TO ROCK!—to take care of her! Just…Just…”

“BONNIE,” said Chica, still on stage. “PLEASE. YOU PROMISED.”
“Just t-t-tell me you like her!” Bonnie burst out. “So I’m not-t-t waiting every day for you to d-d-d—DYSKINESIAL EPISODES ESCALATING. NEURAL ISOLATORS DON’T APPEAR TO BE HAVING ANY EFFECT—decide to kill her!”

Freddy just looked at him. After a moment, as Bonnie’s revving fan slowed and his cooling system resumed normal rhythm, he sighed and came back through the plastic to put both his hands on Bonnie’s shoulders. “I. TOOK. CARE. OF. MANGLE. TOO,” he said, as gently as he could. “AND. I. STILL. HAD. TO. K-K-KILL. HER. I’M SORRY, BONNIE. I. KNOW. WHAT. YOU. WANT. ME. TO. SAY. AND. I. COULD. SAY. IT. BUT. IT. WOULDN’T. MEAN. ANYTHING. EVEN. IF. IT. WAS. THE. TRUTH. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Bonnie tried to pull away, but Freddy wouldn’t let him go, and after a long, bad time, he finally nodded. The real hell of it was…he did understand.

Freddy patted him once and released his grip. “FOR. WHAT. IT’S. WORTH. I—”

He was interrupted by a rattle in the back room as the loading dock door shook. Not loud, not at first, but Freddy looked around at once.

“What’s that-t-t?” Bonnie asked stupidly, knowing what it was and what it couldn’t be. Even as distracted as he was, he should have heard a car drive up. Hell, he should have seen one. It hadn’t been that long since they’d both been standing at the window and there was nothing out there but the road and the desert.

When the door shook again, Freddy turned abruptly away from Bonnie and pushed out through the plastic sheets into the dining room. “CHICA. DID. YOU. HEAR. A. CAR.”

Chica shook her head, but in the very next instant, any thought that the wind was gusting on that side of the building was dashed as the door rattled a third time, the unmistakable act of a human hand. Someone was out there.

“GOD. NOT. NOW,” Freddy said, scowling. “JUST. GO. AWAY.”

The rattling stopped, astonishingly, only to be replaced a few seconds later by a violent banging. Whoever was out there was trying to break the door off its runners.

Freddy’s eyelids snapped down at an angle and the March began to play. “OH. YOU. WANT. IN. DO. YOU,” he growled, heading in that direction.

Bonnie followed, for the first time in his life actually anxious to kill a man just to get it out of the way before Ana came back. But when Freddy yanked the table-leg out of the runner and heaved the door up, one arm already drawn back for a lethal punch, it was Ana on the other side.

She had her toolbox in one hand, but not the duffel bag that was practically a fixture at the end of her arm. Freddy’s and Bonnie’s combined eyelight reflected off a sheen of sweat and her clothes were sticking to her in ways that could not be comfortable. And she was pissed. That was the first thing he should have noticed. Her eyes were almost as bright as Freddy’s own, lit and blazing with fury.

“Quit locking me out!” she snarled, shoving between them.

Freddy let himself be pushed, plainly surprised. He looked at his fist, opened his hand, and lowered the loading dock door, only to open it again and look outside at the empty lot. “WHERE. IS. YOUR. CAR.”
She threw out a laugh like a slap and kept walking. She limped, like it hurt.

“Ana?” Exchanging a last puzzled glance with Freddy, Bonnie turned and limped after her. “What-the-happened? What’s wrong-ong?”

“Asshole!” Ana slammed down her toolbox with a crash onto the prep counter in the kitchen and went directly to the cupboard where she kept her drinks and vitamins. “I work a thirteen fucking hour shift for that son of a bitch, and he calls it jiggling! That man takes half the fucking day to scratch his ass, but I’m the unprofessional one? Fuck him and fuck this whole town!” She pulled a bottle down, wrestled it open, and drank three deep swallows straight from the neck.

“That’s enough,” said Freddy.

“And fuck you too!” Ana snapped, tipping the bottle back again.

Bonnie grabbed at Freddy’s arm when he started forward, but Freddy merely patted his hand and kept going.

Like a defiant child, Ana turned her back on him and drank faster right up until Freddy plucked the bottle from her hands. While she sputtered and wiped her mouth, he capped it and put it away on the topmost shelf, out of her reach. Then, as she reached for another bottle, he closed the cupboard door and leaned on it, ignoring her efforts to push him away.

“Move your ass, bear!”

“Do you need a nap?”

“I said, move!”

“And. I. Said. Enough.”

Bonnie braced himself for the explosion, but even more unsettlingly, Ana quieted. She looked at Freddy, perfectly silent, perfectly still, her face as blank as a paper mask.

“Behave yourself,” Freddy ordered, taking his hand off the cupboard door and folding his arms. He glowered down at her, dropping notes of the March like water in a leaky sink, but calm enough in his tone as he said, “Now. Tell me. What’s wrong?”

She said nothing, did nothing. Her eyes, full of furious thought, danced back and forth between his. Without a word, she turned around and walked out, into the dining room.

Freddy tipped his head back and studied the ceiling for a short time, then shook his head and turned his back on her. He put his hands on the countertop and leaned on them, fingers scratching lightly as they twitched. The March played on, note by staggering note, with long stretches of unsettling quiet between them, but Freddy himself did not speak. At last, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in a clear, if unspoken command: You deal with her.

Bonnie went. In the dining room, he found Ana unknowingly mimicking Freddy’s exact posture, leaning on her hands over the table she’d made into her bedroom, tight-jawed and unblinking. Her fingers picked restlessly at the neat row of staples holding her bedcurtain to the table’s edge; but for that and the slow rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, she was still.

He had to say something. Something supportive and sympathetic, but not anything that could be construed as patronizing or pitying. Get her to open up without prying or making her defensive. Be strong, not controlling. Sound sincere, not rehearsed.
God, he just knew he was going to open his mouth and tell her he was her best buddy. He could almost taste the words, like burnt wires and blood.

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Chica asked, still on the stage.

Ana nodded once, silent.

All Bonnie’s fears of blathering out some stupid part of his kiddie-act fell away. “Don’t,” he said. “Don’t say it-t-t if it isn’t true.”

Her mouth twisted into a smile without humor while her eyes stayed fixed and hot with anger. “Because good boys and girls don’t tell lies.”

In the kitchen, the disjointed notes of the Toreador March spun out into a recognizable bit of melody before Freddy cut it off again.

“You d-d-don’t have to lie to me,” Bonnie told her, brushing the back of his hand along her stiff spine. “And you d-d-d—DON’T UNDERSTAND THE EPHAPTIC PROCESS HE UTILIZED.”

She sent him a sidelong glance as he gripped his throat, smiling that same angry smile. “I don’t, huh? Well, that’s a relief, because I don’t even know what the hell you just said.”

“I said-d-d…I said-d-d…” Bonnie’s ears jittered. He let go of his speaker to grab them and hold them still. “You d-d-don’t have to be ok-k-kay all the t-t-t—TIME TO ROCK!”

She stopped smiling. Some of the hard shine left her eyes.

“What-t-t happened?” Bonnie asked.

She started to speak, only to shake her head. “Nothing.”

“Ana, please.”

“Nothing, seriously. It was the stupidest thing and it was all my own fault.”

Plastic crinkled. Freddy had come to the kitchen doorway to watch and listen, although he kept his distance.

Ana looked at him. Her expression was still difficult to read, but she seemed to be waiting or something. When she didn’t get it, whatever it was, she turned all the way around and boosted herself up to sit on the table.

“I lost my job,” she said and immediately clapped her hand to her face, rubbing hard enough to redden the skin as she muttered, “Lost, who the fuck am I kidding?” She dropped her arm, then swept it out in a broad gesture, snarling, “I threw my job away in a spectacular display of poor judgment. I then had to walk all the fucking way to the office from Majestic. It is ninety fucking degrees out there, let me remind you, and my fucking toolbox weighs a ton. I get there and what to my wondering eyes should appear—”

“—BUT A MINIATURE SLEIGH,” Chica stuttered, grabbing at her speaker in wide-eyed dismay.

“I wish, but no. I find an empty parking lot and a note on the door informing me that the lot is for employees only and all others will be towed.”

She fumed.
Bonnie looked back at Chica, who shrugged slightly. “I… I don’t know what-t-t that means.”

“It means it’s towed! He towed my fucking truck! I spend the next half an hour playing phone tag trying to figure out where it is. Do you know where it is, Bonnie?”

“No,” he said timidly.

“It’s in the impound lot behind the government building. Thank God my stash is here or I’d spend the rest of my fucking life in prison!” she spat and Freddy came growling to the kitchen doorway and folded his arms. “The bitch on the phone said the towing fee alone is two hundred and fifty dollars and I just know they’re going to find a way to rack that up. In the meantime, I have no transportation, which is almost totally okay, since I don’t have a fucking job to go to. So.” She rubbed her face some more. “That was my day. How was yours?”

Bonnie thought of Foxy folding Mangle into the wooden chest, carrying it away and coming back empty-handed. He thought of Freddy lugging buckets from the gym to the quarry all day while Chica and Bonnie told jokes and sang songs. He thought of the Purple Man down in the basement, imprisoned in the dark and the silence, but maybe still aware of them, as a spider is aware of every hapless thing that blunders into its web.

He said, “I did the Hokey Pokey.”

She looked at him.

“Five times,” he said, holding up his right hand and one finger from his left to make five.

She snorted, stared at her knees, then offered him a crooked smile. “Okay, you win.”

He lowered his arms and his ears. “Are you… Are you going-ing-ing to be okay?”

“Yeah, sure, fuck it. I don’t have cancer, I just lost my job. And at least something good will come out of this shitshow,” she sighed. “I ought to get back on schedule here pretty quick, now that I have all this free time.”

“THAT’S THE SPIRIT,” Chica chirped. “ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE.”

“Yeah.” Ana sat for a while longer, then pushed herself off the table. She staggered slightly when she landed on her feet; they hurt her. When Bonnie caught her, she put a hand on his chest fast, as if to push him away, but then just stood and looked at him.

She had beautiful eyes. This wasn’t the time and he knew it, but oh God, she had such beautiful eyes.

“Why did I do it?” she asked him. “I knew better and I did it anyway.”

“It’s ok-k-kay.”

“No, it’s not. So what if he calls me a whore? It’s not the first time. It sure won’t be the last. I could have handled that a thousand ways. I picked the very fucking worst, the one way absolutely guaranteed to ruin everything. It’s like I go out of my way to fuck myself over.”

He took her hand and held it while she searched his broken face for answers. Finding none, she ultimately pulled out of his grip and turned away. In silence, she took a few things from the boxes she kept under the table, then walked off down the East Hall without another word.
Freddy came out from the kitchen to watch her go, arms folded and fingers rubbing restlessly at his biceps. He still looked pissed. Even when the restaurants were open, he’d never had a high tolerance for temper tantrums, but at least he was just standing there pissed and not chasing her down to lecture her.

“T-Two hundred and fifty dollars…is that-t-t a lot?” Bonnie asked Chica.

Chica wobbled her hand, so-so.

“IS. THAT. WHAT. YOU. GOT. OUT. OF. THAT,” Freddy inquired idly, still gazing down the hall. His eyes whined softly as his lenses irised smaller; Bonnie hadn’t noticed how big they’d gotten.

“Why?” Bonnie asked. “What did-d-d you—”

“She’s angry at herself for losing her job,” said Freddy. His cameras whined again. “The job where her manager called her a.” Freddy clicked through a few files, then grunted. They’d all heard Ana say what she’d been called.

“I think-k-k she’s just mad she g-g-got down on his level. She said-d-d there were other ways to handle it.”

“I’m sure there were,” Freddy said. “For example, I would have taken his head off.”

“That’s your answer to everything,” said Chica.

Freddy acknowledged that with a tip of his head and finally turned away from the hall. “You have to admit it’s a pretty good answer to a lot of questions. Keep a close eye on her tonight,” he added, heading back into the kitchen and out on patrol. “She’s going to want to get hi!”

“You don’t know that-t-t,” Bonnie argued, but quietly, avoiding Chica’s eyes. Everyone knew that. Even he knew that.

“Okay, Freddy!” Chica called, then looked at Bonnie, unsure. “Do you want to play?”

“I don’t know. D-D-Do you think I should-d-d?” Bonnie went to the plastic shutting off the East Hall and peeked through, but Ana was already gone.

“Hey kids! It’s time to play follow the leader with Freddy Fazbear!”

“Yeah, I know what-t-t he said, but all her st-st-stuff’s in the kitchen. She’s not going-ing-ing anywhere. Maybe she just-t-t wants to be alone.”

Chica nodded, but said, “Are you sure that’s how the song goes?”

He wasn’t. Kids wanted to be comforted when they cried. When they screamed and hit and threw things, it was just their kid-way of asking for arms around them, even arms like his, and a soft voice to say it was okay, especially when it wasn’t. To a child, no punishment was worse than a Time-Out, sent to an empty room to cry alone while all the rest of the world ignored you. Bonnie understood child-tears and knew what to do about them, even if he didn’t always have that choice. He didn’t know adults very well. He’d seen them cry—cry and scream and struggle and plead—but he’d never seen one comforted. He’d seen Ana cry, too, but the one time Freddy had put his arms around her, she had shut herself off like she was an animatronic herself and it had been an awful
thing to see.

“Maybe you should-d-d go,” Bonnie said finally.

“WHO, ME?”

“Well, you know. You’re a g-g-girl. She’s a girl. Girl’s t-t-talk to other girls like they don’t-t-t talk with guys. Especially g-g-guys they’re…you know.”

“YOU’LL NEVER KNOW UNLESS YOU TRY!”

“Look, she’s had a b-b-b—BASAL SYSTEM—bad day. I know we all have,” he interjected quickly. “But I just don’t-t-t want to say the wrong-ong thing and make it worse.”

Chica slapped both hands to her chest in a clear ‘And you want me to say it instead?’ gesture, with a little ‘Have you even heard the way I talk?’ sprinkled in for flavor, but climbed down the stage steps.

“Thanks,” said Bonnie. “I owe you one.”

“YOU SURE DO!” Chica shot back, waddling off down the East Hall.

Bonnie waited, trying not to let the quiet get to him, but he managed to come up with a dozen different imagined conversations to fill the empty time until he heard Chica’s footsteps return. Alone. Glumly wondering which of his fantasies had come closest to the truth, Bonnie went to meet her, pulling back the plastic just as Chica was reaching for it.

She didn’t look upset. As encouragement went, that wasn’t much, but it was something. If anything, she looked confused. Holding up a finger to stop him asking, Chica concentrated on clicking through her sound-files and finally came up with, “LET’S PLAY HIDE AND SEEK!”

Bonnie blinked, then squinted, but her earnest expression never changed. “You…c-c-couldn’t find her?” he guessed at last.

Chica shrugged expansively.

“Great.” Bonnie thumped himself on the forehead, breaking off a small chip of plastic from the crack that cut across it. “Freddy t-t-tells us to watch her and we immediately-ly-ly lose her. How…? Where would-d-d she go? She doesn’t have her t-tr-truck and I’m pretty sure she’s done walking-ing-ing for the night.”

Chica went over to the theme park display that Ana had covered with renovation plans. She pointed at certain places on the map—the arcade, the theater, the craft room, even the quiet room—and spread her arms with another shrug. Her meaning was clear: Ana hadn’t been there.

Granted, the pizzeria had been built for the Game. Halls twisted and intersected; most rooms had more than one door, even if they weren’t always obvious. There were plenty of ways Ana could have doubled back without Chica seeing her, but she sure hadn’t come back here, so where had she gone? She hadn’t just wandered off. Although unhappy and upset, she’d walked like someone with an obvious destination in mind, a reason why she’d left by way of the East Hall, so what else was back there?

Pirate Cove? Had she gone to see Foxy? Foxy was in no mood to talk to anyone, but that didn’t mean he’d chase her off if she went to the Cove. On the contrary, it was too easy to imagine the two of them alone together, Foxy on one side of the curtain and Ana on the other, neither speaking.
Isolation was just Foxy’s way of dealing with the dark stuff, and obviously, it was Ana’s, too. And if that was the case, he should let them be.

He couldn’t. It had nothing to do with trust or jealousy. He just needed to know where she was. In case Freddy asked, if for no other reason. If she was in there, he’d back out and let them do… whatever. He wouldn’t get involved, he just had to know one way or the other.

Please let her not be there.

“Ok-k-kay, I’m going to look,” Bonnie decided. “If I still d-d-don’t find her, well, she d-d-doesn’t want to be found and I guess we have t-t-to respect that, right?”

Chica nodded, tapping her fingertips. “SOMETIMES EVEN BEST FRIENDS FIGHT.”

“Don’t worry, I c-c-can handle Freddy,” Bonnie assured her and hoped it was true. “You just stay here and see if Ana c-c-c—CORTICOBASAL DEGENERATION—comes back. I really-ly wish I knew where that shit’s coming-ing-ing from,” he muttered, ducking through the plastic and into the East Hall.

He stopped on the other side to listen for Freddy, but heard nothing. Hopefully, he was still outside. If there were signs of kids down by the quarry, he might stay there for an hour or more, just watching them. If they were drunk and loud, he’d be out there all night…or at least until the kids headed for the pizzeria. And if there were no kids at all, Freddy might be back in just a few minutes. Bonnie still wasn’t sure just why Freddy thought Ana needed constant supervision, but this wasn’t the night to push it. He went to find her.

He checked the event rooms on the way to the Cove, just in case all Chica had done was open the doors and take a quick peek. Ana could be quiet when she wanted to be. She was easy to miss when she was sitting out of the way and drawn up small. But no, he’d forgotten most of the rooms had been completely cleared out over the weekend; even Ana couldn’t hide against bare walls. She really wasn’t there.

He was almost at the Cove, more certain with every reluctant step that he’d find her there when he opened that door and wondering if he really had it in him to just turn around and leave them together (no, he didn’t wonder at all; he knew damned well he didn’t), when he scanned again for Freddy and heard…something.

Not footsteps. Not anything he knew how to describe right away, although it was a familiar sound, sort of. A little like rain and a little like a faucet left on in the sink, only neither sound was quite right. Whatever it was, it was inside the building, coming from the back end, maybe from the security room. Had a pipe started leaking in the ceiling? Were there pipes in the ceiling? How would that even work without water pressure? He didn’t honestly think it had anything to do with Ana—he would have sworn that to Freddy’s face—but he went to investigate and he went quietly. One might even say sneaking, as if a pipe, even a leaky one, could be taken by surprise.

The sound became clearer as he neared the security office, definitely a water sound, but not a leak. He could see a faint yellowish glow through the hall window, enough to tell him there was a light on in the employee’s break room beyond, and that it wasn’t eyelight. He switched his own eyes off without thinking and kept going. He now knew it had to be Ana, he had to, because no one else was here, and yet he didn’t call her name or quicken his step or in any way announce his presence. He followed that sound, that watery rainy sinky sound, to the end of the hall and through the security office to the doorway of the break room and there he stopped.

He should have known. He knew the shower was here and he’d seen her take clothes with her
when she came this way. On some level, he must have known, although he hated to think he’d come back here in the hope, however deeply buried, of catching her in the shower. He was a lot of things, a lot of bad things, but a peeper, he was not.

So why was he still standing here?

Because she was naked.

He’d seen her naked before.

Funny thing about seeing Ana naked…once was not enough.

It wasn’t like he could see much, either. She was standing with her back to him in the narrow open-sided closet-thing she’d made, directly beneath the window-box. The nozzle he’d noticed earlier spat out an uneven trickle of water—the source of the sound. He hadn’t recognized it as a shower because the showers the Purple Man had in the basements of the other buildings had used a lot more water and made a very different sound. This really was like rain, only in an impossibly focused space, or like a leaky faucet, only in a very tall sink. Now and then, Ana would reach up to squeeze the nozzle and open up a slightly heavier flow, but never for long. Of course, she had only that little bag of water, warmed in a windowbox—a far different setup from the Purple Man’s steamy hour-long soaks, but she seemed comfortable with it. She had a little round spongy thing and a couple squirt-bottles stuck to the walls of her shower that she squeezed when she needed soap. She’d get some soap, lather up that sponge, scrub up under the trickle, rinse off under the slightly heavier trickle, get more soap and do it again in a different place, working her way methodically over her body. Her hair was loose; being wet made it longer and darker, a shiny black dress that covered exactly as much as her shirt and undershorts had, and yet, the idea that she was naked behind that veil of hair lodged in Bonnie’s brain and allowed no other thoughts through.

She showered. He watched, seeing gleams of lantern-light in streaks along her wet skin, light like beads shining in all that dark hair, light pouring down her legs in ribbons and swirling away through the drain at her feet. He could hardly see her body for all that light.

Then she squirted a little soap into her palm and started rubbing it into her hair, working up a crown of suds before gathering up her hair and piling it atop her head, exposing her entire back to him for the first time. Bonnie’s gaze went first to her ass—shining with water, streaked with suds fallen from her hair, and quivering slightly as she shifted her weight from foot to foot in the small space—then came up at the unexpected sight of dark marks below her neck.

Not just marks, he saw, but words. _Everything is all right_, spelled out in a looping, overly-stylized hand. Another tattoo. She’d told him she didn’t have any others. He had just enough time to identify all the reasons why it would be wrong to mention it now, and then she ducked her head under the water. The soap sluiced away down the channel of her spine and he saw what lay beneath it.

Scars. Too many to count. Too many to be believed. They covered her back from her neck to her hips, lying in all directions like a game of pick-up-sticks branded into her body. Every mark was separate and distinct from every other, long and straight, slightly warped out of true, as if they had been smaller once…or she had.

He stared a long time, his eyes moving back and forth from those scars to the bad joke written over them. He was still staring when Ana dropped her hair over her back again, rinsing it straight and shiny-dark, before she turned the water off and turned around.

She froze, one hand reaching for her towel. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but she
didn’t make a sound.

Bonnie twitched backwards, bumped the doorjamb, and blatted, “HI THERE!” before he could stop himself. He grabbed at his muzzle, but the rest came hyucking out his speakers anyway: “I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY, BONNIE THE BUNNY! WHAT’S YOUR NAME?”

“You okay?”

He nodded, staring straight ahead at the runners of the security door.

Silence. He should say something, but he was afraid to try.

“Come here,” said Ana.

He looked at her, ears snapping up and twitching at the joints. She was still standing in the shower, still naked, still with one arm out, but not for her towel anymore. She was reaching for him.

He felt a funny sort of flutter, like a mouse had crawled into his stomach and couldn’t get out.

“Come here,” she said again, now with a slight beckoning motion of her fingers.

Bonnie glanced back, listening, but couldn’t hear Freddy anywhere close by. He took a few hesitant steps toward Ana, reaching nervously up to straighten his ears and his muzzle, and then tapping at his abdomen casing to try and chase that mouse away, but the fluttering remained and only got stronger the closer he got to her. “Sorry,” he said. “I’M SORRY! I d-d-didn't mean to.”

“Mm-hm.” She came to meet him in the middle of the floor and took his hand.

“I wasn’t-t-t looking,” he stammered, feeling the lie like heat in his face.

“I don’t mind if you look.” She led him toward the shower.

“I…I was j-j-just walking-ing-ing by and…and…” He stopped when she stopped him, turning as her hands directed until he was standing beside the shower. She smiled at him as she took that spongy ball and put a squirt of soap in it. He watched her fingers sink into it and suds ooze out, feeling weird echoes in impossible places.

“How did they used to do this?” Ana asked, rolling that sponge between her hands as white lather dripped down her arms.

“Do…Do…What-t-t are we doing-ing?”

“What does it look like we’re doing?”

He looked at her, at him, at the room around them. His mind had never felt so magnificently blank. All he could think was that she was naked and so was he. Of course, he’d always been naked, but for almost fifty years now, he’d never really known it. Not like he did now.

He twitched, jaw flopping open and snapping crookedly shut. He grabbed it with a shaking hand and clenched until the rattles stopped. “I don’t-t-t…I’m not…I haven’t got…I c-c-can’t…”

She reached up and lay her hand over his. It was warm. There was no way he could know that, but he did, if only for a moment.

“I’m giving my man a bath,” she said, pulling his slack arm away and dabbing at his face. “You going to be okay with the water?”
“Yeah,” he said numbly, staring.

“With the roof leaking as bad as it does, I guess if you were going to short out in the damp, you’d have done it by now, but I’m still a bit nervous. It’s a lot of water.”

“We’re water-resistant.”

“Water-resistant isn’t water-proof. How’d they used to clean you?”

“With their c-cl-clothes on,” he said without thinking, then jerked hard and held up both hands in frantic ‘no’ motions as she laughed. “With a hose! With-th-th a hose! They had-d-d a spray…they’d sp-spray…with a hose!”

“You want me to get dressed?”

“No! I mean, you c-c-can if you want-t-t! It’s your…uh…” Static welled; he gripped at his throat, massaging his speaker like that could help. “You have p-p-p—PRETTY TODAY—pretty eyes.”

“Thanks. Most people think they’re creepy.” She moved to the other side of his face and rubbed the sponge in small circles. “I keep thinking I should get contacts so people will quit giving me grief over them. But you like them, huh?”

“Yeah. So…So much.”

“Then I won’t.”

“Really? I mean,” he said quickly, doing all he could to ignore her as she pressed herself right up against him, standing on her tiptoes to reach the top of his head, “you d-d-don’t have to change anything-ing-ing for me.”

“No,” she agreed, hooking one arm around his neck to hold him steady while she washed his ears. “I don’t. Not for you.”

Soap bubbles popped against his microphones, deceptively deafening. He watched her mouth move while she talked to him, catching just enough of what she said to throw in an acknowledging, “Yeah,” or “No,” when appropriate, but mostly just lost in her eyes, her smile. He knew he couldn’t hear everything, because she kept pausing to look at him and then to laugh, but she just kept washing and talking, so he guessed it was fine.

At last, she brought out the shower nozzle and rinsed him off with a few sparing drizzles, guiding the water over the curves of his head and down to his shoulders with sweeps of her bare hand. Beads of water glittered on her skin like jewels. Her hair hung loose all down her back, just starting to curl as it dried.

This was it. This was the moment. He was going to tell her he loved her. Bonnie ran the words twice through his mind, willing himself calm and casual. Three words. He could do this. I love you.

He opened his mouth, jerked hard, and blatted, “ISODYNAMIC PROCESSES OF THE LIMBIC SYSTEM.”

Damn it.

“You okay?” she asked, adding more soap to her sponge.
He nodded, ears drooping.

“Turn around.”

He obeyed, staring into his reflection in the tinted glass window of the security office while she washed his back. Big, stupid bunny.

“I’m taking off kind of a lot of fur here, my man. Sorry about that. Whatever this stuff is, it does not like water.”

“It’s fine,” he said glumly. Big, stupid, bald bunny.

“Wow, this is really breaking down,” she said behind him. “You sure they used to wash you with a hose?”

“Yeah. There’s a st-st-stall backstage with a d-dr-drain in the floor and he’d just spray us off.”

“With water? Regular tap-water?”

“Yeah.”

“This is coming off crazy-hard. You’re practically melting like the Witch of the West. Hang on,” she said with sudden dawning suspicion. “Is this…? Holy shit, I think it is.”

“What?”

“It’s fibracene. Someone…dyed fibracene and flocked you with it. What the actual fuck?”

“I d-d-don’t know what that is.”

“It’s a fire-retarding insulation material, but…there’s a reason they only use this stuff to insulate dry gas lines and ventilation systems. It gets brittle in the heat and breaks down in the damp, especially oils, like the oils found on human skin. Who the hell would put that on something that little kids were going to be hugging on ten hours a day? You’d have been bald in a month and, like, a hundred kids would be hospitalized with respiratory distress. I don’t get it.”

“I don’t-t-t know what to tell you,” Bonnie said truthfully. How was he supposed to tell her that they’d been reskinned, all of them, over the course of one frantic weekend, and that he’d have used asbestos if that had been all he had. It wasn’t supposed to last, not even for a month. It just had to get through the opening…and the closing.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” she said and started washing him again. “It’s obvious they went with Bargain Bob when they built this place, but it bugs me. They shouldn’t have gone cheap with you. Not you. My man deserves better.”

The sound of her sponge sloshing over his casing filled the room.

Unexpectedly, she giggled.

He looked back over his shoulder, but she was just scrubbing away, a little pink in the cheeks, but otherwise normal as any lady washing her animatronic rabbit at the end of the day. “What?” he asked.

She peeked up at him through her hair, laughed again, shook her head. “Nothing.”

“What-t-t?” he insisted, feeling nakeder than ever.
“It just snuck up on me, that’s all. How I’ve washed stoves and cars and dogs and horses, and I never once got weird about it, but here we are. And it’s about to get just super weird.”

“It is?”

“Yup. Turn around.”

Bonnie turned and faced her.

Grinning, eyes shining, suds on her arms and clinging to her hair, she said, “Lift your arms for me, my man.”

He did, puzzled, and watched as she started at the fingers of his right hand and worked her way up his arm, over his shoulders, across his chest, down the other arm and finished at his left fingers. “That wasn’t weird-d-d,” he started to say as she passed the shower nozzle over him and briskly rinsed the soap away.

She put another squirt of soap on the sponge and, looking straight into his eyes, began to rub it in circles over his chest.

That mouse ran through his stomach again and where it ran, he imagined he could feel muscles tightening and skin prickling. “Ok-k-kay, it’s a little weird-d-d,” he heard himself say, staring at her hand as it moved lower…and lower…and lower…

“I know you’re only saying that because you think it’s what I want to hear, but yeah,” she said and let out another breathy giggle. “It is.”

And then she knelt down in front of him.

“Oh,” he said stupidly. “Oh. Yeah, wow. Um…”

Smiling, Ana put a little more soap on her sponge and worked it in with her fingers. She put a steadying hand on his hip, shifted higher on her knees, and looked up at him as she pressed the sponge between his legs and began to rub back and forth. “You want to hear the worst part?”

“Uh…” He groped at his speaker again. “Yeah, sure.”

“I’m a little turned on.”

“Oh…me, too.”

She laughed; he tipped his head back and fixed his eyes on the ceiling until he couldn’t feel her hand anymore, but he could still hear it, rhythmic and wet. The ceiling tiles were cracked and flecked with mold. His mind kept wanting to make pictures of the abstract shapes formed by their decay and all the pictures were of Ana.

Finally, finally, she said, “Okay.” and climbed to her feet. She fetched the shower nozzle and turned the water on, pushing it in falls down his legs to the floor. When she’d wrung the last drop out of the reservoir, she let the nozzle drop and stood up straight to smile at him. “Thanks.”

He blinked. “For what-t-t?”

“Before you came in here, literally all I could think about was how much I hurt and how tired I was and how everything I fucking touch turns to suck. As weird as that got, it was nice.” Her smile went crooked. She hesitated a hand up and touched his face. “You’re nice. I need a little nice in my
life right now.”

He raised one big, clumsy bunny hand and tried to brush it across her cheek, but he could tell he did it too hard even if she didn’t say so. “Can we…C-C-Can I…I really want-t-t…I mean, I’d like t-t-to…if you want-t-t to…”

“Use your words,” she said, smiling.

“K-K-KINEMATIC FUNCTION FULLY INTEGRATED WITH SENSORIMOTOR MODALITIES.”

Her smile held, but her brows knit. “Maybe use some other words?”

“I…” His fingers twitched, scraping across her skin and leaving a pinkish mark behind. He let his arm drop, clenching his hand into a fist, and felt his ears twitch. ‘I love you,’ he thought desperately, but he didn’t try to say it. Even if he did manage to get it out, the words would be so chopped up and overlaid by static, they’d lose all meaning. All he could do was look at her.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said and kissed him.

Bonnie watched her, his cameras whining with the effort to keep her in focus, savoring the sight of her, the impossible feel of her. She kissed him like she meant it. She didn’t—couldn’t—but she made it easy to pretend he didn’t know that. He touched her hip and she only smiled. He put his arms around her and she just snuggled close. He stroked his fingers down the dark tumble of her hair, imagining he could feel her warm and alive against him, and then gently moved her hair aside and touched the scars he could not feel but knew were there. His fingers moved, playing them like strings, soft music. He loved them; they were hers and he had to love them.

He couldn’t really feel her, or he would have felt her stiffen. As it was, he only knew he’d done something wrong when she suddenly squirmed out of his grip, stumbling back until she hit the shower and then just stared at him, too quiet and too still.

“What’s wrong?” asked Bonnie. “Did-d-d I hurt—”

“No.”

“Are you—”

“I’m fine.”

He reached for her.

“Don’t.”

Slowly, Bonnie lowered his arm.

After a moment, keeping her head down and her eyes fixed straight ahead, she moved quickly past him and got her towel. She wrapped it around her body, pulled her hair together and braided it without brushing it. “I’m going to bed,” she said without looking at him.

“Ana, I—”

“Good night.” She picked up her lantern and started walking.

“Wait!”
She didn’t. She left and took the light with her.
Ana hadn’t realized she’d been working for Shelly long enough to acclimate to the work-schedule until she woke, jobless, at a quarter to five for no reason. One of the animatronics was in the room with her, she knew even without lifting the curtain to look. She could hear servos humming steadily, rhythmically. Bonnie, playing his stringless guitar.

She listened as she drowsed, contemplating sleep at the same low emotional temperature as she reflected on the previous day’s events. Ultimately, however, she decided if she was going to walk to town later and pick up her truck, she’d better get some work done at Freddy’s first.

When she switched on her camp lantern, the small sounds elsewhere in the room stopped at once. He must have known she was there, but he didn’t greet her in any way. Was he mad at her? She guessed she had kind of walked out on him after the shower and maybe he didn’t deserve that, but he’d been touching her scars. It was no accident, either. He’d claimed before he couldn’t feel much—how could he, with plastic hands?—but he’d been touching her scars. Not just like he knew they were there and he knew he was touching them, but also wanted her to feel him touching them and know that he understood…and of everything that had happened all that day, his understanding was the worst.

Now she had to go out there and face him and it was going to be awkward, the way it was always awkward with everyone who’d ever seen them, worse even than it had been with Rider when he found out, and he’d even guessed who put them there.

‘You are over-thinking this,’ Ana told herself as she shimmied into a pair of jeans, and it was true. Bonnie’s programming was complicated beyond Ana’s limited capacity to understand, but it was, after all, just a computer program. He had seen her scars, sure. He’d had to guess how to react to them, and he’d made that guess based in large part on her interactions with him, which at that moment had included her naked and kissing on him. Taking that into account, could she really even say he’d made the wrong guess?

He still hadn’t said anything, which was a little unsettling, but he probably had to see her to kick into guest-mode, she decided. To test her theory, she lifted the curtain and peeked out at him.

His eyes snapped on at once, showing her it was indeed Bonnie. He had been sitting on the edge of the stage with his guitar still on his lap even though he wasn’t playing it anymore. Seeing her, he put it aside and got up, limping toward her. “HI THERE! Hey. Are you-you-you—READY TO ROCK?”

“Yeah, sure. A little stiff. You’d think I’d be in shape, doing what I do for a living, but walking apparently uses different muscles. Hang on. I need to cover my shame before Freddy sees me.” Ducking back under the table, Ana grabbed a tee off the laundry-wall. By pure luck, the first one she touched was clean, both in literal terms and in the sentiment expressed. What were the odds? She put it on and crawled out, taking Bonnie’s hand when he offered it to gain her feet. “Where is everyone?”

“Chica’s in b-b-back somewhere, probably the arcade. I haven’t seen F-Foxy all night, so I guess he’s in the C-C-Cove.”
“And Freddy?”

Bonnie’s ears swiveled. He glanced at the kitchen. “Freddy’s always around-d-d.”

A moment later, Ana could hear it too: the slow, scraping sound of Freddy’s feet on the tiles. Soon, the brownish blur of his arm came out of the greater darkness and moved the plastic sheets aside. His eyes came on, flickering before their light steadied. His grunt of greeting held equal parts inquiry and accusation.

“I didn’t-t-t do anything,” said Bonnie. “She just-t-t woke up.”

Freddy grunted again and looked at Ana. “IT’S. EARLY,” he said. “GO. BACK. TO. BED.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she replied, sleepy enough to be amused rather than annoyed. “I thought this was Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria. I didn’t realize I’d wandered into Bedtime Bear’s Daycamp for fucking Toddlers by mistake. How are you this morning, Bedtime Bear?”

Freddy’s eyelids evened out into his longest and most suffering long-suffering stare. “DON’T. CALL. ME. THAT.”

“Then don’t tell me to go to bed. I’ll get up when I feel like it and I’m up now. I’ve got shit to do today.”

Freddy grunted and moved on into the East Hall, but only a short distance. She could see him, the glow of his eyes, distorted through the plastic. He appeared to just be standing there, staring at the wall.

No, not the wall. At her calendar.

No sooner had the realization struck than Freddy turned and came grumbling back. When he pushed through the plastic, she expected to have to justify the day’s schedule and probably convince him all over again of the necessity of taking down some walls, but he surprised her with a regression to mascot-mode. “HAVE YOU TRIED OUR FAMOUS FREDDY FAZBEAR FUNYUM PIZZA STICKS?”

“What?”

“HAVE YOU…” He broke off, clicking, and looked at Bonnie with an expression of plastic frustration.

“She just-t-t got up,” said Bonnie, shaking his head. “Like, two minutes—TO SHOWTIME!—before you walked-d-d in.”

Freddy grunted and glared again at Ana. “EAT. SOME. THING.”

“And now it’s Munchy Bear’s Daycamp for fucking Toddlers,” she said, heading outside to pee. “How’s it going, Munchy?”

“STOP. CALLING. ME. NAMES.”

“Stop telling me what to do,” Ana replied, pushing open the door to the West Hall.

It wheezed shut behind her, but didn’t close all the way. It couldn’t, really, not since the rainy night she’d bashed it open, and although the plastic sheets she’d hung in front of it did a good job of blocking dust, it wasn’t much of an impediment against sound. When Freddy said, “AND. YOU.
She kept smiling, because it was funny. When this place was open, he’d probably hugged on screaming kids all day and laughed right along when the brattier ones called him a buttsniffer or whatever little Mormons thought was hardcore swearing, but take away his nightly program maintenance for a few years, and even Freddy Fazbear could recognize an obnoxious little shit when he saw one. For now, he seemed to have something of a sense of humor about it, at least when she wasn’t in the room, but the day he decided to give her a smack, she was in trouble.

Maybe if she was nicer to him, he’d be nicer to her. It was all about the adaptive programming, right?

Yeah, right. That would work on any of them, except Freddy. When he didn’t like you, it was for life.

Just the same, when she came back from using nature’s vast restroom, Ana was in no hurry to return to the dining room. Bonnie was almost certainly waiting for her, but Freddy might be waiting too. She didn’t need to start the day by listening to a lecture from another high-handed jerk with delusions of authority over her.

So when she squeezed through the boards and under the plastic sheet that covered the side door next to Tux, rather than head down the hall and get straight to work, Ana wandered into Pirate Cove.

“Morning, Captain,” she called.

No answer.

“Foxy?” Ana felt her way along the wall to the rail and followed that to the amphitheater steps. “Captain? You know, I’ve been meaning to ask, is Fox your first name or your last? I never really questioned the fact that Freddy has a surname and none of the rest of you did until I saw how many of the Freddyland Faces have them too.”

Metal scraped on wood, underscored by a brief whine of straining servos. Two heavy footfalls, high on the deck of the Flying Fox. She waited for the thud as he hopped over the deck onto the padded stage and heard instead the creak and quiet click of a door opening and closing. He’d gone into his cabin.

Yesterday—had that really only been yesterday?—he’d been complaining that he didn’t get enough time with her and today, he didn’t even want to look at her.

Sheesh, it really was going to be one of those days, wasn’t it?

Ana continued to feel her way along the rails and across the room, leaving the Cove by way of the East Hall door. She wasn’t sure why. It was a much longer walk and she hadn’t cleared this room, so she stumbled into a lot of junk on the way. Maybe she was just giving Foxy a chance to come out, maybe with a little baggie of weed or whatever and it would be like he’d gone in there to get something and not just to get away from her. But he didn’t, no matter how long it took her to reach the door, so when she got there at last, she just left.

As she followed the wall to the dining room, Ana could hear the rapid, rhythmic slapping sound of Chica playing handball by herself in the arcade. She considered stopping by and inviting herself into the game. Maybe she could win the Triple Crown of Rejection.

It was supposed to be a joke, but it wasn’t, not even in her own mind. Ana kept walking and did
not call out a good morning when she passed the arcade.

Freddy was not waiting for her in the dining room when she finally got there. Bonnie was, of course. He stood in front of the West Hall door, plastic pushed to one side and muzzle to the inset glass, watching for her. His fingers twitched now and then, making the plastic crinkle. When she said, “Hey,” he tore it right off the door frame as he spun around, and then tried to press it back in place, stuttering apologies and tangling up his ears.

“It’s okay,” said Ana. “I’ll fix it. Just hang tight and try not to tear it.”

“Okay,” said Bonnie, now hopelessly swaddled in plastic from his head to hips. “Smooth,” she heard him mutter as she found a lantern and went into the back. “Nothing-ing-ing turns the girls on like a clumsy jack-k-ass.”

Smiling, she collected her staple gun and the stepladder and returned to unwrap her man and hang the mangled plastic back up.

“Wh-Wh—WHERE’S MY GUITAR? IT’S TIME TO ROCK!”—Where were you?” he asked.

“My workshop. I mean, the quiet room. It’s where I keep my tools.”

“B-B-Before that. You went out-t-t this way and came back that-t-t way.”

“Oh.” She shrugged one shoulder, pretending the plastic needed all her concentration. “Thought I’d say hi to Foxy.”

“Oh.” His ears drooped. He pushed them up again. “How is he?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t want to see me. He’s probably mad because I didn’t see him last night. You know how it is. Pirates don’t become pirates because they’re so rational and forgiving.”

“He, uh…He had a b-b—BEST BUDDY—bad day yester-d-d-day.”

“Some of that going around, all right,” she agreed, setting a last staple and giving the plastic a testing tug. “Today won’t be much better, either. Not for me, anyway. Still, at least I have you to come home to.”

She could have climbed down off the stepladder. She held her arms out instead, which was all the prompting Bonnie needed to lift her down. He kept his hands around her waist even after he’d set her on her feet, but didn’t pull her any closer. His ears folded forward; his head cocked, puzzled.

“Come b-b-back—SOON!” he echoed. “Where are you g-g-going? I thought you said you lost-t-t—AND FOUND IN THE SECURITY OFFICE—your job.”

“I did, thanks so much for the reminder.”

“Sorry.”

“You remember the other half of the suck last night? The bit about my truck?”

“Yeah,” he said uncertainly. “It got…turned into a t-t-toad?”

“Close enough. Well, in a few hours, I need to go get it. Then I need to find a real hardware store and pick up a few things.”

“You say that-t-t a lot.”
“I keep running into problems I can only solve with stuff I don’t have.” She cocked a thumb at the back wall, behind which was the gym. “I wasn’t expecting to need a weed-whacker, for example.”

“Yeah, that-t-t…that’s pretty—TODAY!—bad,” Bonnie said, looking at the wall.

“So I need to get what I can get done now, because I don’t know how much time I’ll have later. Or what kind of mood I’ll be in to do it. Truthfully, there’s a better than average chance I’ll come back pissed off beyond belief, get high, and spend the rest of the day under the table watching my fingers.”

Bonnie didn’t return her smile. His ears lowered.

“But in the meantime, I have this golden opportunity to catch up on the stuff I couldn’t do yesterday, so…want to give me a hand? Oh shit,” she laughed, covering her eyes even before Bonnie brought his twitching arms up and started the applause. “When am I going to learn?”

“Sorry.” Bonnie stopped clapping and pressed his hands together. The fingers laced, most of them. The left pinkie folded backwards, like a wilting flower. His shoulders shook, as if with laughter, but he wasn’t laughing. “I d-d-don’t mean it.”

“Stop apologizing.” She put her hands over his, lightly rubbing, and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his hackey-sack nose. “You’re doing everything right, my man. Girls love a guy who can make them laugh.”

“I…I…I LOVE PEPPERONI AND EXTRA CHEESE.”

“Me, too. Want to work up an appetite with me?”

His ears came up, quivering. “Um…” His cameras darted left to right and came back to her smiling face. “Right-t-t here?”

“No, I’m pretty much done with this place for now. And I don’t really want to soak up sewage fumes before I go to the town hall, so the bathrooms are out. I guess we could go to the theater, but I really don’t like the thought of you on all those stairs.”

Bonnie’s upper and lower eyelids came together in a squint. “What…What are we talking-ing-ing about?”

Ana opened her own eyes extra-innocent wide. “Cleaning and clearing, of course. Why? What did you think we were talking about?”

“Um…” He shivered. “Cleaning and…clearing. Of c-c-course.”

“And maybe after you work those big bunny muscles of yours, you and I can find a nice clean corner to make out in until I have to leave. Sound good?”

“Yes, p-p-please.”

“Give me a hug?”

He opened his arms immediately and she got up close and snuggled into his chest.

“Mmmm,” she murmured, then laughed. “If this is really fibracene, it can not be good for me to rub up on it all the time, but you’re so soft, I just don’t know if I can stop touching you now.”

“Is it…Is it b-b-bad for you?”
“Doesn’t matter. I don’t live the kind of lifestyle where you die of long-term exposure to carcinogens.” She pulled away, smiling, and kissed him again, this time on the mouth. “Let’s go to Pirate Cove.”

“P-P-Pirate Cove?”

“Well, Chica’s in the arcade. I don’t want to chase her out if she’s having fun. I kind of want to encourage her to go there instead of the kitchen when she wants to throw things in the middle of the night,” she added. “And we won’t bother Foxy. He’s in his cabin and we’re not going to make that much noise.”

Bonnie didn’t answer right away, but when he did, he said, “Okay.”

She stepped back and held out her hand. He took it and they went to Pirate Cove.

Ana set her lantern on the first table she saw and turned the brightness up as high as it would go. Bonnie stood quietly by as she studied her surroundings, first with her eyes and then her other-vision, stacking clutter together in a mental game of Tetris while simultaneously consulting a mental work-schedule to see just how much space she really needed to do just the immediate job that needed to be done.

She must have been quiet too long.

“Are you ok-k-kay?” Bonnie asked.

“Yeah. Here’s what I’m thinking. I don’t get the dump trailer changed out until Thursday, so there’s no point actually removing any of this stuff. All we can do for now is organize it to make it easier to remove when the time comes and allow me to move around it in the meantime. So what I want to do is, let’s get all that crap—” She indicated the prop cargo filling up the back corner. “—and stack it up by the ship. Not the wall, understand me? I need to take the walls off soon, so I need to be able to get at all of them. Got it?”

Again, there was something of a lengthy pause before Bonnie answered, “Yeah.” He looked toward the stage at the bottom of the amphitheater and his ears drooped slightly, but not in an angry way. He limped over to the cargo and picked up a barrel.

“Just right over there,” Ana said again. Then she went to work collecting and stacking chairs. Most of the tables were in pretty sad shape, so it was easier to break off their legs and stand them up against the ship than it was to deal with them, leaving the sturdiest of the bunch to be her worktable when she got around to needing one. By the time she was done, Bonnie had much of the cargo shifted already, baring the walls all the way to the corner and revealing for the first time—

“Is that a door?” Ana asked.

Bonnie’s ears lowered further, but he didn’t answer, just carried another crate over to the ship and put it with the rest of them.

She didn’t need confirmation anyway. Anyone could see it was a door. Not a regular door and not what she’d consider a pirate-themed door either. It looked more like a door on a submarine or a spaceship, made of metal, with a round wheel for a latch. There was a porthole above it, but even when she put her lantern right up to the glass, she couldn’t see much of the room beyond. The wheel was so rusted, she doubted she could get it open without Bonnie’s help, but to her surprise, it turned easily. Like the wheel, the hinges protested when she made them work, but did not resist.

She opened the door.
The first thing she saw as she raised her lantern was the banner hung across the opposite wall welcoming her to Kiddie Cove. The walls themselves were padded, like in the quiet room and maybe for the same reason, then painted in an ocean-view mural with lots of happy dolphins and whales breaching—and one shark fin, she saw—and plenty of parrots and seagulls circling through the blue skies, showing off their pearly whites in friendly grins. The floor was thickly padded for toddlers to toddle on without bruising their clumsy little bodies. The toys were all soft and colorful, with plenty of pillows and blankets. And stuffing, lots of stuffing, like clouds fallen out of those perfect painted blue skies, because everything had been torn up beneath its peaceful film of dust. The walls, the floor, the toys, even the ceiling. Not just cut, but shredded. Clawed. As if they’d kept a goddamn tiger in here.

She wasn’t sure how long she just stood there, but when she turned around, there was Bonnie right behind her. When she dreamed of that moment later, she dreamed he pushed her in and slammed the door, that she heard the rusty scream as the wheel-latch turned and locked her into darkness, and then the flicker of eyes lighting up behind her and the slow, scraping sound of something rising up out of the toys…but that was later. Here in the real world, Ana knew it was just Bonnie and Bonnie would never hurt her.

“What happened here?” she asked.

Bonnie looked at the room, but didn’t answer. Didn’t know how to answer, maybe. Freddy had some understanding of vandalism, if only that it was a direct consequence of people breaking in, but as a rule, the animatronics didn’t have a very good grasp of what damage actually was. For them, a room was a room, regardless of what it looked like. If she’d opened this door and found a legit Satanic altar, complete with goat-skulls and buckets of entrails, she doubted she’d get any different reaction out of Bonnie now.

And really, she knew what had happened here. Typical punkass break-in behavior. If you have a hammer, bash everything you see. If you have fireworks, blow it up. And if you have a knife, slash the shit out of Kiddie Cove.

“Can you go get me some garbage bags?” she asked, focusing her attention where it needed to be. “They’re on the shelf in the store room.”

“Oh.” And off he went.

Ana went on in, trying (and failing) not to step on anything until she reached what appeared to be some sort of activity table set up in the center of the room. It was toddler-height, very low but long and wide. Covered as it was at the moment in blankets and pillows and plushies, it looked almost like a bed, but there was a quiet room if the kiddies needed naps, so it obviously wasn’t a bed. Maybe a coloring table? Except there was a craft room elsewhere, too. Just a regular old activity table, then. Probably painted ocean blue, with little ships and sea monsters the kiddies could move around as they played.

Ana picked the blanket up and whisked it to one side, sending toys flying and stared without immediate comprehension at what had been hidden underneath.

She thought for a moment she was looking at some sort of oversized version of that kid’s game, Operation, the one where players use tweezers to pull plastic bones and organs out of a cartoon patient. There was no patient on this operating table, no buzzing red nose, no cavities to suggest pieces in need of removal. Instead, there were small flip-panels all around the outer edge and restraints in the middle.

Oh, they were padded and a bright, playful pink in color, but they were no joke. Ana could feel the
weight of them through the padding, hear the solid thunk it made when she lifted one on its hinge and let it drop. There were seven restraints in all—wrists, ankles, neck, waist and...something. Maybe a tail. The implication that the patient had neither been willing nor anesthetized was probably not intentional, but it was hard to unsee.

MEET POLLY PULL-A-PART! said the plaque at the head of the empty table, and that was apparently all the introduction poor Polly got. Where Brewster and Swampy got backstories and life’s ambitions, the larger sign at the foot of the table merely read: The animatronics at Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria are put together a lot like you are! Have fun taking Polly apart and putting her together again and see what we mean!

Ana lifted the topmost flip-panel to find an educational factoid printed beneath, similar to those found at an aquarium or children’s science center. Walking around is hard work! Most animals need a sturdy support structure to help them carry their own weight as they move. Some animals, like insects and crabs, wear this structure on the outside of their bodies. This is called an EXOSKELETON. But most animals, like foxes and bears and even people, wear them on the inside. This is called an ENDOSKELETON. Your endoskeleton is made of bone, which is pretty strong stuff! Our animatronics have endoskeletons made of metal that’s even stronger!

On the flip-panel beneath that one, she found: NOW THAT’S SMART! The most important bones in your body are the ones that make up your skull, because that’s where you keep your brain. Why is the brain so important? Because it thinks all your thoughts, remembers all your memories, and controls everything the body does, even when you’re asleep! All of your senses, everything you see and hear and feel, is processed in your brain. Polly’s brain doesn’t look like yours, but it works exactly the same way. She can see and hear and feel everything that happens to her.

Near the wrist restraint, she opened a flip-panel that read: LOOK AT ALL THE BONES! About half of the bones in your body are found in your hands and feet. The same is true for our animatronics. Your hand has 27 bones. Polly’s hand only has 16. Most of these bones are in her fingers, just like yours, and for the same reason. She needs lots of finger bones to be able to hold and move small objects. Press the button to watch Polly’s fingers move!

Ana stared at the small, innocuous black button at the bottom of the panel until she heard Bonnie’s returning footsteps. Then she let the panel drop shut and turned around. “Where’s Polly?” she asked, pointing at the table.

Bonnie didn’t look at it. “She’s not-t-t here anymore.”

“Why not?”

After a long moment, Bonnie said, “She b-b-broke.”

“Oh.” A thought struck, dropping cold into her belly and heating up fast. “Is she backstage?” she asked, horrified. “Oh my God, has she been alone in the parts room this whole time?”

Bonnie was already shaking his head, although his ears were dropping almost straight down by this time. “She’s not in the building-ing-ing. She’s gone.”

Ana nodded, although she found this answer oddly unsatisfying. Her natural dislike of the New Faces had been overruled in poor Polly’s case by the sheer awfulness of her position within the restaurant. As craptastic as it must be for Brewster to eternally play the banjo and greet customers or Tux to google ‘Where do farts come from?’ all day, getting strapped to the rack and ripped apart by toddlers was infinitely worse. No one deserved that. Not even a fake animatronic.
Ana took a bag from Bonnie and got him to hold it open. She worked for several minutes in silence, but there were only so many shredded toddler-toys a girl could pick up before she had to ask, “Why did this place close?”

Bonnie fidgeted. “K-K-Kiddie Cove or the pizzeria-a-a?”

“Either. Both. I know nothing happened,” she said with a laugh. “It’s just the same Freddy Lives horseshit that’s been going on forever in this town. I’m sure Chuck E. Cheese gets it twice as bad and God knows what Disney goes through. My point is, I’m not afraid.”

Dust puffed through the cracks in Bonnie’s casing as his internal fan revved. “Of me?”

“I could never be afraid of you,” she assured him, sweeping several clumps of loose padding and torn cloth onto a blanket and bundling it all together. She pushed it down into the now-bulging trash bag and gave him a pat on the cheek. “You’re my man. My man would never let anything bad happen to me.”

“Never,” said Bonnie, not loudly, but with force enough to make his speaker hum with static.

“I’m not afraid of any of you.” Ana picked up part of a soft toy pirate ship, one of the heads of a formerly two-headed ride-upon sea serpent, and a random piece of broken white plastic that didn’t appear to go to anything. She threw them away. “I didn’t believe in that crap then and I don’t believe it now, but…Jesus, Bon, I’ve been in empty buildings and I don’t freak out easy, but this place is so far beyond the norm, I don’t even know how to describe it. It’s like…It’s like reverse paranoia, you know? Like when you’re so high, the wind blows a branch into the window a few times and you think it’s some crazed serial killer tapping on the glass even when you can clearly see the tree? Well, this…” Ana picked up a mangled plushie—a white wolf, dolled up with a pink eyepatch and soft satiny hook—and just held it, staring at the restraints on Polly Pull-A-Part’s table. “This is like looking straight at that serial killer and saying, ’Nope! Just the wind!’ and hopping right in the shower.”

Bonnie had no answer to that. She wasn’t sure there was an answer.

Ana put the plushie in the garbage bag and looked at him, dimly aware that she was shaking her head over and over, just a little, even though she was smiling. “I’d just really like to know what happened here.”

Bonnie mimicked her tiny head-shake, although he didn’t smile and he kept his cameras fixed on her eyes. “No, you d-d-don’t.”

“Is this a bad place?” she asked. “I mean, I know it’s dirty and I know it’s run down, but is it bad? Is it really?”

His right ear twitched, then his left shoulder. “It’s b-b-better now.”

“This is better, huh?” Ana looked away at parrots with teeth, leaping dolphins and a shark fin, soft walls ripped open, toddler-toys, pink restraints, and press this button to watch Polly’s fingers move.

Bonnie tossed the garbage bag aside and took her hand. When she looked at him, he said, “It’s better now. Ok-k-kay? It’s all—FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY AT FREDDY—all right-t-t now. Okay? O-O—OH, GIVE ME A HOME—Okay?”

She touched his cheek and all the stuttering and shivering stopped. Not at once, but it stopped.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Now let’s…let’s finish cleaning up so we can get the hell out of here and
never come back, what do you say?"

He nodded and recovered the garbage bag, stooping carefully to gather those items that had fallen out when he’d dropped it. As he picked up the wolf plushie, his fan revved again and he also held it for a while before putting it in the bag, just as she had done.

Adaptive programming. It picked the strangest behaviors to emulate.

* * *

Kiddie Cove wasn’t that big and the condition of its padded walls and floor put sweeping and mopping out of the question, so she ended up in the theater after all. The seats were bolted to the floor and the bolts were rusted, so she spent the rest of her morning there, cutting them free and letting Bonnie carry them to their temporary holding place in the gym. She’d only done a few of them, however, before Bonnie disappeared.

She didn’t need help, although it had been nice to have it, so she kept working for a while, but the longer he stayed gone, the more she found herself thinking it wasn’t like him to leave her. Eventually, she got up, ostensibly to get a drink, but really just to see where he was.

She found him onstage with Chica and Freddy, the three of them silent and still. Startled, she checked her watch. After six. Time had really slipped away from her.

She got her phone, set it to sound an alarm in two hours, and took a bottle of water with her back to the theater.

She was sweeping the seat-less room when her phone went off. Since she’d started and she hated leaving a job half-done, she went ahead and finished sweeping. There wasn’t time for a shower, even if she had remembered to set it up again after using it last night, which she hadn’t. She refilled it now though, and heaved it into its windowbox so the rising sun could warm it up. Later tonight, she could have a decent wash, but for now, the best she could do was another bottle of water and a change of clothes.

The prospect of clomping all the way into town in her heavy work boots was not a joyful one, but Ana only had one pair of shoes. She could do a hell of a lot better than jeans, though. There at the bottom of her panty-pile was a solitary pair of cycling shorts. She picked them up, but didn’t jump into them right away, weighing the pros and cons. Pros: Moisture-wicking fabric, light-weight and breathable, wouldn’t chafe on a long walk. Cons: Form fitting, provides lift and support to the ass region. Probably not what she ought to wear in a government building.

Eh, fuck ‘em.

Ana put the shorts on, stripped out of her sweaty shirt and selected a clean one. Surprisingly, this one was also suitable for public viewing. The graphic was that of a sugar skull, perfectly acceptable in Texas where she’d bought it, if a little death-y for Mammon. It still wasn’t one she’d wear to work—it had a scoop-neck and was a hair too small, showing off way more cleavage than would have been appropriate on the job—but what the hell? She wasn’t going to work.

She tucked her car keys and her phone into her bra, put her wallet in her boot, clipped her music player to the sleeve of her shirt and put her ear buds in. Once Fall Out Boy was blasting in her skull, she headed out. In the store room, she took the table-leg Freddy liked to use as a supplemental locking mechanism and hid it in one of the kitchen cupboards. Just in case.
She walked to town.

It was early enough that the heat was only oppressive and not soul-crushing, but she was still sweating buckets before she arrived at the bank. She stopped on the corner where she used to wait for David on schooldays and took her wallet out so none of the good townsfolk had to see her dip into her bra, then jogged across the empty street and went inside. The three tellers on duty stopped chatting and turned with bright smiles to greet her; all eyes went directly to her tits and only one of them was a guy. She really should have gone with another shirt.

Since she’d been told the fee to retrieve her truck would be two hundred and fifty dollars, Ana went ahead and withdrew her daily cash limit of five hundred. She hoped it would be enough, but if it wasn’t, she was determined not to make a scene. Nod, smile, walk back to Freddy’s, throw things, get high, snuggle Bonnie, and come back tomorrow to withdraw another five hundred—that was the plan.

Finances settled, Ana left the bank, tucked her wallet back into her bra and bent over to take the phone from her boot. She distinctly heard one of the female tellers say, “Oh my God, Bucky, look at her butt.” She probably shouldn’t have worn the cycling shorts either.

Walking on, Ana found Rider in her contact list and hit the dial button. It rang once and switched her over to voice mail. Rider didn’t screen her calls; he was in a meeting. Adopting a casual, even cheerful tone, Ana said, “Checking in, boss. Ran into a spot of trouble over a parking space last night and got my truck impounded, so I’m on my way to collect it. I believe it was cleaned out, but if I’m wrong, you might be getting another call from me today. Hope all’s well with you. Talk to you later.”

Ten minutes later, with the green lawn and bright flowerbeds of the government building at last in sight, her phone rang. She bent to answer it and the car that had been turning out onto this street behind her stopped dead in the middle of the intersection. The other car waiting for it to turn didn’t even honk.

“Hey Rider,” said Ana, without looking.

“Was that your cute way of warning me you might need a bail bond this afternoon?” Rider asked.

There were other voices in the background. He wasn’t alone. Ana kept it short and neutral.

“Might.”

“You do realize I got other shit to do today that don’t include you. Can you give me one reason I should put it all on hold while I wait for your phone call?”

“Sure, hang on.” Ana took a quick selfie at arm’s length and sent it to him.

The car behind her completed its turn and coasted slowly by. Powder blue Crown Vic. Familiar. Mrs. Kellar’s car. Ana turned her head a little more and saw the woman herself, nose high and purse on lap, in the passenger seat. Mason sat behind the wheel, tattooed arm hooked over the driver’s door. Their eyes met as he drew even.

He nodded.

She nodded.

He drove on.
“Mm-hmm,” said Rider as the Kellarmobile passed away down the street. “Yep, that’ll do. Okay, call me just as soon as you know, one way or the other. How’s it going at the house?”

“It’s going,” Ana said vaguely. “I’m in the middle of replacing a roof.”

“Last of the big jobs?”

“Only time will tell.”

“Good. Get on it, get done with it, and get home,” he ordered and hung up. A moment later, as she was tucking her phone away, it buzzed with his follow-up text: Jackn off 2 that l8r and there ain’t nothing U can do 2 stop me.

Ana snorted and typed, U got a real girl.

She can watch, idc. Jill off or wv girls do.

“Thanks for that mental image,” muttered Ana, smiling, but before she could type it, his next text came in.

Ur not eating.

“Yeah, I am, fuck you,” Ana said and typed.

No Ur not n it starting 2 show. Fix that.

“Fuck you,” said Ana again, but didn’t type it. She didn’t answer at all, which was never a good way to deal with Rider.

U need me 2 come get U?

“No,” she muttered, tapping her phone’s screen.

He wasn’t done with her. U think I won’t?

“You think I’ll let you?” Ana asked, but typed, Im eating ffs. U take 2 mile hike in UT summer n show me how gr8 U look.

Yeah yeah. Eat. ttyl

“I look fucking great,” Ana muttered, returning the phone to her boot. “I legit stopped traffic a second ago, so fuck you.”

She looked at herself in the dark mirror of the tinted doors as she approached them, though. She couldn’t see whatever had set Rider off, but she had to reluctantly admit that she’d looked better. It wasn’t like her ribs were showing or anything, but her cheekbones were definitely more prominent and the shadow of her collarbones was just a bit too noticeable. When had she eaten last? Well, it didn’t matter. There was plenty of food waiting for her at Freddy’s. Maybe she’d fire up the generator and break in her Easy Bake Oven. Cupcakes. That ought to make Chica’s day.

A welcome blast of cold air hit Ana as she opened the door, freezing the sweat to her body. She took a moment to savor it as she studied her surroundings, but there wasn’t that much to see. Just a wide, beige room with a couple broad-leafed plants, a tasteful selection of art prints, one of those number-printing machines to keep the crowds organized, and a signpost directly in front of her reading, All Visitors Must Check In. Since there was only one other person Ana could see—a young man reading a book behind one of the service desks—Ana headed on over.
He let her get all the way there before drawling, “Did you take a number?”

Ana looked again at the unoccupied waiting area and then at him. “Are you serious?”

“Government policy.”

“Oh for…fine.” Ana went back and ripped a tag from the machine. 87. She walked back to the desk and thumped it down.

He glanced at it, then at her (his eyes got stuck halfway to her face; between the sweat and the sudden air-conditioning, her high-beams had come on), heaved a sigh, closed his book and pressed a button. The digital reader on the wall behind him turned from 86 to 87. “How can I help you?” he asked.

“I’m here to get my truck.”

“What does that mean?”

Ana stared at him while counting all the reasons why she could not reach across this desk and pull him over it by his nostrils. “It means my truck was towed and impounded last night. I was told it was here and so I am also here to get it back.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Excuse me?”

“How’d you manage to get it towed? Park in a crip-spot?”

Ana counted some more. “No.”

“Fire-lane?”

“No. Is this part of some form you have to file as part of this procedure?”

He shrugged. “Just asking.”

“Okay, well, this is not a social event, so can we please get on with it?”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I have things to do,” Ana said, trying not to snap.

“Sure, sure.” He put his book all the way down and woke up his computer. “It’s just that, generally, when people like you get in a hurry in a place like this, it’s because they’ve got a reason to be nervous.”

“Is this what nervous looks like?” Ana asked flatly.

He glanced at her again and returned his attention to his computer. “You said it was a truck?”

“Yeah. 2006 Ford F-150 XLT. Black. Cargo shell. Name is Ana Stark.”

“You named the truck?”


He looked at her.
“That’s the truck’s name,” she told him. “You know. It’s my work-mule.”

They stared at each other. Eventually, he started typing again.

A few minutes passed while he pressed keys and waggled his mouse, but at long last, he turned to her and said, “Well, I can’t help you.”

“What?”

“I don’t have the authority to release a vehicle. You’re going to have to wait for someone from the Public Works Department to review your case and get back to you.”

“When will that be?”

The clerk shrugged and opened up his book again. “When it’s your turn. You getting your drunk-tank back may be at the top of your priority list, but it’s not on ours.”

“I wasn’t drunk!”

“Lady, if you’re going to yell at me—”

“I’m not yelling!” Ana snapped, and it was true for now, but not for too damn much longer.

“Is there a problem here?”

Ana did not immediately recognize the woman’s voice that slipped calmly into the wake of her not-a-yell, but it was one she’d heard recently enough to trigger the instinct to shut up, so she did, taking a calming breath as the clerk rapidly ditched his book and sat up straight. Town official, she guessed, or at least someone higher up the ladder than he was. And although it was probably too much to hope it was someone who had the authority and the inclination to help her, she reined in her temper and turned around.

It was Wendy Rutter. She was never going to see her truck again.

Standing with Mrs. Rutter were several other people, among them, the old man from last night, looking even more funereal, in his distinctly old-fashioned black suit and topcoat, complete with cane and trilby hat. His baby-blue-eyed grandson was also present, looking a bit tired and hungover, but still gamefully giving her the come-hither smile. Ana noted these witnesses, but wasn’t much encouraged by their presence. Rutter’d had a damn camera rolling on her the last time they’d met, and Ana had still been spit on and slapped. Nevertheless, she readied herself for battle and faced off against this new foe.

“I repeat,” said Mrs. Rutter, advancing on Ana with a hard, unhelpful stare. “Is there a problem?”

“I need to talk to someone about getting my truck out of the impound lot.”

“Leave your contact information with the desk and someone will be in touch.”

“When?”

“When someone is free to deal with you.”

“Ballpark it for me,” Ana said tightly. “Should I be expecting a call within the hour? Later today? Sometime next week? The fifth of Never?”

“You really must talk to someone about these feelings of persecution, Miss Stark.”
“Like a lawyer?’’

Mrs. Rutter’s lips thinned. “I said, someone will be in touch with you. Now. Would you like to leave or shall I have security escort you out?’’

Ana looked at Mrs. Rutter, huffed out a hot laugh, and left.

The grandson, Chad, caught up with her halfway across the lot. She could ignore him calling her name since her earbuds were in, but not his hand on her arm, so she grit her teeth and turned around.

“Grand-dad wants to talk to you,’’ he said, thumbing back at the building, where the old man now stood just outside the tinted doors.

“No offense, but I appear to have a long walk ahead of me, so tell your grandfather thanks, but no thanks.”

“Come on.”

“I said, no.”

“Five minutes.”

“This isn’t a negotiation. See you around.” She pulled at her arm, but he didn’t let go, and her temper flared out past the safety range. “I have had a hard day and it ain’t even noon yet. Before you piss me off any further, you might want to seriously consider how pissed off you really want me to get.”

He laughed. Ana thought, in a perfectly still and factual frame of mind, of punching out those straight, white teeth. She didn’t, but only because she didn’t want to break her hand. She had a lot of walls to repair in the very near future. A knee to the balls was still on the table, but by the time she’d thought of it, she was no longer quite reckless enough to go through with it cold. Not quite.

“Oh Jeez. Look,’’ he said, still laughing. “I got a headache out to here and listening to a roomful of small-pond big-fish kiss that wrinkled old ass for an hour has not made it any better. I have got to get out of this sun and pour some caffeine in me, so I’ll tell you what.” He released her arm to dig into his jeans pocket. He pulled out a wallet. “I will give you a hundred dollars if you just go talk to the guy. Come on.” He held out a short fan of bills. “Five minutes. A hundred bucks.”

Ana did not take his money, but she did pull her earbuds out and walk back across the lot to meet the old man.

“Are you all right?’’ he asked.

“Yeah, sure. I’m fine. And look, I don’t mean to sound rude, but I need to walk away from this before I do something stupid and get arrested. So it was nice seeing you again and all that, but so long.”

“How can I help?”

“You can’t,’’ said Ana, backing up in a futile attempt to disengage.

“I’m reasonably confident I can,’’ he remarked, maintaining eye-contact even if he didn’t physically follow after her.
“Then don’t. It’s personal.”

“It certainly looked that way. What have you done?”

A sensible question, yet Ana’s temper flared again and this time, she let it.

“What have I done?! I haven’t done a goddamn thing! I was born! That’s apparently all it takes in this fucking town! Yeah, I see you!” she snarled through the tinted window glass at the shadowy figures gathered around the reception desk. “You want to sic the dogs on me, call ‘em out and see what happens, but don’t expect me to run! You think the worst thing I can do is call a lawyer? Is that what you think? Bitch, you have no idea who you are fucking with!”

Her roar hung in the air, unanswered. Gradually, her challenging stare shifted from the figures behind the glass to the glass itself and she saw what they saw—a sweaty, angry, scantily-clad grown-ass woman throwing a temper tantrum in a parking lot.

And then she saw the old man reflected beside her, silently watching, and even further back, his grandson, who appeared to be taking a video with his phone.

She clapped both hands to her face, took a cooling breath, and said, “My truck was impounded.”

“Why?”

“That’s an impertinent question,” she said through clenched jaws.

“Yes, it is. Please answer it.”

She pushed her arms out in an expansive shrug before letting them drop. “At some point between leaving your place last night and arriving at the office, I ceased to be employed by Shelton Contractors. Ergo, I was unlawfully parked, ergo it was impounded. Kind of a sore point this morning. Can we not talk about it?”

His fingers flexed on the head of his cane. “Walk me to my car,” he said and moved away without waiting for her to say yes.

Ana looked at his back, then at the waiting road. She rolled her eyes and followed him to a slate-grey luxury sedan where Chad was already slipping behind the wheel.

“Front or back?” she asked sourly, stepping ahead of him to get his door.

“The back, please. It’ll make talking to you easier.”

“Talking to me?”

“Forgive me, that was presumptive. Would you like to join us for breakfast?”

“What?”

“Cook has the mornings off. I usually content myself with toast and coffee, but the boy likes to eat,” he explained, opening the back door himself and gesturing within. “Will you join us?”

“No,” said Ana, baffled. She looked down at herself in case her outfit had miraculously changed since leaving Freddy’s that morning, then up at him, even more dumbfounded. “Thanks and all that, but I’m barely dressed and sweating like a pig.”

“Pigs can’t sweat. That’s why they wallow.”
“I know that!” she snapped, annoyed. She did know.

Chad hooked his arm over the back of the captain’s chair and groaned at her, “Just say yes, for the love of God, lady! He’s not going to stop just because you say no!”

“I don’t get into cars with strangers.”

Chad rolled his eyes. “I promise not to murder you as long as I get a cup of coffee in the next ten minutes. After that, no promises.”

The old man gave his grandson an unsmiling glance and again gestured to the back seat. “Please.”

Oh, what the hell. It was hot and she hadn’t eaten.

Ana got in the car.
Ana had been in some nice cars before, or thought she had, but on that day, she learned that cars are like jewelry, electronics, prostitutes and any other luxury item: price is no guarantee of quality. The muscle cars and cruisers she’d known paled in an instant as soon as she found herself in this one. She couldn’t have said what make or model it was, but the seat was leather and cupped her like a lover, the interior lines led the eye, and the air positively reeked of her own sweat.

“Where to?” Chad asked as his grandfather sat beside her and shut the door.

“One moment, please.” The old man reached into an inner pocket of his topcoat and withdrew a small plastic bottle. Not pills. Eyedrops.

Ana looked out the window as he administered them, unsure what the social protocol here was, and finally ventured a, “Still giving you trouble?”

“Oh no, I’m quite recovered from yesterday’s test. I wear special contact lenses to help with my sensitivities,” he explained, putting the bottle away. “But they do dry my eyes. So it is with most of the troubles that plague us, great or small. There are no cures, only compromises. I’m ready, Chad.”

“Where to?”

“The nearest international airport. I’ve never had a truly English English muffin.”

Chad braked hard before he’d fully reversed out of the slot and stared at him. “Really?”

“No. Gallifrey’s.”

Chad stared a little longer, then laughed uncertainly and started driving.

“You know they will never let me through the door like this,” Ana remarked.

“Yes, they will,” the old man said mildly. “Unless you’d rather go to London after all?”

“I don’t have a passport.”

“Trifles.”

“You’re in a mood, aren’t you?” Chad asked, crookedly smiling into the rearview mirror.

“I’m old. We’re temperamental. Perhaps I’m off my medication. One never knows. I always thought I’d travel around the world when I was older,” he added, gazing out the window as the scenery passed. “Which is odd, because I detest travel and did, even as a young man. Certain things are just expected, I suppose. I wonder now if I should have liked the world, had I seen more of it then?”

“It’s not too late,” Ana pointed out. “Older is a relative term.”

“True, but I have other obligations now. Promises to keep.”
“And miles to go.”

“Miles and miles. But you now.” His gaze shifted to her, disturbingly direct. His eyes were still bloodshot, unhealthy-looking. They were dark in color, a deep brown that made it difficult to determine iris from pupil; they were darker even than that, reflecting no light. She guessed his ‘special contacts’ had something to do with that, but the effect was unsettling, giving him a way of looking into or through and not at the things he turned them on. And right now, he was looking at her. “If you could go anywhere in the world this instant, if money was no obstacle and you had a passport, where would you go?”

“Oh, said Ana.

Chad snorted. “Never too young to be an old fogey, I guess.”

“Manners, Chad. And where is home?” the old man inquired.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Ah well. At least you haven’t stopped looking. I suspect most people do. I did.”

“I keep telling him to sell this place and move back to SoCal with me,” Chad said. “Sunshine, sand and babes in bikinis. Get us a big house with our own private beach and live it up in style. That’s home. If you’d ever been, you’d know that’s home.”

“I’ve been,” said Ana.

“Yeah? Whereabouts?”

“Everywhere. San Diego to Sacramento. Right before I came here, I was staying on the outskirts of the Mohave.”

“Not what I meant by sunshine and sand.”

“Okay, well, the time before that, I stayed in the house we were flipping in the Hills. That do it for you?”

“Beverly Hills?”

“Hidden Hills, actually, but same general area.”

He angled the rearview mirror to see her better. Not much traffic in Mammon anyway. “What was it like?”

“Smog, smack and skin cancer.” Ana shrugged. “And palm trees.”

“I meant the house.”

“The one in the Hills? Oh, it was a dump. Only 1400 square feet, but it had a yard and a damned good view, and I think a Baldwin used to live there once.”

“What’d it go for?”

“We bought it for four-fifty and sold it for three and a quarter.”

“Wow. That must have sucked.” He laughed, shaking his head at her. “Must be why you’re not doing houses anymore, huh?”
Ana puzzled that over and finally allowed herself a smile. “I get it. You think we took a loss. Sorry, I should have been more clear. We bought it for four hundred fifty thousand dollars and sold it for three and a quarter million.”

He stared.

“Want me to drive?” Ana asked politely.

He looked at the road again, jerking the wheel just in time to avoid coasting off onto the sidewalk. “So you made practically three million dollars just painting a house and putting in new carpets?”

“It was a little more involved than that. We got it at a fire sale, following an actual for-real fire. Had to rebuild the entire north side.”

“So is that what you’re doing out here? Getting into the Mammon real estate market?”

“What Mammon real estate market?” she countered.

Chad laughed. His grandfather studied the head of his cane.

“No, there was…was a death in the family. I came back to deal with it. There was property and I am restoring it, but it’s mostly, you know, as something to do.”

Chad shook his head in a wondering way. “You one of those obsessive type-A personalities who works all day and spends your weekends organizing your Tupperware or what? What do you do for fun?”

“Why do you ask?”

Chad shrugged, smiling into the mirror. “I’m always on the lookout for new fun things to do.”

Ana neither flinched nor smiled. “I hear good things about decoupage.”

“You missed the turn, Chad,” the old man said, still frowning at his cane.

Tires squealed briefly as Chad spun them around. Ana caught at the door to keep from leaning into the old man, her gaze going out the window to the other end of the lot where the mall used to be. Shelly’s crew was hard at work, leaning on shovels as they watched someone—hard to tell from here, but it might be Big Paulie himself—navigate the claw.

Not that it mattered. Even if she still had a job, she’d just be answering the fucking phone.

Chad found a place close to the entrance and parked. It wasn’t a handicapped slot, but still that cane was a thing, so as Ana opened her door, she turned to the old man and said, “Need a hand?”

Expressionless, he raised his hands and clapped them softly three times.

She blinked, then laughed way too hard. “I always fall for that one,” she said, grinning, and got out.

The old man didn’t want help and Chad was determined to give it anyway, so Ana went on ahead and waited by the entrance. When the two of them made their final approach, she opened the door and stepped aside.

Tiny Tim Gallifrey glanced up from the griddle as the bell rang. The spatula in his thick fist kept right on flipping flapjacks as his gaze lit on Ana’s ample cleavage, traveled down her sweaty sugar-skull tee, over her skin-tight shorts, along her bare legs to her boots, and all the way back up again.
“Mother!” he called, turning his attention back to his cooking.

His wife finished delivering a table-load of brunches before turning around, her slightly frazzled smile firmly pinned in place even as her eyes bulged. “Oh good heavens,” Lucy sputtered and pointed. “Out! Out this instant and don’t you dare come back until you’re dressed!”

“What?” said Ana, thoroughly unsurprised. “It’s all covered.”

“I said, out!” Lucy pulled the ever-present towelette from her apron strings and by-God snapped it at her, like she was a stray dog nosing at a pie left on a windowsill. “What’s wrong with you? There are children here!”

“Good morning, Miss Lucy.”

Lucy stopped shooing at once and stepped back as the old man walked into the lobby. Nodding at the furthest corner booth, he smiled at Ana and said, “Our usual table, when we dine out. I hope it suits you. There will be three today, Miss Lucy.”

Lucy shut her open mouth and stared at the kitchen, her back rigid and body stiff. The towel dangling from her fingers trembled.

“Seat the man, Mother,” said Tiny Tim without looking up.

Lucy looked back at them. Elsewhere in the diner, a young mother gathered her family and left, leaving cash on the table and taking long strides through the lobby, carrying one child and dragging another, who was tearfully protesting that she hadn’t finished her pancakes. Lucy looked at the table, then turned all the way toward it. “Seat yourself,” she said in a tight, shaky voice and began to rattle dishes together, ignoring them.

“It’s not you,” Chad whispered, plucking a menu from the counter himself and heading for the booth. “She does this every time we come in.”

“You dine and dash on her once or what?” Ana asked, staring back over her shoulder at Lucy as she followed him.

“Probably. If you ever figure it out, please tell me, because I’m dying to know. Grand-dad likes to act like he doesn’t see it, but this whole town is completely crazy. The first day I got here, I mean the very first day, some lady slapped me. Like, no ‘Hi, hold still, you’ve got a mosquito on your cheek,’ or nothing, just walked up and wham.”

As much as she did not like this kid and as determined as she was not to give up her bad mood, Ana found herself thawing. “That must be the unofficial town greeting. I’ve had it too.”

“Yeah? That lady’s probably spitting in the coffee as we speak.”

“They do that to anyone who orders it.”

“And yet he won’t leave!” Chad said, pointing at his grandfather, who was arranging himself carefully in the booth opposite Ana. “I mean, what do you have to do, you know? The weather is ridiculous, the people are insane, there’s nothing for miles…you have to drive twenty minutes to find a McDonalds, for Christ’s sake! They have those on the moon!”

“Don’t forget the smell.”

“Oh, the smell! Jesus, how can you stand it, day in and day out? What even is it?”
“The quarry.”

“Well, it smells like a sasquatch put on Swamp Thing’s sweaty workout shorts, then jumped up its own butt and died.”

“Pretty much,” Ana agreed, inspecting the menu.

“I don’t know who Grand-dad thinks is going to buy all—”

“We don’t talk business at the table, Chad,” said the old man, opening his own menu.

Chad made a lip-zipping gesture, then leaned back and smiled at Ana.

The girl the Gallifeys had hired to help with the summer crowd came to the table with coffee and three cups. As she filled them, her eyes had a way of sneaking speculative peeks at Ana’s cleavage and the old man directly opposite it. She smirked as she opened her order pad. “Gold-digger’s special?” she guessed.

Just when she thought the rumors couldn’t get worse.

“Big canyon breakfast,” said Ana. “Separate checks.”

“The usual,” said Chad, unabashedly comparing the waitress’s chest to Ana’s.

“English muffin, toasted.” The old man passed up his menu, but did not immediately relinquish his grip. “Cindy Wexler, isn’t it?”

The waitress blinked, then cautiously smiled. “That’s me. How…?”

“Oh, I know all the children. And I remember you especially. How could anyone forget that Fourth of July, eight years ago?”

The girl’s smile wavered.

“You were Little Miss Mammon that year,” the old man reminisced, still gripping the menu and gazing unblinkingly into her widening eyes. “They put you up on the lead float in the parade, do you remember?”

“Um…”

“A hot day. I warned you to slow down on the sodas, but it was a hot day after all. And when the first fireworks went off, you, poor startled child, went off with them. Oh yes, I remember you and the unfortunate nickname that followed you thereafter. Little Cindy Wetter. Children can be so cruel. Fortunately, most of them grow out of it.”

He let go of the menu and settled back in the booth.

The waitress stood there, her mouth a trembling, mortified O, until Chad lost the fight not to laugh. She flinched at the first snort, stared wildly around, and then fled for the kitchen.

“Hope you like spit on your toast,” Ana remarked.

“Mmm?” The old man gave her a preoccupied old-man look of confusion that was almost convincing. “Oh, did I upset her? I do hope it wasn’t something I said. My mind wanders sometimes and my mouth goes with it, I’m afraid.” He glanced at Chad and pointedly added, “Have we ordered yet?”
“Yes, Grand-dad. You got toast.”

Looking back at Ana, stone-faced, the old man said, “I prefer English muffins,” and slightly raised one eyebrow as his grandson assured him that was what he meant, an unbuttered toasted English muffin, just the way he liked it.

That smile was tickling at Ana’s lips again.

“Don’t worry, he gets like this,” Chad concluded. “And to be honest, I kind of like it when he does. You know that old bit about telling people to go to hell so nicely that they look forward to the trip? That’s what he does. Me? I’m a go-fuck-yourself kind of guy.”

“Watch your language, Chad,” the old man said, gazing out into the diner and watching customers come and go. Mostly go.

“Sorry,” said Chad, eyes sparkling, not sorry. He leaned across the table and gave Ana a wink. “Loved your little outburst back there, by the way.”

“Thanks. I see it on YouTube and I’ll know just whose ass to kick.”

He laughed. Still the same easy, unthreatened laugh, like he thought she was kidding. “I like the tattoo, too. Most of the girls I know who have ‘em only get the little pretty ones they can hide from their mamas. But it’s all ‘go big or go home’ with you, isn’t it? Nice. I’d kind of like to see the whole thing.”

Ana pulled up her sleeve and turned her arm toward him.

Chad smiled. “The other one.”

“Mind your manners,” the old man said, stirring his coffee.

“No, but seriously, that’s cool,” said Chad, nodding at the gears and wires inked across the tattooed hollows of her chest just above her breasts. “I’d love to get some work done, but then I think about what it’s going to look like when I’m old and I can’t imagine, you know? Wrinkles and ink.” He affected a shudder, then turned a grin on his grandfather. “What about you? Got any badass tattoos?”

“Yes.”

Chad’s grin held a moment, then wiped itself away in an expression of astonishment, then came creeping cautiously back. “This is another of your jokes, right? You don’t, really?”

The old man tapped his spoon on the side of his cup, set it on his napkin, and took off his topcoat. He folded it carefully over the back of the booth before unbuttoning his cuff, rolling up his sleeve, and planting his elbow on the table so they could both see the blurry crest occupying most of his bicep. The colors had faded, but it must have been striking once—red ribbons floating across the bottom of a blue shield with an eagle clutching a rocket and a rifle in its talons like crossed swords. Negative space between the red ribbons gave the illusion of white ones. There was writing on these, mostly too blown out to read, but the crowning one boasted the barely-legible slogan Steel Thunder and Fire.

“A-R-P-A,” Chad read, squinting. “Isn’t that the old folks’ club that haggles insurance and stuff? When did you get this?”

It’s DARPA these days.” He tapped some of the other ribbons. “HRP, that was the Hypersonic Research Program. SDIO, the Strategic Defense Initiation Organization. ASCP, Advanced Strategic Computing Program…I can’t read that one. It could be TTO or ITG, either the Tactical Technology Office or the Innovative Technologies Group. And that long one there that looks like someone killed a spider and smeared it across my arm once read Project Morning Star, which was either the first application project I commanded or the one I was commanding at the time I acquired this, I don’t recall anymore.”

“More spoils of your misspent youth?” said Ana with a smile.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Were you drunk?”

“One would think, but no.” He pulled his sleeve down again. “Call it peer pressure or, better, protective coloration. I was young and my colleagues at the base were far more taken with military spirit than I. I thought this was the way to prove my…it’s difficult to say, now. My patriotism, perhaps. My worthiness, my competence. I don’t know,” he said, all his concentration apparently on his cuff as he buttoned it. “I suppose it had more to do with sex, really. Things of that sort generally do.”

Chad, caught mid-swallow, choked on his coffee.

Ana passed him a napkin. “Things like tattoos?” she inquired with a pointed glance at her own.

He glanced at it too, even as he reached out absent-mindedly to pat Chad on the back. “You must admit the imagery is suggestive in my case. Rampant eagle. Phallic implements of destruction. Even at the time, I thought the rocket rather veiny.”

“Oh Jesus,” sputtered Chad, beet red but still trying to laugh through his wet coughs.

“Not to mention the fifteen year-old boy who had it applied to his right arm. I’m ambidextrous in most respects, but there are always certain activities that require a dominant hand. Chad, I really must ask you not to die at the table. I haven’t the slightest idea how much to tip the server for bussing a corpse.”

They both watched Chad relearn the art of breathing for a while. Eventually, unsignaled, their eyes met again.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“You must speak up if I do. One of the many troubles that come with lucre is that no one ever corrects your flaws. The common man is rude. The wealthy are…”

“Eccentric,” Ana supplied, smiling.

“Just so. I never learned how to properly engage in social intercourse and now that I’m old, what little desire I ever had to learn is long gone. My time is short. I prefer to speak the truth and have the truth spoken to me. Politeness for its own sake is shallow and deceitful. I’ve learned…rather too late…to be cautious of those who speak it too well. But you should not be made to suffer my eccentricities.”

“You should hear some of the things guys say on a work crew,” said Ana with a shrug. “I don’t
blush easy.”

Their food came. Tiny Tim himself brought it, the first time Ana had ever seen him leave the kitchen that was his domain. He set it down in the middle of the table and let them sort out which belonged to who, asked the token server questions, and left again. The old man used a knife and fork to eat his toast and after only two bites, excused himself, walking carefully and with dignity past the restrooms and out the front door. Ana watched through the window as he took out his phone.

“So,” said Chad, stirring his syrup with a chunk of egg.

Ana looked at him and waited.

“I was thinking maybe you and me could get together some time. I got a big place all to myself. Out of town,” he added, knowing that was a selling point. “I guess it used to be an old ranch of some sort, but there’s no animals there now. Just me. Nice and quiet. We could watch some movies, get to know each other…”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not?” He pushed his plate away and leaned across the table to touch her hand, rubbing his thumb along her wrist in a slow, stroking motion not half as suggestive as his smile. “You’re a good-looking girl. I’m a—”

“Kid,” she interrupted. “Seriously, you smell like Pokemon and homework, so just stop already.”

He looked startled, then laughed. “No, no, I just look young. I’m twenty, I swear.”

“Yeah? And I’m not.”

His brows went up. “Oh yeah? Well that’s great. First time I saw you, I thought you were the other guy’s kid. Like maybe still in high school.”

“Shelly’s kid? Fuck, no. Wait, you thought I was still in high school and you just hit on me?”

Chad shrugged that off. “So…what are we talking? Like forty? Forty-five?”

“Forty?! Kid, I will slap you right out of this booth.”

“See? You’re not that much older than me.” He went for her hand again and when she pulled it out of his easy reach, he tapped his foot against her ankle under the table instead. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re just old enough to know what you’re doing and I’m young enough to do it all night. What’s the big deal? We’re both consenting adults.”

“Not interested.”

“You seeing someone?”

“I just said, I’m not interested. I don’t owe you a reason.”

“Okay, okay.” He picked up his fork again, studying her with a furrowed brow and a puzzled smile. “So…is this a lesbian thing or…?”

“Not every girl who rejects a guy is a lesbian.”

“Hey, I love lesbians, I’m just asking. It’s none of my concern who you’re into, I just think you’re
hot and figured I’d take a shot, you know? If you’re not down, you’re not down. It’s cool.”

The bell over the door rang. The old man returned, tipping his hat politely to Lucy, who ignored him as she carried a tray to another table.

“You’re not going after Grand-dad, are you?” Chad asked, watching him. He was still smiling, but it wasn’t quiet as charming now. “Because, see, that does concern me.”

“No,” Ana sighed, “I am not going after your grandfather. Jesus Christ.”

“Good. Because he may not be all there these days, but I am. And I keep a close eye on him.” So saying, he stabbed his fork into the center of his egg and twisted. Yellow yolk welled up around the tines, thick as blood. He watched it for a while, then turned a bright smile on her. “Besides, he’s still technically married, so in all honesty, if you were going after his money, the best thing you could do is go after me.”

“For the third and final time, I am not interested.”

“Just saying.”

The old man rejoined them. “Do forgive me. Business. What are we talking about?”

“Economics,” said Ana and Chad laughed.

Breakfast resumed. Ana managed to clear about half her plate while Chad kept an engaging monologue going, flitting effortlessly from one topic to another. In spite of everything, Ana found herself responding to his natural charisma. He might be an entitled little shit, but she had to admit, it was nice to have a real conversation with a real human every now and then. When she reached her stomach’s limits, Ana made one half-hearted attempt to flag down a waitress, then just pulled her wallet out of her bra and tossed some money on the table. The old man followed suit, and the three of them left the diner.

“It’s gotten hotter,” the old man remarked as they walked back to his car. “May I offer you a ride home?”

“Miles to go,” Ana replied. “But I’ll take one back to town hall, if you’re really offering.”

“All fueled up and ready for round two?” Chad guessed, sliding behind the wheel.

“I hope not, but I figure it’s best to be prepared, and I’m pretty sure they can’t keep my truck without giving me some kind of receipt. They backed off the last time I hit ‘em with paperwork and a lawyer, so maybe they will this time, too.”

“If not?” Chad asked.

Ana shrugged. “I’ll buy another one. Damned if I’ll play their game.”

He laughed, glanced at her in the rearview mirror, then turned all the way around and looked at her.

“It’s just stuff,” said Ana.

“Yeah, but come on, you’re not really going to buy a new car!”

“It’s just money.”
The kid stared at her while the old man studied his cane and Ana looked out the window.

“Sheesh, the two of you,” Chad muttered and drove.

Back at the government building, Ana said goodbye, but the old man insisted on walking her to the door. Old-fashioned, as Shelly had said. Chad, younger and more sensible, stayed in the car with the air-conditioning on.

“Thank you for joining us,” the old man said as they walked. “You’re very pleasant company.”

Ana laughed. “No, I’m not.”

“I would like to meet with you again, if possible. Ah, that sounded predacious,” he remarked. “I meant informally. Just if we should happen to bump into one another. That wasn’t much better, was it?”

“But it is a small town,” she said, relenting slightly. “And odds are good, we’re going to bump sooner or later. Feel free to say hi.”

“I will,” he said gravely, opening the door for her. “And I do hope you will do the same. Enjoy the remainder of your day, Miss Stark.”

“I’ll try. Oh, and Ana is fine. You can call me Ana.”

“Thank you,” he said after a moment. He seemed about to say something more—probably her name, trying it out—but then just let the door close behind her and walked away.

He still hadn’t introduced himself. That was just getting awkward.

The clerk was already on the phone when Ana took a number and headed his way, talking low and fast. He hung up right as she reached the desk and said, “Someone will be right with you.”

True to his word, Ana soon heard the jingle-clump-radio chatter of approaching cop. She closed her eyes, opened them, smiled, and turned around.

“Sheriff Zabrinsky,” she said. “Fancy meeting you again.”

“You ready to pick up your pick-up?”

“What do I have to do?”

“Drive it away.” His accompanying shrug attempted to project casual indifference, but his eyes told a different story. They were hard, dark with anger only just suppressed. “It’s all yours.”

Her battle-smile held a moment longer before she blinked it away in bewilderment. “Really?”

“Don’t,” he said. “Just don’t. I got a missing person on my plate and the Fourth coming up. I don’t need your hassle over a damned parking violation, so you pick up your ball and go home, little lady. You win again. However, the next time your name comes across my desk, I will come down on you with both feet. I don’t care who you know. Understand?”
The thought of the old man stepping outside to make his ‘business’ call drifted through Ana’s mind…but she dismissed it. Hell, he hadn’t even insisted on buying her breakfast; why would he lean on the town officials to release her truck? No, Zabrinsky had probably just gotten the memo about her little ‘lawyer’ comment.

“Fine,” said Ana. “So we’re done here?”

“We’re done. If you’ll just follow me, I’ll take you to your vehicle.”

* * *

So that was that and it was a good day after all. Mere minutes after walking into the government building for the second time, Ana was on the road to Hurricane and just a few short hours after that, she was lifting the loading dock door at Freddy’s. The first thing she saw was the table leg positioned very obviously in the exact center of a hip-high stack of sheetrock. So Freddy had found it. But he hadn’t used it. Progress. The bear himself was not in evidence when Ana came into the dining room, but Bonnie and Chica were onstage dancing to *Everybunny Needs Somebunny*, so she watched for a while before she got started.

There was a lot of backwork waiting for her in only half a day, but, energized by her little victories in town and a big canyon breakfast, Ana was ready for war. Her armor consisted of a commercial-grade chemical respirator, a disposable biosuit, heavy rubber gloves and galoshes. Her siege equipment were half a dozen plastic barrels with holes drilled in the lid and a good layer of rocks and sand in the bottom for weight. Her weapons were a machete, a shovel, a cordless band saw, and a welder’s torch. And her battleground was the gym.

By now, it had been several days since she’d started the Monkey Kingdom draining and with the water gone, the oppressive swampiness of the place had greatly diminished, even if the padded floor still squished beneath her feet. When Ana stepped up on the lowest riser of the pyramid and had a peek, the greasy pink mass she remembered was at the very bottom. It had cracked in several places and broken up into clots around its edges, exposing the dregs of the dark water that had once filled this discovery toy nearly to the brim. She could see pale forms here and there in the water, but she could not tell yet what they represented.

And it didn’t matter. She knew what she might find and the fact that she had prepared for it with weighted barrels told her she’d already decided how to deal with it if she did find it. All that was left was to jump in and deal with it.

So she did.

Shoveling out the pink slime was the grossest part. Even her mask could not fully filter out the smell, which became a taste once she’d breathed it in. But it went quickly and once it was gone, it was gone. Beneath, she discovered a predictable sediment of bones, feathers and fur, but although she did glimpse human detritus—rotted scraps of cloth, slimy clusters of hair, a sprinkling of small suspicious bones—she saw no body in any recognizable form. That yellowish jelly coating this room told its own story, but without a skull or pelvis or other concrete evidence, she found she could close her mind to it and just shovel muck.

She filled only three of the six barrels she had prepared for this task. That was fine. She may or may not need them in the future. She put the empties out in the hall for now, loaded the full ones into the back of her truck and got to work cutting the pyramid apart. When the truck was full, she drove out to the quarry and pitched everything in, very much aware that at any time, some punkass
looking to shoot bottles or set off early fireworks might happen along. Of course, if they were to see a person in a biosuit and full-face respirator with a machete strapped to her hip dumping barrels in the quarry, they were almost certain to turn their punkasses around and happen right the fuck off again, but she still wanted to avoid it if she could.

By six o’clock, when she had made her last quarry-run, she had mostly emptied the gym, leaving only Tumble to stand watch over a barren landscape where a few rusty support beams and platforms stuck out of a withered jungle. She’d been tempted to take the weasel, too, but ultimately decided to leave it. Her standing with Freddy was precarious enough without him catching her hauling broken animatronics out of the building to be dumped in the quarry. In her mind, there was a huge difference between the New Faces and the real animatronics, but she wasn’t sure she could explain it to him in ways he could understand.

So Tumble stayed and Ana did not waste her time cleaning more than that. On Thursday, when the dump trailer at home was changed out, she would simply take the walls off and the flooring up and throw it all away. For now, she was done with the gym, but nowhere near done with her workday.

She moved on to the bathrooms. Once again, as tempted as she was to remove those cartoon interlopers, Brewster and fucking Lala from the doors, she left them alone. She even picked Cinnamon’s sign off the floor and screwed it back into place on the door. Inside, she left the greater mess (and dear God, what a mess…there was nothing like an abandoned bathroom to bring out the inner shit-artist in a trespasser) and just focused on capping those damn pipes. The rest would have to wait, probably until after the Fourth. She already had more stuff going into that dump trailer than she had room for and she simply couldn’t make a habit out of throwing crap in the quarry. Once she had the toilets out and the sewage pipes sealed, she was done in here.

Freddy was onstage for one of his evening magic acts when she trudged back to the dining room. He did not react at all when she took off her breather and gloves, but when she wrestled the boots off and turned them upside-down to drain, she heard a grunt in the middle of his Magic Rings monologue. She looked wearily around, in case he had something to say about it, but he was just holding up the rings like normal, ears waggling as he demonstrated how ordinary they were right before they ‘magically’ doubled in number. She’d seen this part so many times, but she was easily entranced when she was hot and tired, so she watched and the longer she watched, the more she caught Freddy glancing at her.

Nothing weird about that. She was the only customer in the room and he was programmed to make eye contact with the guests. Still, it was starting to feel weird. Freddy’s stage-persona was so…so different from the real him, or at least, the ‘him’ he had become over the last decade of neglect. She got the distinct feeling he didn’t like performing for her. Maybe he wouldn’t like performing for anyone anymore, but this felt personal, as if she were…how did Foxy put it? ‘Impugning his dignity’ by witnessing his big goofy teddy bear routine.

Well, she couldn’t stand around here all night anyway. The worst of the day’s work was behind her, but there was plenty left to do and even if she didn’t have work in the morning, she still wanted to get to bed before midnight.

Still keeping one eye idly on Freddy’s hands—she knew how the trick worked, but damn if she could catch him doing it—Ana slipped her hand between the tape-line of her biosuit and opened it from her neck to her navel, then shrugged out of the sleeves and pushed the whole thing down to her ankles. Beneath, she wore nothing but tattoos and a natty pair of boy-cut briefs.

The rings spilled out of Freddy’s hands and hit the stage in a merry jingling mess.

“Oh stop,” said Ana, gathering up the suit and stuffing it in a garbage bag. “I’m still more dressed
than you. Plus, I’ve been rolling in funk all day. I couldn’t be less sexy.”

Freddy pulled in a breath—she could actually hear him doing it, his fan revving louder even than the Toreador March, which was tinkling away—and bellowed, “RULE THIRTY-SIX. PUT. YOUR. BEAVER DAM. CLOSED. ON.”

“Hey, I asked for a room with a door on it, didn’t I? But oh no, you wanted me where you could see me. Get yourself a good eyeful, bear.” But she picked up her sugar skull shirt off the floor and her jeans from much earlier that morning and put them on. “You’d better get over it in a hell of a hurry, though, because when I get my shower tonight, you’re coming with me.”

Freddy, picking up his rings, dropped them again. “WHAT?”

“Yep. Tonight. Me and you, sharing three gallons of sun-warmed water and a bottle of soap. And I will warn you right now, it’s going to get weird around the belt-line.”

He actually took a step back, like the fifty feet between them was not enough. “THE. HELLO. YOU. SAY.”

“The hello I don’t. Not to put too fine a point on it, but you reek. I told you the day I moved in that you were all getting washed. What did you think I meant?”

Freddy stared at her. She could neither hear him clicking through sound-files nor see the thoughts spinning through his creepily expressive cameras. He was, she realized, speechless.

Footsteps in the halls, both of them. Chica, coming back from the reading room and Bonnie, on his way from the craft room. The seven o’clock set had ended and it was mingling time.

“Look, I’m not going to insist tonight, but it is happening,” Ana said as the animatronics came through the plastic sheets into the dining room. “Hey, Chica? Want to take a shower with me later?”

Chica stopped dead in the middle of a wave, blinked, then sort of rolled one shoulder and chirped, “SURE! THAT SOUNDS LIKE FUN!”

“Consider this your one reprieve,” warned Ana, pulling her day pack over and opening the central pocket. “Tomorrow night, it’s you or it’s Foxy, and by Friday, you are all minty-fresh, or so help me, I will pop open your chest and do it without your participation.”

Freddy raised one hand and touched his chest-panel, frowning, but he didn’t argue.

“Okay,” said Ana, more to herself than to any of them. She brought her tablet out and thumbed the power button.

All three animatronics took a step back, and then Bonnie came lurching forward to stand in front of her, facing the stage with his arms up and out, stuttering and glitching too hard to make out what he was trying to say.

Freddy did not drop his rings again; he threw them to one side and dropped right off the edge of the stage with just one hell of a bang, crossing the room in long strides with his eyes on and music tumbling in his wake. “WHAT’S THAT?” he boomed, too happily, seizing Bonnie and throwing him aside like his magic rings. “WHERE. DID. YOU. GET. THAT.”

Ana, stunned, did not resist as he snatched it out of her hands. “At a Best Buy in Pasadena, I think. Why? Bon, are you okay?”
She took a step toward Bonnie, struggling on his back on the floor, and Freddy caught her and shoved her back into the wall, keeping her pinned while he watched her tablet power up. He studied her desktop icons when they appeared, turned the device over to examine the backing, then looked at her. In his eyes was nothing of the bear that had just been prissily shocked at the prospect of getting naked with her, nothing of the bear that had just been performing a dimestore magic trick to a roomful of non-existent kids. She looked and saw the real Freddy, the one all those punkass kids kept trying to paint on the back of the building, and she still wasn’t afraid, but for the first time, she thought maybe she ought to be.

Then he grunted, dropped his arm and turned around.

“DON’T. MOVE,” he said, sweeping the plastic covering the East Hall aside and ducking through. “CHICA. WATCH. HER. BONNIE. DON’T. MOVE. THAT’S AN ORDER.”

Bonnie’s frenetic rocking and grappling stopped immediately. All four limbs dropped slack to the floor. His fingers twitched, then his foot. His eyes stared straight up, no more than a thin ring of white around the dilated lenses.

“Okay,” Ana said after his footsteps had faded with distance. “What did I do this time?”

Chica just looked at her, tapping her fingertips together.

Ana went over to Bonnie and sat down beside him, picking up his shuddering hand and holding it on her lap. She waited.

Soon, Freddy returned. He had shut the music off, which made the clank and wheeze of his mechanical parts that much louder as he came and stood over her. After a moment, he held up the tablet. “WHAT IS THIS?”

“It’s a tablet. Like a computer, only without a keyboard. Here.” She offered up her empty hand and, after a long stare, Freddy gave her the tablet. She tapped into the web, typed ‘tablet’, and turned it around to show him the image bar. “Mine’s a Surface Pro, like this, only mine’s last year’s model.”

Freddy’s cameras moved left and right, reading. His frown deepened, but in a thoughtful rather than a threatening way. “EVERYONE. HAS. THESE. NOW.”

“Most people, I guess. In some form or another. People use them for reading and browsing and games and stuff. You know. It’s just a mobile computer. Look.” She tapped open the roombuilder app. It pulled open her last active project, the Duckling Daycare. “I use it for work. I was going to get some accurate measurements of this place and take some pictures so I have something better than, you know, that.”

Freddy followed her pointing arm in the direction of the East Hall and her hand-drawn map of the building. He grunted.

“Is there a problem?” Ana asked cautiously, knowing damn well there was, but still unable to figure out what.

Freddy thought some more and finally shook his head. “NO PROBLEM.” He bent and wedged his hands in under Bonnie’s arms, scooping him up and setting him with a rattle and thump on his feet. “WAKE UP,” he said. “IT’S. ALL. RIGHT.”

“You sure?” Ana asked, getting up as well, but keeping a good distance.

Freddy grunted affirmatively, then slid her a sidelong glance and a shadow of a smile. “YOU.
SCARED. ME,” he said, patting Bonnie on the shoulder.

“Did I?” she exclaimed, somewhat giddily. “Well, shit, man, I’m so sorry!”

“What. ARE. THE. RULES. AN-N-A.”

“Don’t touch Freddy,” she said promptly, but puzzled, because she couldn’t see how that was what this was about.

His eyelids turned briefly upward, then evened out. “What. Else.”

Derailed, she could only blink at him for a moment, but slowly, they came back to her. “You mean don’t yell and don’t hit and stuff?”

“You. Rules.”

“Keep my clothes on? Pick up my tools? I don’t know…Oh! And don’t mess with the locked doors.”

He nodded.

She waited, then said, “Why? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing.” He released Bonnie, paused, then gave her another of those awkward pats on the head. “You’re. Fine. Go. To. Work.”

When he was gone, Ana looked at Bonnie. “What was that about?” she asked.

His answer was to pull her against him in a hug, hard, like he was trying to pull her all the way inside his casing and keep her there.

“It’s a beautiful day,” said Chica, losing interest now that all the customers were engaged. She waddled off into the kitchen and began to shuffle through the pizza trays, talking to herself as she pretended to make a pizza and run it through the broken oven. “Are you hungry? I’m hungry. Let’s eat!”

Bonnie shivered. His arms tightened. It hurt and was getting a little hard to breathe, but Ana didn’t struggle.

“It’s okay,” said Ana, setting her tablet aside with a sigh and giving in to his urgent embrace. “It’s all good in the hood, my man. Everything’s all right. Everything’s just fine. No one’s eating anyone tonight.
Ana tried to get back to work after that, but Bonnie was a little clingy...in the same sense that lava is a little warm or piranha are a little nippy. Before the tablet-incident, Ana had hopes of getting completely caught up to her schedule, but Bonnie made that impossible and soon she was forced to adjust her goals to simply getting the measurements so she didn’t fall any further behind. Bonnie put even that small milestone in jeopardy, constantly in the way of the laser measuring tape’s beam and photobombing all her pictures. She bumped into him every time she turned around; he bumped into her every time she stopped walking.

At eight, he went back to the stage, leaving her a little ashamed of how grateful she was that he was finally gone. She wasn’t sure how much time this gave her, but she was determined to make the most of it.

Under normal circumstances, taking measurements was the quickest part of any job, but the circumstances were far from normal. She had never been gladder for the purchase of her laser measurer. Shelly could call it a toy all she wanted, but she could not imagine doing this with tape and a pencil. The pizzeria’s layout was easily the most convoluted she’d ever seen, as if it had been deliberately designed to confuse the senses. Even Ana got turned around once and managed to set a quarter of the damned restaurant in the wrong direction on her roombuilder before she realized her mistake.

By the time she made it to Pirate Cove, Foxy was already done with his set and quiet. She considered greeting him, but decided her pride really couldn’t take a repeat of this morning. She wasn’t sneaking around out here. If he wanted to talk, he knew where to find her.

She started taking measurements and tapping them into the roombuilder. It took longer than the other rooms had. Pirate Cove was a big space, neither squared nor empty. The prop ship jutting out of the back wall and all the cargo piled around it interrupted the laser; those decorative glass floats on the wall reflected it. Finding a clear shot from wall to wall was difficult enough to do just once, but having to do it more than a dozen times at every irregular jut and angle turned a simple job into an endless exercise in frustration.


Ana glanced at the curtain as Foxy’s low, sing-song chant trailed off to growls and then to silence. She scuffed her boot deliberately, letting herself be heard, but he didn’t call out. Shrugging to herself, she went back to work, blindly lining up a shot, thumbing the button, realizing she’d hit a float only after the digital reader tried to tell her the opposite wall was nine hundred ninety-nine feet away, moving a half-step to the left and trying again. Maybe she ought to take the damn floats down...but that would mean getting the ladder and climbing up and down it a million times before she could even start the job she was trying to do. Not to mention the fact that Bonnie would also be done with his set before too long and right back under her feet.

“Da-da-da dee dum,” muttered Foxy, somewhere behind the curtain. “Da dum...da da-dee...And the ship were bound up in the bay.”

Ana’s focus broke. She looked around, the laser pointer aimed and ready-light blinking, listening.
She knew all of Foxy’s songs—at least all his old songs—and that was not a line she recognized.

“And I had but one night to frolic and fight...for at dawn, we must all be away.” Metal scraped on wood, gouged at it. His hook. “It’s hoist the black flag and away.”

No, she definitely didn’t know that one. And she wasn’t sure she liked it, although she couldn’t have said why not. It had an unremarkable melody, simple enough for kids to follow, nothing hard or jarring on the ear. Maybe it was just the way he was singing it, low and rough, so that despite the easy lilting rhythm of the tune and the unexceptional lyrics, it felt like something ominous building. Which was silly and she knew it. This was a kid’s place. Foxy’s songs had a tendency to dip into dark places—pirates were supposed to be scary—but fifteen men on a dead man’s chest and sailing with a skeleton crew were about as grim as it got here.

“Me boots were on land and with bottle in hand, I were in a bonny fine mood. When I spied a maid walking down by the docks, in a place no woman should...A place no good woman should.”

Another slow scrape punctuated this line, which was itself indefinably weighted with meaning.

Aimed at her, she supposed, trespassing here in his Cove. Little did he know she was no good woman. She smiled and tried in vain to get a measurement. Damned glass floats.

“Her skin were like milk and her hair were like silk. She were rounded at rudder and bow,” growled Foxy. “So I says to her, ‘Miss, I’ll be taking a kiss and whatsoever else I might allow. Will ye or no, I’ll be taking it now.’”

‘And this is where she pulls her sword,’ thought Ana comfortably, wiggling her laser-pointer an inch this way and an inch that way, hunting for that magic angle that would find the other wall. ‘And you’ll fight it out and steal that kiss when you beat her before you go sailing off.’

“And I’ll give ye a shilling if ye be willing and so off to bed we’ll go—”

Off to bed? Seriously?

“—Mind ye, two years at sea without a lass on me knee has left me disinclined to hear no,” Foxy sang. “But however ye’ll have it, just so.”

Ana frowned around at once, the laser-pointer and tablet in her hands now almost forgotten.

“Oh, she ran like a hare, but I chased her down there and I were the quicker, ‘tis true. When she found herself collared, she fell ’pon her honor. Aye, and I fell on it, too.” Foxy chuckled, the sound as devoid of humor as the lyrics were devoid of mercy, “On it and in it and through.”

She couldn’t stop herself anymore.

“That’s a bit more grown-up than the other songs I remember you singing,” Ana said.

Silence fell like an axe, chopping off the growling rise and fall of Foxy’s voice mid-word. A long moment followed, during which she had just enough time to wonder if the interruption had glitched him out, when he said, “Yer a bit more grown-up than the ones I usually b-b-be singing to.”

“Mind if I come onstage for a second?” asked Ana, already on the amphitheater stairs.

“Not in the mood for company, lass.”

“I just need to take some measurements, Captain. I won’t stay.”
A grunt was his uninformative judgment.

“Please,” she said, approaching the stage.

“If I say no?”

“I’ll tell you it’s my birthday. You have to let me up then, remember? The only difference is, you probably have to sing the Birthday Matey song or something. How do you want it, Captain?”

“Black-k-k—MANE, ME MORTAL ENEMY—mail, is it? Eh. Come on up with ye, th-th-then.”

Ana pulled the curtain back on an empty stage with a seemingly empty ship towering over her. Shining her light in all the obvious places did not reveal Foxy and although she supposed his input wasn’t exactly necessary for what she had to do, not knowing where he was made her feel a bit twitchy between the shoulderblades.

She took her measurements, which was easier here than elsewhere in the Cove, but still not as easy as point-and-click. The ship was the most obvious obstacle to work around, but not the only one. The laser tape kept bouncing off the mesh wall of the ballpit and the uneven surface of the curtain gave her readings a degree of error she found unacceptable.

As she paced around, trying to find the sweet spot that would solve her scanning problems, Foxy began again to sing. The stage was made to amplify sound and throw it out into the audience. With the curtain down, his voice seemed to bounce—now above her, now behind her, on every side and in both ears at once.

“Tho’ she kicked and she scratched, she was good n’ all catched. And bitterly tho’ she did cry, she soon cuddled up close and slipped off her clothes—”

Ana shook her head wonderingly, determined to keep her eyes on her laser-tape’s display.

“—till naught there was covered her but I. And ah, how I made her sigh!”

Her arms dropped to her side. She turned around and stared at the broken side of the ship for a second, then redoubled her efforts to get her numbers. She did not blush easy, hadn’t that been what she’d told the old man just today? She didn’t blush easy, but damned if she wasn’t blushing now.

“All through that night till dawn’s rosy light, she happily slept at me side. But when she awoke, it were with some other bloke, for I were away with the tide. Weigh anchor, we sail with the tide.”

If he was sailing away, hopefully, the song was almost over.

“Aye, if the ladies be fetchin’, I chase ‘em and catch ‘em, but there’s nary a one has catched me. For I leaves them all sleeping or stomping and weeping on the sand of the shore of the sea. Oh, I leaves them all there by the sea.”

“You dog, you,” Ana murmured, once again smiling now that he was firmly back in G-rated lechery.

“Ye may call me a bounder,” Foxy sang, as if in careless reply, “a rover, a scoundrel, but faithful to me true love I be. For there’s been many a skirt hung up by me berth, but me one and me only’s the sea. Oh, me one love is ever the sea.”

The last words were little more than a mutter and nothing new followed them.
“You mind if I take some pictures?” Ana called.

Foxy uttered a wordless yet perfectly translatable sound of Jesus-Christ-this-shit-again and said, “Aye, I b-b-bleeding well do. Ye want a picture, t-t-take one off the d-d-damned wall, and no, I ain’t-t-t signing it.”

“Not of you. Get over yourself,” Ana said testily. “Of the stage. So I have a visual record before I take the walls off.”

“Oh. Do what ye want-t-t, then.”

In the dark, the flash was bright as lightning; in the quiet, the click and whine soundbite her tablet produced to let her know it had taken a picture might as well be thunder.

He must have been watching while her attention was on the screen, because the next thing he said was, “Where’d ye c-c-come by that?”

“Electronics store somewhere in California,” she replied distractedly. “Freddy wanted to know too.”

“I’ll b-b-bet he did. What is it-t-t, then?”

“Just a touchscreen computer.”

“Just,” muttered Foxy and grunted a low laugh. “Aye, just.”

Right. They must have had laptops when this place shut down—they had a need for wireless internet, anyway—but not touchscreens. Sometimes it was hard to remember there had ever been a time in Ana’s own life when cordless phones were the cutting edge of the modern age.

On the deck of the ship, still unseen, Foxy suddenly said, “It help ye any to d-d-do that up here?”

“I don’t need to.”

“That ain’t what-t-t I asked.”

“I’m just about done.”

“Still ain’t what I asked.”

“I got what I need,” said Ana, which was more or less true. She didn’t need exact to an eighth of an inch measurements yet and wouldn’t be working in Pirate Cove for a while anyway. This was just the preliminary stuff. “Night, Captain. Go back to your rapey little lullaby.”

“I swears to G-G-G—GREAT NEPTUNE’S GHOST—if’n ye don’t g-g-get up here and take yer bloody pictures, I’ll carry ye up and lock ye in me bleeding c-c-cabin.”

“Yeah, but I’m done,” said Ana, moving toward the edge of the stage.

“Ye have to the count of—”

His hook slammed into the rails of the ship and before Ana had even fully turned around, he was dropping through the dark and landing with a heavy whump right next to her.

“—I ain’t counting,” he concluded, without any pause. He snapped his eyepatch down, raised his hook, and leaned in to show her a few teeth. “I ain’t got-t-t me sword at the moment, but if’n I has
to go back and get it, by the powers, I’ll be marching ye up-p-p that gangplank at its point. Pick up yer pins, girl, and on that deck.”

Ana didn’t move, but not because fear had frozen her. She searched his face, trying to determine just what it was—the angle of his eyelids, the tilt of his ears—she couldn’t figure it out, but there was something there, something wrong.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He held her in his yellowed stare a moment or two, then raised his eyepatch and dropped his arm to his side. “No, I ain’t,” he said, turning away. “Come on. Leave that-t-t trinket and come ab-b-board. I got a b-b-bottle of rum and yer going to drink it.”

“I am, huh?”

“Close as I can get t-t-to getting drunk.”

“Yeah, but I’m working.”

“Fake it for me,” he snapped, still walking. “Ain’t-t-t I done enough for ye lately-ly-ly?”

“What the hell are you mad at me for?” Ana asked.

He looked at her and once again, she was struck by just how expressive plastic could be, not because she could tell what he was thinking, but because she couldn’t.

“I ain’t,” he said finally. His ears sagged outward slightly, the left more than the right. “Ye ain’t-t-t done aught to be mad at, have ye? Been rough seas for me these p-p-past few days, that’s all. Ain’t-t-t fit for company and don’t want to be alone. G-G-Get the feeling ye know how that feels.”

“Maybe.”

He crooked his hook at her, one foot on the gangplank and one on the stage. “Come sit-t-t with me, lass. Just for a while. I’ll t-t-tell ye a story.”

’I don’t want to hear it,’ thought Ana, so clearly she was afraid for a moment she’d actually said it out loud. Right on its heels came the idea, not in words but fully-formed all the same, that if she went with him tonight, things would change. And if she didn’t, well, other things would change. One way or another, there would be consequences.

She took a step toward him.

“Leave that-t-t,” he said again, nodding at her tablet. “I don’t like it-t-t. Bad memories.”

Memories of a computer that hadn’t been invented when he’d last been around in the world?

Ana hesitated, then shrugged her misgivings away. She set her tablet down, took his hook, and let him lead her up to the deck.

“Wait here,” he said, leaving her to enter his cabin. He left the door open a crack, letting her see a sliver of the tiny room within—the corner of a table, the edge of a map, swords hanging on the wall and shiny swag in every corner, frosted over with dust. When he came back, he had the rum. He gestured with it vaguely. “Rest yer nethers, lass.”

Ana looked around and sat down with her back against the control podium in the bow of the ship. Foxy took a place against the ship’s wheel in front of her. His foot bumped hers as he settled
himself; when he pulled it away, Ana impulsively stretched her leg out to keep touching him. He glanced at her boot against his knee as he worked the cork out of the bottle, but didn’t say anything and didn’t move again.

“Here ye are, luv,” he said, passing the rum but not releasing it to her grip. “EAT WHAT YE PLEASE AND DROWN ALL YER SORROW.”

“Live for today,” she joined in, raising the bottle with him in a shared salute. “We die on the morrow.”

“I love it when ye t-t-talk like a pirate,” he said and let go of the bottle.

She had a lot of work left to do tonight and didn’t care for rum, but she had a sip, just a small one, to be polite.

“How is it?” he asked, watching her with unnerving directness.

“Tastes like cloves and ass,” she replied, swallowing. “How can you stand the stuff?”

“No sense of taste.”

“That would help, all right.”

“Fair—WINDS AND A FOLLOWING SEA—warning, lass. Ye get d-dr—DRUNKEN SAILOR—drunk and I won’t be no gentleman.”

Ana snorted around the neck of the bottle as she tipped it again. “If I get drunk, Captain, I sure won’t be no lady.”

“No?”

“No. ‘Bout the only time I can stand to be touched is when I’m stoned or, preferably, shitfaced.”

“Hard luck for p-poor ol’ Bon, that. He still thinks he c-c-can win ye over with a b-b-broken guitar and bad jokes.”

“Yeah, well, bunny is funny, but liquor is definitely quicker.” She made her mouth smile, but the words had a bitter taste. She chased it away with more rum. “Poor old Bon,” she echoed, studying the kraken on the label of the bottle. “He deserves so much better than me.”

“Ah, b-b-but we don’t get what we d-d-deserve, do we? We just-t-t get what we get, as someone or another-r-r—ARR!—once told me.”

Ana shrugged and nodded, now studying the ship on the label. Had it been a navy vessel? Whalers? Colonists? Slavers? It was going down, in any case, whether they’d been saints or sinners. That was just how it was in life. Some days, you got the briny breeze and the wide open seas and some days, you got the kraken. “So what’s on your mind, Captain?”

Foxy tipped his head back and studied the stars painted on the ceiling tiles. “What’s the worst-t-t thing ye ever done?”

“Christ, we’re going straight there, huh?” Ana had another swallow of rum, a bigger one. “There’s a hell of a lot on that list, you know. How do you define ‘worst’? Like, in legal terms? Does it have to be something I did to someone else or just any old thing at all?”

“Ye know what-t-t worst means. Quit yer stalling.”
She watched him watch the painted sky.

“When I was eight or nine, I put some crayons in the dryer,” she said.

His cameras shifted. He looked at her.

“It was the end of summer, the very end. We’d been out all day, doing our back-to-school shopping. Mostly doing David’s. Aunt Easter had to be careful what she bought for me, because if she got stuff that was too nice or just got too much of it, Mom would yell at her and, you know, knock me around a little.”

Foxy didn’t offer sympathy or ask questions. He merely waited, listening.

“So David had this nice notebook and a binder with...something cool on it, I don’t remember. Transformers. Power Rangers. Something. He had pens and crayons and pencils and all that shit. All new school clothes. New shoes. New backpack. I got exactly what was on the list of required supplies and a box of David’s old hand-me-downs. I know she’d have bought me everything I wanted. I know that. I knew it then. And she took us to the movies and out for sundaes afterwards and it was a great day. Really. I was happy. But…that night…”

Ana stared at him for a while and had a third drink, this time taking a few swallows.

Foxy waited.

“Aunt Easter always washed the clothes before she let David wear them. So while we were watching TV, she was doing the laundry, old clothes and new ones mixed together. And when they were in the dryer and David was in the bathroom getting ready for bed, I snuck downstairs with some of his crayons and put them in the dryer. Red ones, mostly. So that even if she got the wax out, which I didn’t think she could do, the dye would still ruin them. And it did.”

Another drink, very small, just a sip. It was hard to swallow it.

“Next morning at breakfast, Aunt Easter showed David one of the shirts and told him to be more careful with his crayons and he said he was sorry and we all had pancakes. I had to go upstairs and throw mine up.” She toyed with the bottle, not drinking. “I could not tell you what I was thinking when I got those crayons. I don’t think I started really thinking about it until that next morning, when she didn’t yell at him or hit him. It’s like...was that the plan? Was that what I wanted? Not just to take away his nice clothes, but punish him for having them? I loved him. I didn’t forget that because I was jealous. I could do both at the same time, apparently. I loved him as I put those crayons in the dryer. I sat at that table the next morning, drinking orange juice and loving him, just waiting for the screaming and the beating to start.”

“Ye ever t-t-tell him?”

“Fuck, no. I never told anyone. Except you. So.” She tipped the bottle one last time, barely wetting her lips before passing it back. “Your turn.”

He studied her as he corked the bottle, then set it aside and patted his thigh. “Sit on me lap.”

“What?” Taken by surprise, she laughed. “No! Why?”

“It’s story-time.” He patted his thigh again, his expression oddly detached.

Ana shook her head, but after a few seconds of staring at each other, she got up and crawled over. He leaned back against the wheel, raising his arms to give her room as she perched herself
cautiously on his knee, very much aware of the difference between her weight and the weight of the last small child he’d been dandling during story-time. “Okay,” she said, once tensely settled. “I’m here. Let’s hear it.”

He put his arm around her and bumped his leg up slightly, so that she had to brace a hand against his shoulder to keep from falling into him. It was not a comfortable position. In fact, nothing about any of this was comfortable. His body was bare plastic, where it wasn’t broken open to expose the unpadded metal endoskeleton. Heat pulsed out through the holes in his chest along with the smell of old oil and decay that permeated everything in this building. He tipped his head back to look at the stars on the ceiling, snapped his eyepatch down over his white eye and in a low, growling version of his stage-voice, Captain Fox said, “Once upon a t-t-time, there was a princess who dreamed-d-d of being a pirate.”

“Was her name Ana?” Ana asked with a crooked smile.

“No. I think…I think it were Naomi.”

“You think?”

“C-C-Can’t be sure after all these years. Couldn’t-t-t be sure even then, but aye. I think so. She were pretty, aye, if a hair t-t-too young for a gentleman to be noticing, and she knew it. She liked-d-d being pretty and too young, and she were easy in the liking of it, for princesses t-t-tend to surround themselves with gentlemen to the p-p-p—POINT O’ ME SWORD—point where they believe all men ar—ARR! Sorry if I should-d-d bellow in yer ear from t-t-time to time, luv. It ain’t intentional.”

“It’s fine. Keep going. Tell me about your trusting princess.”

“Every chance she got-t-t, she’d sneak out of her castle and run princessly wild about the k-k- kingdom, tossing her hair and smiling her smiles and glinting like gold in the sunshine. She knew th-th—THERE SHE BLOWS!—weren’t any real danger, for every lad-d-d what looked at her, loved her, and every man, being a gentleman, wouldn’t look-k-k. And so it was she found her way freely to P-P—PIRATE COVE, YAR!—and her, ah, glinting like gold. Well, she quick c-c-caught the eye o’ the pirate captain and he quick caught-t-t hers. And she, being young and innocent, imagined herself d-d-daring to show him her smile. And he, who had b-b-b—BURIED TREASURE—buried more smiles than g-g—GOLD DOUBLOONS!—in his time, showed her his.”

“You dog, you.”

“It weren’t me.” Foxy’s ears lowered at an odd angle. She could read Bonnie’s long, jointed bunny-ears pretty well by now, but not his. Combined with his growling tone and distant stare, the lie of his ears gave him a brooding expression, neither angry nor sad, but dark and somehow purposeful. “I were there, aye, and I d-d-did nothing to stop it, but it weren’t m-m-me.”

“Who, then?”

“Who do ye ken?”

There was only one other pirate captain in any of Foxy’s stories.

“Blackmane?”

He did not agree or correct her, just grunted and went on. “She led him on, in her same p-p-playful fashion, but the snares that had tangled up so many doe-eyed lads c-c-could not catch him. Poor
fool, how could-d-d she know? She ran, light on her heels and full of j-j-joy, but he would not
chase, only laugh after her until she c-c-came creeping back. Every day, she crept a little closer,
ye, and closer still by night-t-t, until that dark hour that she came all the way to his t-t-table and
drank from the Devil’s cup. I watched the wine spill over her lip and onto her clean, white skirts,
sure, and there’s nothing stains so d-d—DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES—deep as a young girl’s
first sin.”

Ana raised her eyebrows, then furrowed them in a frown. Foxy’s stories were prone to brush up
against the occasional racy undertone, but that was a hell of a direct innuendo.

“He could have ended it there, with only that small har-r—ARR!—harm done, and left her weeping
on the shore as we p-p-pirates so often do. But he was bored and hungry and she was small and
sweet. So he played a while, spinning her t-t-t—TALES O’ THE SEA—and dropping p-p-
promises like pearls in her ear. She listened, p-p-poor pretty fool, until she was d-d-drunk enough
on love and lies to let him lead-d-d her out to sea. And what d-d-do ye reckon he did with her?”

‘He drowned her,’ she thought, but didn’t say it. When Foxy looked at her, she merely shook her
head.

“He broke her heart,“ said Foxy, scratching his hook over his own chest in a distracted,
unconscious manner. “Then her b-b-body and then her mind, snapping off each p-p-p—PIECES O’
EIGHT!—piece until there were hardly anything left, and what there was, he g-g-gave to his crew.
And when they’d trained her up, he took her b-b-back to the kingdom where once she had ruled and
lined his pockets with the pennies all them d-d-d—DEVILS!—doe-eyed lads paid to bend her over
the barrel, six and eight and t-t-ten hours at a go. And so she lived ever after, locked in the b-b-
back of one of many of the Devil’s rooms, while in the front, some p-p-pretty little fool cast her
smiles at him…and he c-c-cast his smiles at her.” Foxy tipped back his head and studied the stars
painted on the ceiling while Ana stared at him. “Say hey for the life of a p-p-pirate, eh?”

“Please tell me you sail in at some point and save her.”

Foxy did not reply.

“You were there, right? You said you were there.”

“Aye.”

“Well, what were you doing?”

“Most nights, I were fucking her,” he answered evenly. “Say hey for the life of a pirate.”

Dimly, Ana became aware that her mouth was hanging open. She closed it, but it kept trying to
come open again, as if it knew something ought to be said, although she could not imagine what.
Her thoughts would not hold still long enough for her to read them. “Is there a moral to this story?”
was the best she could manage, and that only after an eternity of silence.

“No.”

No. Foxy’s stories never came with morals, but they did have happy endings!

“No moral,” Foxy said suddenly, thoughtfully. “A warning, m-m-m-maybe.”

“Don’t talk to strangers?”

“Can’t very well d-d-do that, can ye? And even if ye did, well, there’s many a p-p-princess has run
afoul of a pirate even shut up in a t-t-tower. Met a few meself that way.”

“I remember,” Ana said faintly. “The one from the Tale of the Jade Tiger and the one from The Dragon From the Depths.”

“Reckon the S-S—SEA-WITCH OF SIRENIA—ought to count, too.”

“Sure, why not? Might as well throw the Oracle of the Nine Isles in there. She didn’t have a tower, but she was alone and that’s what you’re talking about, isn’t it? If you’re going to live in the world at all, you’re going to talk to strangers and swim with sharks.”

“Aye.”

“But there’s a difference between swimming with them and fishing for them,” Ana said, not without a wince. It was just a story—and one in damned poor taste—but it still left her feeling like she was blaming the victim. She ought to know better than anyone that bad things opened the door and came in whether you invited them or not.

“Trust is a shiny hook, luv.” Foxy shifted, bumping his knee up higher so that Ana was pushed into the crook of his shoulder. This made his arm drop, so that the hand that had been at her waist now fell to her hip. He didn’t notice. All his attention was fixed on the ceiling. “But it c-c-catches them what casts it far more often than it c-c-catches the pretty fish they’re angling for.”

“That’s why I don’t trust anyone.”

“Oh aye? Let me ask ye, lass. How many o’ me stories have ye heard-d-d, ye who ain’t been there to hear ‘em?”

“I don’t know. A lot. Honestly, I thought I’d seen all of them until tonight, although I doubt this one was ever approved for the public.”

“How many t-t—TIME TO SAIL!—times?”

“I don’t know. Dozens at least. Wait, if I see the same show over and over, like on tape, does that count as one show or—”

“Coo, luv, yer st-st-stalling again.”

“Hundreds.”

“Hundreds.”

“Easily,” she admitted, her cheeks burning as if with guilt.

“Would ye guess a thousand-d-d?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I wasn’t counting at the time and I’m sure I don’t remember them all.”

“So a thousand times ye’ve seen the show,” Foxy mused. His fingers fanned and came together again slightly lower, now more on her thigh than her hip. “So…tell me…”

She waited, puzzled.

“Ye ever s-s-seen me put a kid on me lap?”

Her confusion held a moment longer. Then her breath caught. Her lips parted, but no sound came
He turned his head and looked at her. His eye was close. His teeth were closer.

Before she could move—she wouldn’t have moved—he pulled his arm away, removing all the support at her back, and pivoted as only a machine can. Her legs went up. Her back hit the boards. In an instant, he had gone from sitting beneath her to lying on top of her. She did not struggle when he trapped her wrists in his one good hand and banged them down on the deck above her head. This wasn’t happening; it had already happened and she had let it happen, so why struggle now?

She stared at him, silent.

“Trust,” Foxy growled, pressing down on her. The jagged edges of his scars dug at her breasts. The heat of his power generator pushed at her in pulses, like a heartbeat. He raised the arm not pinning hers to the deck, turning his wrist so the light from his eye glinted along the full curve of the weapon that grew from his stump, all the way to the point. “Trust is a shiny, shiny hook.”

Ana did not answer or blink. She waited.

After a while—how long a while, she had no idea—he pushed himself off her, resuming his original position against the ship’s wheel as if he’d never left it. He picked up the bottle of rum and set it on his knee, metal fingers playing almost musically along the neck as he stared at the ceiling.

Ana sat up, but not all at once. Her limbs were stiff, unwilling to obey her. ‘The rum,’ she thought. What else could it be? She wasn’t hurt. She was fine.

“Go on with ye now, lass,” he said, taking his bottle and climbing to his feet. “It were good of ye to c-c-come and see—YER OLD SHIPMATE, CAPTAIN FOX—but it seems I ain’t yet-t-t fit to be in company. Best ye keep out o’ the C-C-Cove for a few days. When I’m ready, I’ll c-c-come to ye.”

Ana nodded, silent, and stood. He leaned up against the control panel in the bow of the ship and watched her as she descended the gangplank and collected her tablet. She woke it up, tapped out of the roombuilder and switched to her camera. When she aimed it at him, he posed—eyepatch down, hook up, rum in hand. His teeth glinted in the flash.

“Good night, Captain,” she said, saving the picture to her album.

“FAIR WINDS AND A FOLLOWING SEA,” he replied, already walking away. “AND TO ALL ME LITTLE HEARTIES—”

The cabin door opened and closed.

“Sail on,” said Ana, and left.
Chapter 17

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The rest of the week passed without incident, measured out by the usual accomplishments and obstacles of any big job. If Tuesday was the Day of the Tablet Incident, then Wednesday was the Night She Showered With Freddy (he stared at the ceiling the entire time and then went immediately outside and stayed there for hours, just sitting on the edge of the loading dock and shaking his head), and Thursday was the Day the Dump Trailer Was Emptied and Filled Again Before Noon and the Night Ana Fell Off the Ladder in the Theater Because She Was Being Lazy and Stupid and Damn Lucky She Didn’t Break Her Fool Head Open. Progress was slow, but steady. Problems were minor and often amusing in retrospect, especially if she had a joint in her.

Friday, the day it all broke apart, began and ended with a phone call.

In all honesty, the first phone call came when Ana had already been awake and working for several hours, but when she looked back on that day, looking for omens of the disaster to come, it was the phone call that always seemed to kick it off. The number was unknown to her, but local and her phone identified it readily enough as V Con, whatever that was, so she stopped what she was doing (cutting up and dragging off pieces of that disgusting floor in the gym) and answered it.

“—start her today, if that’s what you want,” a man said, indistinctly and with a bit of an echo underscoring his words; he had the phone on speaker. Beyond that, he sounded vaguely familiar, but then it was a local call. Everyone in Mammon was vaguely familiar to her by now. His next words were clear and direct, cheerfully brisk in a manner to suggest he was a good ol’ boy but a busy man: “Hey there! I’m looking for the Stark kid.”

“You got her,” said Ana, mulling over the word ‘kid’. “Who’s this?”

“Willard Villart.”

“Memorable,” she remarked. The sense of vague familiarity snagged at her.

“Of Villart Construction, formerly Handsome Handymen for Hire, owner, operator, charismatic commercial spokesman. Look, I’ll come to the point. Word on the street is, you are looking for work. And as it just so happens, I have a spot open on my crew.”

“Villart,” Ana repeated and heard Shelly’s voice like an echo: Villart, that jackass.

“That’s me. So what say you trip-trap on by and give me your autograph on some tax forms and we’ll—”

“I came to see you a couple months ago, didn’t I?”

“Why, yes, you did. I didn’t have anything at the time, but I sure am glad I kept your number on file—”

“You sent me to Shelly.”

“Big mistake on my part, I admit that now, but I’m big enough to—”

“As a joke.”
A long pause. “Uh…no, I wouldn’t say—”

“As a joke,” Ana said again, harder. “You couldn’t keep a straight face even then. So what was the joke, huh? Was it the little girl, thinking she knew which end of the hammer to hold? Or did you just put me on his stoop like a burning paper bag?”

“I never did that,” he said, talking fast away from the speaker.

“The hell you didn’t! And what’s the joke now, jackass? You think you can dangle a paycheck over my head and I’ll jump and jiggle for it? Funny fucking joke, but I’ve done enough work for the comedians in this town, so you can take your job and pound it right back up there.”

She ended the call, blocked the number, took up her sledge hammer and went to fucking town on those walls. This accomplished two things: It drained away her useless anger and it exposed the bones of the building.

She had been bracing herself for a worst-case scenario, so the significance of what she discovered was slow to settle on her. At first, all she saw was a 4x4 vertical column completely covered in black mold. This was disheartening, if not entirely unexpected, but it looked straight and surprisingly solid in spite of the fungal overgrowth. When she pulled her utility knife and gave it a testing scrape to see how deep it went, she got another surprise.

The mold was not growing into the wood. It wasn’t wood at all. It was some kind of metal, either stained black by the mold or perhaps some alloy that was black to begin with. If it was mold, it was the only sign of damage the column showed; otherwise, there was no rust, no dents, no scratches. Had to be for load-bearing purposes, although she’d never seen structural supports like this before, and while she supposed she hadn’t seen it all, she’d sure seen a lot.

Ana studied this puzzle for a few minutes, then took her sledge hammer on a short tour of the building, opening up walls in every room in search of more metal supports. And she certainly found them, but the more she encountered, the less sense it made.

They weren’t everywhere, which was to say there was at least one in every room in some form or another, but there were plenty of splintered, rotted 2x4s filling the space behind the walls. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to how the metal supports were sited, either. She found them on the exterior walls and the interior, on load-bearing and curtain walls, as columns, beams and girders. Their placement seemed so random that after wasting an hour knocking holes in walls in a futile effort to solve their distracting mystery, Ana had to tell herself out loud that it didn’t matter and it was time to move on.

And it was while moving on, that the common element behind the odd metal underpinning unexpectedly revealed itself.

After her initial disbelief had completed its cycle through curiosity, confusion and apprehension, she arrived back at her default I-don’t-have-time-for-this setting. She made a second circuit of the building, looking into holes she’d already made and making a few more, just to test her theory. Once she’d confirmed it to her satisfaction, she returned to the dining room to think.

The Fazbear Band was in full swing—Bonnie on guitar, Chica on air-keyboard, and Freddy singing a medley of old children’s songs rebooted with an upbeat jazzy tempo. Ana listened for a while, giving her ears something to do while the wheels in her mind turned, and when she came to a conclusion, she said, “I need to talk to you when you get off tonight.”

Freddy stopped singing mid-word, although the other two continued to ‘play’. “ABOUT. WHAT.”
“Work stuff.” She shrugged. “Nothing life-threatening. It can wait, just don’t let me forget.”

“I. CAN. TALK. NOW.” Freddy came down the stage steps, frowning. “WHAT IS IT?”

“Well, there’s good news and bad news,” Ana said, boosting herself up onto the table and wiping her face on her shirt. “What do you want to hear first?”

“THERE’S. ACTUALLY. GOOD. NEWS.”

“I know, right? I was surprised, too. Okay, the good news is the load-bearing walls are just fine, owing to the absolutely dumbfounding architectural decision to use I-don’t-even-know-what-the-fuck-that-stuff-is to offset the cheapest framing material imaginable. The exterior walls are also good, which I already had reason to hope, having battled my fucking way through eighteen inches of brick and concrete once already to get that fucking pyramid drained. And by the way, let me take this opportunity to formally take back all the swearing I swore that day, when I naively thought that was a pain in my ass, because I had no idea that if I had merely drilled a little to the left or right, I might have hit one of those what-the-fuck-ever columns and thrown back a broken drillbit right through my damn skull.”

“THE. WALLS. ARE. GOOD,” said Freddy, latching on to the only part of that he must have considered important. He grunted, tipping his head back with a thoughtful expression. “SO. THE. WOOF. IS. FINE.”

“You keep saying that,” sighed Ana, rubbing her temples. “No, Freddy, the roof is not fine. The roof is still under threat of imminent collapse. It could happen right now as I’m talking to you, telling you to for fuck’s sake get it through your head this time, and it will absolutely crush us all flat where we stand. I’m just saying that when the dust settles and the blood and oil are pooling out around heaps of roofing material, the columns supporting the outer walls and that area over there —” She waved at the stage or, more accurately, the backstage parts room. “—will still be standing. In fact, since it now won’t have to support a roof, it won’t be as susceptible to stress fatigue or buckling and it’ll probably stand there at least another twenty years, no problem.”

“SO. HOW. IS. THIS. GOOD. NEWS.”

“Well, I’d budgeted the lion’s share of my time this week for repairing and replacing load-bearing walls, which is a metric bitch-ton of work even for a full crew and the proper equipment, let alone me and a fucking ladder. The fact that I now only have to replace moldy sheetrock and a couple dozen 2x4s frees up a significant chunk of time. With a little luck and a lot of work this weekend, I can be on schedule again when Monday rolls around, and since I don’t have a job, I might actually get ahead of the game next week…which will allow me to deal with the wiring.”

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”

“It means I’m going to need power to do some of the essential work here. Now I wasn’t initially going to fuss with the wiring because I have a generator and I could just plug shit into that and call it good, but it’s not exactly portable, in spite of what the manufacturer insists. And not only is it heavy, but it’s also loud and hot and if I run it in the quiet room, it’ll fill the room up with deadly, deadly fumes, which means I’d have to keep the door open to vent them out, which in turn sort of defeats the purpose of a quiet room. Whereas, if the wiring in the building is good, I can hook up a transfer box and then pretty much leave the generator running in the store room and plug shit into the walls like God intended when He invented alternating current. So I wasn’t planning on rewiring when I took this job on, but since I figured I now had the time, I got to thinking maybe I should rewire the building today.”
“WHAT?”

“Considering the condition of the building, it’s the only way I can be sure none of the outlets here are going to shoot flames thirty feet out into the room and then explode.”

“NO.”

“Yeah, wait for it, bear, because I didn’t even get as far as asking for your permission. Come look at this.” Ana hopped off the table and led the way to the gym with Freddy close behind her. When she pointed at the hole in the wall, he looked at it obediently. “See that dark metal post-looking thing?”

“YES.”

“That’s one of the underpinning columns I was telling you about. That’s what’s holding the building up, well…part of it, anyway. But apparently that’s not all it’s doing.” Ana pointed at a blue plastic box fastened to the wall’s frame. “Do you know what that is?”

His expression went from watchful to mildly annoyed. “NO. WHAT IS IT?”

“That’s part of the electrical system. It used to have an outlet in it, but I took it out, because, well, look at this place. It was covered in slime. So I took it out and immediately, I notice a distinct lack of wiring. No big deal. Abandoned buildings can mean big bucks for salvagers and Mammon’s pretty poor. I figure someone’s been in to strip out the old wiring and to be honest, I’m fine with that. Saves me a step. I’d just as soon run all new wires than try to make the old stuff safe anyway. But then I notice something weird. Do you see it?”

Freddy looked at the wall, his eyes moving slightly back and forth as if reading. “NO. WHAT AM I LOOKING. FOR.”

“I’ll give you a hint. See where it’s attached directly to the column? Directly to it. See what I mean now?”

Freddy looked at it and at her. “AN-N-A. I KNOW. PIZZA. I KNOW. CARD TRICKS. I KNOW. CHILDREN’S SONGS. THAT’S WHAT. I KNOW. WOULD. YOU. PLEASE. GET. TO. THE. POINT.”

“It’s not unusual to mount boxes to studs, but that’s not a wooden stud. That’s metal. Generally speaking, you want to keep electrical stuff well the fuck away from metal stuff. Admittedly, I don’t know what that is, so I guess it might not be conductive, but then I noticed the really weird thing.” Ana studied the empty box, reliving that particular discovery and feeling all over again the mingled wonder and disbelief that she had experienced upon pulling the perfectly ordinary outlet out of its box, but unable to put it into words even she understood much less words Freddy might follow. “I’ll show you,” she decided, looking around.

Spotting another electrical outlet on the adjoining wall, Ana pulled her utility knife from her toolbelt and headed on over with Freddy right behind her. She knelt down and carved out a square of sheetrock around the outlet, exposing another dark metal column. “Mounted right to it,” she said, tapping the back of the blade against the electrical box. “See?”

“I. SEE. IT.”

“Obviously, I haven’t pulled down all the walls, but so far, all the outlets and lighting fixtures I have looked at have been just the same, mounted right to one of these load-bearing supports. Now check this out.” She quickly unscrewed the outlet plate and tossed it aside, got a grip on the outlet
It came free of its blue nest box without resistance, its wires coming out of that mysterious grey column like roots from soft soil, the loose ends capped with common brass jacks that had been pushed through small holes drilled into the column.

“It’s hollow,” she said, holding the outlet and its impossible wiring up for Freddy’s impassive inspection as she knocked the base of her knife against the column. “And whoever ran the wires in this place, ran them inside the frame—the metal, load-bearing frame—of the building. And that’s weird enough, but what the hell is this?” She gave the outlet a shake to make the jack-tipped wires tap together. “All your electrical stuff is just…plugged into that thing like…like headphones into a computer. The lights, the cameras, the air conditioning system—the real one, as opposed to whatever the fuck that goes to,” she added, glancing up at the vent over the rock-climbing wall. “Quick question, and I realize it sounds stupid and obvious, but you were open here, right? Not for very long, but for a few days, right?”

“ONE. WEEK. YES.”

“And you had power, right?”

“YES.”

“And the lights worked? The oven worked? You had air conditioning?"

“AN-N-A. HOW. MANY. WAYS. CAN. I. SAY. YES.”

“Okay. So, um…where was it coming from? Because this?” She waved the outlet in front of his muzzle. “This is not how it’s done.”

Freddy frowned at the wall and at her. “WHAT. DO. YOU. MEAN.”

“I mean, wires have to be wired together. That’s why they call it ‘wiring’. This isn’t wiring. This is…” Ana lifted her empty hands and let them drop. “I don’t know what this is.”

Freddy did not answer.

“Now I’m going to show you something really weird. Come on,” said Ana, now heading out of the gym and through the building to the fuse box in the store room. “See that?” she asked, pointing at the thick cable that appeared to be going in through the top of the box. “In a normal building, that would be the main power line. It should be coming in from outside, from, I guess, wherever the city buried it. It gets broken down here and is run out to all the different rooms, like…like streams running out from a river or blood vessels running out from your veins. You know what I mean?”

“YES.”

“Okay, but check this out.” Ana reached up and gave the ‘main power line’ a tug. It came off the wall easily. “This is just a length of insulated hose. It only goes half an inch into the wall and it’s not connected to anything. This box—” She dug her fingers in around it and lifted it off the wall, where it had been secured with simple picture-hanging hooks and brackets. “—is just a breaker box with a bunch of switches that aren’t connected to anything. Look at this.” She turned the box so Freddy could see the sticker on the side, time-aged but perfectly legible. “That little paper certifies
that this place passed inspection and meets all fire and safety codes, so obviously someone had a
very merry Christmas that year, because there are no wires here to be inspected. As near as I can
tell, there never were.”

“What does that mean?”

“Good question, Freddy. What *does* that mean? Here’s another good question, what is the point
of putting a fake breaker box out where people can see it? And a better question, where is the real
one? And how the hell is it functioning? I mean, I don’t know what bizarro-world alternate
dimension is providing your power, but it is not the Mammon Utility Board. And before you bring
up the solar panel on the roof—”

“What?”

“—let me tell you that even if that roof was paved with solar panels, you still need wires in the
damned walls! Not only do I not know how this set-up you’ve got here works…I don’t even know
how the hell it exists!”

Freddy, not surprisingly, said nothing. He frowned at her and not the breaker box in her hands as
she hung it back on the wall like the decorative object it was.

“And while we’re on the subject of mysterious alternate dimensions, can you tell me where the hell
the stairs are? Because I have now officially been all over this building and I haven’t found them.”

Still Freddy said nothing, and later, this would push heavily on her peace of mind, because there
were plenty of stairs in the pizzeria—the three short steps leading up to the show stage in the
dining room and the party room, the steep amphitheater steps in Pirate Cove, the stadium steps in
the theater, even the concrete steps off the loading dock—but Freddy didn’t take her to see any of
them. Because he knew, that unquiet whisper in the voice of Mike Schmidt would later tell her as
she stared sleeplessly into the night, he knew those weren’t the stairs she meant.

“There’s got to be more to this place,” Ana said, scratching a hand through her hair in frustration.
“I’ve even mapped out the Treasure Cave and there’s no way to access the mermaid’s grotto. There
has to be some way to clean that room and grease her gears, so there has to be—”


Ana sighed and pinched at the bridge of her nose. “How do I say this nicely? Freddy, ours is not
exactly a relationship built on trust.”

He grunted, then said, “Do. You. Love. Bonnie.”

“What?” Successfully derailed, Ana blinked up into Freddy’s scowling face and laughed. “Um,
look, I realize we just had a shower and that will always be a special night in my life, but since
when are we girlfriends? Why the hell would I talk about my personal life with you?”


Her smile faded. She felt it go and, like the wiring in the building, wasn’t sure where. It should
have been easy to ask what the hell this was about, easier still to make a joke or just not answer, but
she didn’t.

“Yeah,” she said.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“Oh, I understand, all right. I understand that’s fucking emotional blackmail!”

“STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES,” he told her stoically. “I. WANT. TO. HEAR. YOU. SAY. YOU. UNDERSTAND. AND. YOU. PROMISE. FOR. BONNIE.” His eyes narrowed. “CROSS YOUR HEART AND HOPE TO DIE.”

The embarrassment she felt at knowing that Freddy fricking Fazbear was not only aware of her feelings for a wind-up toy rabbit with a speak-and-say for a brain and toxic insulation for skin but could also effectively use them against her was nothing compared to the realization that she was going to let him. Heaving an extra-heavy sigh to let him know what a bastard he was, Ana sketched a quick X over her chest.

Freddy grunted and turned around, but stopped after one step and looked back. “THAT,” he said, pointing at the grey-painted metal tube where it showed through one of the holes she’d cut in the wall. “WHAT. ARE. YOU. GOING. TO. DO. ABOUT. THAT.”

“Nothing,” she said sullenly. “I guess I’ll just have to lug the fucking generator through the whole building every time I want to cut a board.”

“GOOD.” He started walking again, returning to the stage and the show that was going on without him. “I. TRUST. YOU.”

Damn it. Now she couldn’t even be mad.

“Can I have my own room?” she called.

“DON’T. PRESS. YOUR. LUCK,” he called back. “AND. DON’T. FORGET. T-T-TO…HAVE A SLICE OF WORLD-FAMOUS FAZBEAR PIZZA.”

“Sheesh, you and Rider,” she muttered, picking up her sledgehammer once more. “You don’t need to tell me to eat. I can take care of myself.”

And by now, he was in the dining room and possibly all the way to the stage, but still he let out his big friendly laugh, as if he’d heard and that was his answer.

* * *

The second phone call—the world-ending one—came that evening, as Ana was hard at work in the gym. She never heard it ring. She had her earbuds in and her music player on in an effort to occupy her mind with something other than the intense pain and exhaustion presently wracking her body. Later, looking for omens, she would recall that the last song she heard before the phone call that ruined everything was Imagine Dragons’s *Monster*. If it was true there were no coincidences, that was surely Fate, with a capital F.

In any case, she had the volume up full-blast, so she didn’t hear her phone ring. She might not have heard it even in dead silence. After ten solid hours spent pulling the walls down and the floor up, scraping the grease off the ceiling and cutting away the collapsing tiles where it was safest to do so, covering the windows in a colossal curtain of black plastic, removing all fixtures, installing new outlets, and now finally putting up new lights in anticipation of the not-too-distant day when she had the bear’s permission to rewire the building, she had reached that special stage of exhaustion when sounds registered, but were no longer being processed. Sensations still were,
however, so when her left breast started buzzing, it only took a few seconds for her to realize what was happening.

She didn’t need much of an excuse to take a break by that point, but still her first instinct was not to stop. Her will to work had long ago been replaced by mere momentum and once her body was at rest, she was afraid it would take more than she had in her to get it started again. Still, she pulled her earbuds out, took the phone out of her bra and looked at the display. Unknown number, local area code, no name attached.

Thoughts of Mason blipped onto her radar and faded out again. Unlikely. After all this time, that particular hash had to be good and settled. Yet the fact remained, not a whole hell of a lot of people knew this number. Might be Villart again, calling from home, but it felt kind of late to be conducting business by phone.

What time was it anyway? Quarter to nine. Christ, so early. Felt like midnight already and she had three more lights to go if she was going to finish this room tonight. Which she guessed she didn’t have to do, strictly speaking, but if she didn’t, she’d only have to play catch-up tomorrow.

The phone rang again, right in her hand. Ana bared her teeth at it and answered with an irritated, “Hang on.” She heard some sort of reply—masculine voice, single syllable, not someone she recognized.

She climbed down from the ladder on legs that had suddenly decided to go rubbery, steadying herself with arms that weren’t much better, and said, “Okay, I’m here. Who is this?”

“Before I answer that, you mind if I ask who this is?”

“You called me, remember?”

“At least tell me, is this the person who placed a Craigslist ad asking for animatronics repairmen in Mammon, Utah?”

“Yeah, I did. Forgot all about that,” she said with a short laugh. “So you just decided to call up at nine-thirty on a Friday night to offer your services? Come on with that horseshit. Who is this?”

“My name is Mike Schmidt and I really need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hang on. This better be good,” she said, heading out the gym door, through the plastic, and into the dining room. Bonnie, sitting on the empty stage with his guitar on his lap, looked over at once, ears up and hopeful, but before he could say anything, Ana showed him the phone and touched a finger to her lips. “I’m on the phone,” she told him, boosting herself onto her table and letting her legs dangle. Now her feet hurt, too. “Get me a drink?”

Bonnie nodded and set his guitar aside, standing.

“Excuse me?” said the phone.

“Nothing, talking to a friend. All right, I’m listening. What’s up?”

“I’m…look, that’s complicated and I don’t want to get into it over the phone. Can we meet? Tonight, if possible.”

“Meet? Like, in person?” She laughed. “You couldn’t just lead off with a dick pic like everyone else, you had to go straight for the hook-up.”
Halfway to the kitchen, Bonnie stopped and looked back. 

Ana shook her head at him and firmly pointed at the doorway. “Nice try, creep, but not in a million years. I’m hanging up now.”

“If you do,” the man said calmly, “I think there’s a very good chance you’ll die.”

Funny. It didn’t sound like a threat. 

“Why? Hang on.” Covering the phone’s mic, Ana made eye-contact with Bonnie and said, “You’re getting me a drink, remember?” As he finally ducked through the plastic and went to the kitchen, she put the phone back to her ear and said, “Who did you say you were? And what’s this got to do with my ad?”

“My name’s Mike Schmidt and I’ll answer all your questions, but not on the phone. You in Mammon tonight?”

“Fairly close,” Ana said vaguely. “But you haven’t told me anything worth meeting up for and unless you do—”

“You know the Gallifrey’s on Majestic Ave?”

Food. Hmm.

“Yeah,” said Ana in her best I-ain’t-buying-it voice, all the while mulling over the merits of some fried jalapenos and a Betty-burger.

“I’ll wait there until ten. You don’t show up, I won’t bother you again. But I hope you do. And if you have any questions about Freddy Fazbear—”

“What?”

“—you’ll be there,” the voice concluded without a pause.

“Wait, what? How do you—”

Dead space. He’d hung up on her.

Well, hell.

Ana started to bring up the last call, thinking to dial him back, but never put it through. He wouldn’t answer anyway. He’d gone out on a great line and he knew it. He’d probably rehearsed it before calling. The whole conversation, all two minutes of it, felt like a scene from a movie, except what kind of movie involved clandestine meetings about robot animals in an abandoned pizza place? He was fucking with her. He had to be.

On the other hand, food.

Decided, Ana peeled off her sweaty shirt and pulled on a fresh one, noticing as she did so that there were only two more shirts in the cubby-box. She could have sworn she’d brought more than this. She either had to make a trip to the laundromat or go home and get the rest…one more job to add to the list, one more thing eating up her time.

She picked up her lantern and went into the kitchen.

Bonnie was there and not by the cooler getting her a drink. He and Freddy were over by the door to
the store room, facing each other, like they’d been talking. Chica was close by, her head cocked in a listening posture and fingertips tapping together. All three turned their heads to watch Ana come in, of course, and when she’d taken enough steps to convince them she hadn’t wandered in by mistake, Freddy turned all the way around and let out one of his pre-recorded bear-laughs even as he glared at her.

“GOING SOMEWHERE?” he demanded, coming to meet her and maybe only accidentally blocking her way to her pack in the narrow aisle between the counter and the oven. “WHERE. ARE. YOU. GOING.”

Ana looked at him, then at Bonnie. “Did you rat me out to the bear?”

His ears lowered.

Ana rolled her eyes, squared her shoulders, and faced off against Freddy. “As a matter of fact, I’m going out. You want to maybe move out of my way? I need my keys.”

Freddy looked at her pack on the counter beside him, but didn’t push it toward her. “OUT. WHERE?”

“Dinner. Yeah, I’m actually eating. Please, hold your applause. And I’m meeting someone, so let’s not keep him waiting, okay?” Ana reached around him, and to her surprise, Freddy put a paw on her pack.

“WHO?”

“Who? None of your business, that’s who! Since when do I need your permission to meet a man for dinner?” Giving his arm a shove (he moved it after a moment, frowning), she collected her keys and wallet and turned around, immediately bumping into a big, purple body. “Ow, Bonnie! For Christ’s sake, why are you always right behind me?”

She sighed and reached up to rub the side of his muzzle. “I know, I know. Sorry I snapped at you. You know I love you, right? It’s just been a long day. I’m tired and hot and sore…and sweaty.” Reminded, she dug back into her pack for the package of baby wipes she kept and gave herself a quick once-over: face, hands, pits and tits. “I need a shower,” she muttered, doing it again with a fresh wipe. “I was supposed to get one with Foxy tonight. I was looking forward to that.”

Her attention on her ablutions, she did not see the effect her words had on Bonnie and would have been surprised to see it even if she had. She had been looking forward to the shower with Foxy, and to finally being able to cross one damn thing off her list for good. Everywhere she looked, she saw something she’d started and had to stop—a host of incomplete projects piling up around a job where the deadline was only getting closer and nothing was getting done. Even in the gym…God, she’d been working all day, her Friday, the first day of the last weekend before the Fourth, and she hadn’t even finished one room.

Ana dropped her crumpled wipes in the sink, looking around the kitchen and seeing everything she hadn’t done. “I’m not going to be ready,” she realized and felt no surprise, only a bone-deep exhaustion.

Bonnie touched the side of her face, mimicking her. “IT’S OKAY.”
“No, it’s not. No, it’s really not. I’m in so far over my head, I can’t even understand it. Everything about this building is such a…a tour de force of unfathomable fuckery and I just can’t get on top of it. I’m never going to get another chance like this. Nothing matters as much as that roof. But I haven’t eaten in, like, two days.” She pulled away from Bonnie’s twitching hand and headed for the door.


“BYE BYE!” called Chica, her plastic eyes canted worriedly in spite of her cheerful pre-recorded tone. She grabbed Ana’s pack, but didn’t offer it, instead hugging it tight to her chest as she happily cried, “COME BACK SOON!”

“I’m not leaving forever!” Ana groaned. “I’m going out to dinner! I’ll be back in an hour or two! Relax!”

Freddy followed her as far as the loading dock door and even held it while she ducked under and went to her truck. She waved as she climbed up behind the wheel to let him know she was leaving—why was he still standing there? Most times, he barely waited for her to be through before he was banging it down and locking it behind her—but he didn’t wave back. He just watched, frowning his Freddy-frown, as she drove away.

* * *

Foxy was restless and had been all day. He stayed in his cabin between sets, keeping his ears flat and his eyes shut, closing off the world as much as it was possible to do, but despite his stillness, he was not truly quiet. Not in his head and not in his heart. He thought of Mangle sometimes, but not as often as he supposed he should. Mostly, his thoughts just tumbled without words or pictures, wanting something to hook onto, but not knowing what.

He decided he was worried about Mangle or rather, the box she was in. He should sneak out if he could and check on her. Chat with her, if she was talking. Let her know she wasn’t alone.

So at the end of his day, when Foxy was free to move around, rather than go into his cabin and settle for the night, he came down off the ship. Pulling the curtain aside with his hook, he peered out into the dark auditorium, but saw nothing. He listened, but if Freddy was on patrol, he wasn’t close enough for Foxy to hear. If he was looking for an opportunity to slip out and check on Mangle, this was it.

But Foxy didn’t move. He was, he realized, still listening. Not for footsteps, but for music thumping or power tools screaming. Still quiet, though.

Ten was early for Ana to chuck it in for the night. All this week, she’d been up and working damn near until dawn. Not that it made a difference to Foxy. She’d been by the other day to haul junk away and again this morning to tap at the walls, but beyond that, she’d left him alone. As requested, he reminded himself. Might as well go back to his cabin.

But he didn’t. Instead, he came out from behind the curtain and jumped down to the ground. His metal feet clanked until he reached the carpeted ramp, then clanked again when he stepped out of the Cove into the East Hall. He should be used to the sound by now, but it still bothered him. He’d worn his boots until they’d rotted off, taking his fur and most of the casing around his feet with them. Over the years, more and more of his legs had been broken away and now the steel ‘bones’
were exposed from the knees down on both of them. The holes in his chest and arms were bad enough, but his legs were gruesome. More and more, he hated the sight of himself and the wreck he’d made of the body he’d been given. Ana said it looked good on him, that a pirate should have scars…

Without thinking, Foxy scratched his hook across his chest, caught himself doing it, and forced his arm to his side. Somehow, he doubted Ana would be quite as impressed by his scars if she knew where so many of them came from.

He could hear the others in the kitchen, talking too freely for Ana to be there with them.

“—BE. BACK. BY. NOW,” Freddy was saying. “I. DON’T. LIKE. THIS. SHE. WOULDN’T. STAY. OUT. ANY. LONGER. THAN. SHE. HAD. TO. SHE’S. TOO. FAR. BEHIND. ON. THAT. SILLY.” A lengthy pause, during which Freddy checked through his sound files, before settling on, “HOMEWORK. SOMETHING. MUST. HAVE. HAPPENED.”

“Nothing-ing-ing happened,” Bonnie said, and not for the first time, by the sound of him. “She just-t-t went out for a while. She left-t-t—FOOT IN, YOU TAKE YOUR—all her stuff, so she’ll b-b-b-be right—FOOT OUT—back. Just stop, okay? Just stop.”

Foxy picked his way through the plastic and into the kitchen. Freddy was at the far end of the room with his hat in his hands and fingers restlessly fidgeting along the brim while he stared into the store room. Chica was here at the other end of the room, clutching Ana’s duffel bag to her chest like a baby. Bonnie paced between them, up and down the narrow aisle between the counter and the oven, head down, ears flat, joints twitching spastically. Not a good look for any of them.

“HI FOXY,” Chica ventured.

Freddy turned his head.

Foxy raised a hand self-consciously. “Ana’s out-t-t, eh?”

Bonnie’s speakers threw out a sound that might have been a swear word under all that static and feedback. He gave his throat a smack to clear it and paced away.

“She g-g-got a phone call,” Bonnie said tightly. “S-Sounded like a g-g-g—GREAT JOB—guy, but I don’t th-think-k-k-k she knew him. I think she said something-ing-ing about him sending her a picture of his d-d-dick.”

Foxy’s eyebrows scraped up, then came slowly down in a frown.

“She c-c-called him a creep and said she was hanging-ing-ing up, but they kept-t-t talking and next thing-ing-ing I know, she’s leaving. There!” Bonnie flung out both arms, banging the oven with one careless hand and the freezer door with the other. “Now you know as much-ch-ch as I do! Can we p-p-please stop talking about it-t-t?”

“WAS. SHE. HI!”

“No, she was working-ing-ing.”
“THINK. BONNIE. WAS. SHE.”

“I said-d-d no!”

Freddy’s grunt left little doubt as to his confidence in Bonnie’s assessment of Ana’s sobriety. “SHE. WOULDN’T. LEAVE. WITH. A. MAN. SHE. DIDN’T. KNOW. IF. SHE. WASN’T,” he said, rubbing the fur right off his brows and gouging at the plastic beneath. “NO. ONE. IN. THEIR. RIGHT. MIND. WOULD. GO. ANY. WHERE. WITH. A. MAN. LIKE. THAT. G-G-GOD. SHE. CAN. BE. SUCH. AN. IDIOT. SOMETIMES.”

Bonnie muttered static through his speaker and kept pacing.

“SOMETHING. HAPPENED,” said Freddy. He looked calm enough, but the Toreador March began to play, note by note, slow as a funeral dirge.

Chica’s fan revved in a sigh and she waddled forward, still hugging Ana’s duffel bag in one arm, but holding the other out in a placating gesture. “ARE YOU HUNGRY? LET’S EAT!”

“IT. NEVER. TAKES. HER. THIS. LONG. TO. EAT,” Freddy argued, then glanced aside to grumble, “WHEN. SHE. EATS. AND. IT’S. LATE. SHE. NEVER. LEAVES. THIS. LATE. WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS—WHY D-D-D-DID. SHE. GO—E-I-E-I-O!—SO. LATE.”

“I DON’T KNOW, FREDDY. WHY DID THE CHI-CHICKEN CROSS—damn it,” Bonnie spat. “You h-h-had to use that f-f-file. I d-d-don’t know. Why d-d-do you keep asking-ing-ing me? I don’t know!”

“YOU COULD JUST ASK ME,” Chica piped up, twitching as she tried to suppress herself. “I’M STANDING RIGHT HERE.”

“How. LONG. DOES. IT. TAKE. TO. EAT. ANY. WAY,” Freddy demanded, rubbing at his brows. “SOMETHING. ELSE. IS. HAPPENING. SOMETHING. IS. WRONG.”

Chica rolled her eyes hugely and shook her head. “LET’S EAT!” she said again, her expression patiently annoyed. “ARE YOU HAVING FUN? TIME SURE FLIES WHEN YOU’RE HAVING FUN!”

“DOING. WHAT,” Freddy demanded.

“GREAT!” chirped Chica, giving them both exasperated stares. “IT’S A DATE!”

Bonnie’s ears smacked the top of his head, which was a stupid sort of reaction. Of course she had a date. She was a grown woman, good-looking, urges and all that…

The memory of how she’d looked, lying on her back beneath him on the deck, tickled into Foxy’s head and would not go easy out again.

“WHY. WOULD. SHE. MAKE. A.” Freddy paused almost a full minute, then gave up on finding the word ‘date’ and said, “BONNIE. SAID. SHE. DIDN’T. KNOW. HIM.”

“I said it s-s-s—SOUNDS LIKE A PARTY—sounded like th-th-that, but what the—HELLO!—hell do I know? I c-c-c-c-c-c-c…I c-c-c-c-c-c-c…God damn it!—couldn’t! I couldn’t-t-t tell!”

“SLOW DOWN,” Freddy said, catching at Bonnie’s twitching shoulder. “BE CALM. OPEN. YOUR. EYES.”
“Ana would-d-d never go out with a g-g-guy like that,” Bonnie insisted.

“Why not?” Foxy asked. “Just because he gave her a p-p-peek at the ol’ mizzenmast? Hell, man, maybe ye ain’t noticed-d-d, but Ana’s a wee bit on the coarse side herself.”

“What would-d-d you know about it?” Bonnie demanded, shaking off Freddy’s hand to advance on Foxy.

“Not a blessed-d-d thing, mate,” said Foxy, arms up in a peace-making gesture. “I’m g-g-going.”

“LET’S SING A SONG!” Chica suggested, but of course that wasn’t what she meant and they all knew it. She was just trying to tell him he didn’t have to leave.

Foxy dropped his lower jaw an inch, showing his teeth and angling his head so it would look like a smile. Sort of. “It’s all right, lass. I’ll w-w-wait in the C-C-Cove.”

“Wait-t-t for what?” Bonnie asked, glaring at him.

Foxy shrugged. “If she wants to see me, it’s wh-where she’ll look, that’s all,” he said, thinking that if she did look, if she did…he thought he might be out and waiting for her. What happened with Mangle wasn’t her fault. Wasn’t his either. He was restless and—all right, he could admit it—he was lonely. “It ain’t-t-t like we got an appoint-t-ment to keep.”

“Sure you d-d-do. Isn’t it your night-t-t in the shower?”

“BONNIE,” said Freddy.

“Don’t B-B-B—BONNIE THE BUNNY!—me. If there’s nothing-ing-ing to it, why d-d-doesn’t he want to admit it?”

“Eh? Admit what-t-t?” Foxy started to look at Chica for help, only to notice all at once how yellow she was…how bright all their colors were. “She washed-d-d ye off,” he said, then blinked. “She washed off with ye.” And, stupid as he knew it was, he couldn’t help it: he laughed. “Coo, I really ought t-t-to be coming out more. She got-t-t ye in the shower?” he asked Freddy. “Ye?”

Freddy’s eyes flashed. He grunted warningly.

“Scrubbed-d-d ye down everywhere, it looks like,” Foxy observed.

The Toreador March began again to play.

“Oh, calm yerself, mate. I knew ye d-d-didn’t feel it. Ye wouldn’t let yerself feel it even if yer p-p-plates weren’t all gummed up. She got her togs off and b-b-bubbles all over, fetching right-t-t up close to get them tricky spots, and ye just-t-t tipped back yer head and studied-d-d the polish on yer halo, eh?” Foxy shook his head, chuckling, and offered Bonnie a mollifying hand. “I’ll keep me eyes closed-d-d,” he promised.

“You’re damn r-r—RIGHT FOOT IN—right you will, b-b-because I’ll be watching-ing-ing to make sure you d-d-do!”

“Kinky.”

“FOXY. KNOCK-KNOCK. IT. OFF,” said Freddy, catching at Bonnie’s shoulder again.

“BONNIE. CALM. DOWN.”

“Aye, c-c-calm down. She d-d-don’t mean anything by it and we all know it. More’s the p-p-pity.”
The Toreador March played a little more, a little louder.

“What?” Foxy asked before he could get a silencing ‘Enough’. “Well, that’s the p-p—POINT O’ ME SWORD—point, ain’t it? She’s supposed-d-d to think we ain’t but animatronics. Why should-d-d she care if she’s bare-dolphin with us in the shower? And for that-t-t matter, why shouldn’t I enjoy it as much as I can?” He turned a challenging stare on Bonnie. “Ye g-g-going to tell me yer mind were on pure thoughts and p-p-prayer when she was on her knees and betwixt-t-t yers?”

Bonnie lunged. Freddy had him before he had even one foot forward and threw him thunderously into the freezer door, pinning him there while he fixed Foxy in a furious stare.

“PLEASE,” said Chica in as small a voice as she could manage. “DON’T FIGHT.”

“I ain’t-t-t, damn it! He’s b-b-been on me since I walked-d-d in! I ain’t seen her in d-d—DAVY JONES—days and he’s biting me d-d-damn head off over a shower I ain’t even had-d-d yet! Hell, the last thing she’s g-g-going to want to do when she gets back tonight is wash me d-d—DOWN TO THE DEPTHS WITH YE—down, so what are ye mad-d-d for at all?”

Bonnie stopped struggling so abruptly that Foxy thought Freddy might have snagged his chest and pulled it partway open. Then his ear twitched. His eyes irised open, not quite full black, but not far from it. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, very quietly.

Baffled, Foxy could only stare at him for a moment. “Ye baiting me? Ye know d-d-damn well what it means!”

“Say it.”

“FOXY,” Freddy warned.

“No, ye heard-d-d him,” Foxy snapped. “He wants me to say it!”

“PLEASE!” Chica backed away, burying her face in Ana’s pack like a child hiding from the world in her mother’s skirt. “DON’T FIGHT!”

“It means,” Foxy growled, leaning over the counter where Bonnie had to see him even through Freddy’s restraining arms, “she’s getting d-d-dinner, mate, and her date’s getting dessert, and if she c-c-comes home at all tonight, she’ll be too well-wrung to think-k-k of doing anything but sleep.”

Bonnie’s speaker let out an air-splitting screech, but Bonnie himself didn’t move, not so much as a shiver.

“Oh, what the hell is yer problem?” Foxy snapped. “She’ll b-b-be back. Let her have this, for—THE LOVE OF THE SEA! I hope she’s out there right now, with her ankles up on some bloke’s shoulders, singing opera! And so should ye! She’s been here day and night all week, working herself to the b-b-bone for ye! Ain’t it enough? What do ye want-t-t from her, rings and roses?”

“FOXY. THAT’S. EN—”

“Don’t ye fucking dare shut-t-t me up, Fred! I’m saying this and I’m saying it all! Ye don’t d-d-deserve her,” Foxy snarled, rounding on Bonnie with his hook up and his eyes burning. “She gives ye more of her own self than she’s ever given another man, ye can set yer warrant by that, but she’s a woman still and a woman needs a living hand-d-d on her once in a bleeding while. I tell ye, she don’t look at me t-t-twice, but if she did, I’d take all she gave me and love her for it instead of throwing yer p-p-pissy little fit over the bits she had to find-d-d for herself elsewhere.”
“Oh, you would-d-d, would you?” Bonnie heaved Freddy back and stormed forward, ears flat and eyes half-black. “What else would you d-d-do?”

Foxy rolled his eyes so hard, he heard a spring snap and his lower left eyelid went crooked. “All right-t-t, all right, I reckon I had that-t-t coming. I’ve flirted-d-d her up some, sure, and ye know what she’s d-d-done about it? Nothing! She’s yers, ye ungrateful ass! What do ye want-t-t from—OLD CAPTAIN—me?”

“I want you to stay the fuck-k-k away from her!”

“How the hell much further c-c-can I stay?” Foxy asked incredulously, then just as quickly cut his hand through the air and slapped the words away. “Ye know what-t-t, bucko? No. I ain’t playing yer g-g-game. Ye think I’m t-t-trying to take her from ye, is that-t-t it? Ye think I’d fetch her up and carry her off if I ever-r—ARR!—had the chance and nothing I can say will ever c-c-convince ye otherwise, eh?”

“No,” said Bonnie, his lenses fluxing. “Not a g-g-goddamn thing.”

“So.” Foxy shoved himself right up close, nose to nose, the light of his eyes burning on Bonnie’s black lenses. “Then that’s what-t-t I’ll do.”

Freddy had him in the next instant, had them both. He threw Foxy into the oven, caught Bonnie as he sprang after him, yanked open the freezer, and shoved him inside, then turned—all in one motion—and heaved Foxy right up off his feet and banged him into the oven again. “I. DON’T. NEED. THIS. RIGHT. NOW,” he growled as Bonnie howled and beat on the walls of the freezer. “YOU’RE GOING. BACK. TO. PIRATE COVE. AND. YOU. STAY. THERE. UNTIL. I. COME. GET. YOU. AND. WHEN. I. DO. YOU. ARE. GOING. TO. APOLOGIZE. TO. HIM.”

“The hell I will,” Foxy said, still quiet, not calm. It was possible he’d been this angry before, he supposed distantly, but he couldn’t remember it, if so. Right now, angry was all he could feel, eating up his mind and his memories until he had nothing else. “If he’s g-g-going to hang the g-g-guilt of it on me anyway, I’ll commit the b-b-bleeding crime. I’ll say whatever-r-r it is ye order me to say, but even ye can’t make me mean it. If he wants t-t-to give me a sorry, without yer orders, mate, maybe I’ll listen. Until then, she’s fair—SEAS AND FOLLOWING—game and I’m playing.”

“FOXY—”

“Ye telling me who to fuck-k-k now, eh?” Foxy asked evenly. “Are ye? Ye really-ly-ly have turned into him.”

Freddy’s eyes flickered. After a long moment, he lowered Foxy to the ground and released his grip.

“I’m g-g-going for a walk,” said Foxy, heading for the store room. “If she g-g-gets back before me, I’ll be sure she d-d-don’t see me slipping in. Just don’t lock-k-k the door on me.”

“COME BACK SOON!” called Chica, waddling after him, but Freddy stopped her.

Foxy raised the loading dock door and dropped down onto the pavement. He walked. Across the lot, down the path, around the base of the bluff. The night was clear and full of stars. He turned his ears to keep the wind from blowing on his microphones and heard desert insects shrilling, owls calling, coyotes laughing…and Mangle humming.

“Hello, luv,” he said, sitting beside her cairn.
She screeched and stones trembled as she thrashed half an inch this way and that within her box. Foxy waited for her to quiet, digging his hook into one of the shallow scars on his chest. Rust-colored plastic came up in curls for the wind to take away. Foxy didn’t feel it when he finally cut through. Truth be told, he didn’t feel much of anything anymore.
Chapter 18

Mike Schmidt hadn’t bothered to tell her what he looked like during their brief conversation, and Gallifrey’s at a quarter to ten on a Friday night in the summertime was more or less guaranteed to be packed. It was a small town. Maybe he figured she’d recognize a stranger when she saw him, not realizing she was as much a stranger as he. More so, even, if he knew the history of the local urban legend that had sprung up around Freddy’s.

Or maybe it was a test, which was more in keeping with this film noir script he’d seemed to be following on the phone. He wanted her to figure out who he was before he decided she was worthy of hearing what he had to say. She found the idea of a test strangely attractive, especially if he expected her to fail. She liked being underestimated. And whether she found him in the crowd or not, she was coming out of this with food and that made her a winner either way.

Ana walked into the diner and hung back while the folks in front of her tried to rein in their pack of shrieking children long enough to pay their check and go. She scanned the tables, careful not to focus solely on lone men, since Mike Schmidt might very well have brought a friend or two. The thing about film noir plot points was never to assume. That, and trust no one.

However, she felt safe in discounting anyone with kids or anyone who appeared to be having a good time, and soon narrowed her list of likely suspects down to three: a booth with two men occupying one side and leaving the other empty, a table with one man and one woman drinking coffee and avoiding eye contact, and one man alone in a corner booth, watching the door. She
noticed him at first since he was the only black man in the restaurant and Mammon was about as white a town as they came, barring those that came with folks in white sheets and pointy hats. She noticed him again because the place was fairly packed and he wasn’t eating, just watching the door, and again because, frankly, he wasn’t too damn hard to look at. Now, their eyes met and held. When Lucy asked if she’d been helped, Ana told her she was meeting someone and walked on over.

He watched her come without any encouragement in the slightest, which gave her a moment’s doubt, until she was close enough to see the jacket he had tossed over the back of the booth beside him. A purple denim jacket, really purple, with a fake metal shield like a kid’s idea of a sheriff’s badge pinned to one sleeve, just under the shoulder. It had a five-pointed star with rounded tips embossed on it. The topmost tip of the star was wearing a top hat. Even before she was close enough to read the words Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria or Security that encircled the star, she knew they were there. Aunt Easter had worn that jacket for as long as little Ana could remember, or at least, a jacket just like that.

“Mr. Schmidt?” she said, extending her hand to be shaken.

“That’s me.” His hand was soft, the kind of hand that did white-collar kind of work, but his grip was strong and his eyes were direct and intelligent. Up close, he wasn’t just good-looking, but kind of on the damn side of good-looking. “Don’t get too comfortable,” he added as Ana signaled a harried waitress. “We’re not staying long.”

“We’re not, huh?”

“What I’ve got to say, I’m not comfortable saying in public.”

“Or on the phone.”

“Or on the phone,” he agreed, not smiling. “You can laugh at me all you want. God knows, the story I’ve got to tell is going to sound batshit crazy and I can’t help that, but if you want to hear it, this is how it’s going to be.”

“Okay. Just coffee,” Ana told the waitress, who had finally swung by the table with a clean cup and some silverware. “So let’s start with the obvious questions, shall we? Why did you assume I was looking into Fr—”

“Don’t say the name.”

Ana blinked, her lips still pursed around the word ‘Freddy’. “Why not?” she asked finally.

“Because this is a small town,” Mike said, staring her down. “And even though a lot of this happened a long time ago, it left some very deep wounds. Anyone close enough to listen in could get their scars ripped right open. Don’t. Say. The name.”

If this was still the script, it was a damned good one. Ana frowned and nodded.

“I’m not going to talk about any of that here,” Mike said again. “But I will get to it, I promise. First off, I’m going to ask if you’ve got any recording devices. Because let me state for the record—”

“Are you seriously asking if I’m wearing a wire?”

“—that you do not have my consent to be recorded.”

“I’m not recording you. Jesus. Don’t you think you’re going overboard on the atmosphere here?”
He didn’t smile. “Let’s get one thing straight, lady. This is not the Hookman or Sheepsquatch we’re talking about. This is not some cute piece of local color that boosts tourism and gets a summer festival named after it. This shit really happened. Real kids really vanished. Real people really died. This place we’re talking about…this place…” His jaw clenched. “It eats people.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah,” she said again, harder now. “My best friend was one of them.”

“Do you mind…” Mike’s eyes cut right and he shut up. Lucy brought the coffee and topped off Mike’s cup. Ana didn’t touch hers. Mike drank his back to the halfway point and put it aside. “Mind if I ask who?” he finished as soon as the waitress was gone.

“My cousin,” Ana said. “David Blaylock.”

“David Blaylock, huh?” Mike leaned back in his booth, studying her face with new interest. “Well, I’ll be goddamned. You’re Anastasia Stark.”

She tried—and failed—to hide the nasty jolt of surprise being recognized by this stranger set off in her. “You know who I am?”

He shook his head. “I know David Blaylock. And his mother. And his uncle.”

“His uncle? You mean my dad? How the hell do you know my dad? I barely know him!”

Mike was already shaking his head. “I mean his mother’s brother, Billy.”

She couldn’t react to that right away. She didn’t know how. In a weird way, it felt a lot like shining her light into Freddy’s and seeing Brewster. “She never had a brother,” Ana said finally, but there was a slight upward lilt on the last word, making it almost a question.

Mike shook his head again. “You never knew him. He died a long time ago, years before you were born. I got a picture, if you want to see.”

She did, suddenly. An uncle? She had an uncle? Died before she was born…at Freddy Fazbear’s?

She shook her head, not in refusal, but just in mute, frustrated confusion. “How do you know all this? Who are you?”

He dipped into his jeans pocket and brought out his wallet, flipping it open to show her his driver’s license. Michael Schmidt, it said. It had an address in Hurricane. It said he was forty-five. He looked a lot younger.

Ana took the wallet—he let her—and thumbed through the assorted bank cards and other pieces of plastic that made up a person’s life. There were a few business cards in other people’s names—a real estate agent, a credit union rep, a CPA—a few photos of good-looking kids and a good-looking wife, a couple receipts, a little money…and tucked in the back with a weathered-looking condom, a press pass.

She took that out and held it pinched between her thumb and forefinger, looking at him.

“1993,” he said. “What a year that was. Clinton took office. The Bills lost the Super Bowl for the third goddamn year in a row. The first Beanie Babies hit the shelves. And minimum wage was four
dollars and twenty-five cents an hour.”

Now he smiled. It was not a good look for him, or maybe it was just not a good smile. “A young man named Mike Schmidt had just completed a two-year unpaid internship at a prestigious newspaper, only to learn there were no paid positions available. When our hero weighed journalistic integrity and fiscal responsibility, he took a job at The Deseret Truth, a periodical whose content averaged sixty percent conspiracy theories, twenty-five percent gory true crime, five percent celebrity gossip, and of course, six pages of advertisements for plastic pyramids with healing powers and angel charms guaranteed to help you win the lottery. After serving his due time in the morgue—”

“Morgue?” Ana interrupted.

“The place where dead stories end up.” He shrugged. “A couple dozen filing cabinets full of old police reports and crime scene photos that weren’t bloody enough to carry a headline. Also where we stored the Christmas decorations and old legal papers. And since our hero was the newest hire, he got the shit detail of schlepping all that legal paper around whenever there was a libel lawsuit, which was often. Spending a lot of time down there, our young Mr. Schmidt had ample opportunity to go through those files and he began to imagine a connection between some of the separate events orbiting a local landmark. And then to think he wasn’t imagining it. He started digging into it, purely as an intellectual exercise. All hypothetical. A lark.” He pointed at her untouched coffee. “You done with that?”

“Not yet. What does all this have to do with…with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named? Because if you’re about to tell me you solved the murders, you should know the real cops already did that.”

“Oh. Well, case closed then. I guess I’ve got nothing else to say.” He held out his hand.

Ana did not relinquish his wallet.

“So you ready to get out of here?” he asked evenly.

Ana flicked at the corner of his press pass a few times, then tucked it back into his wallet and handed it over. “Yeah, I’m good to go.”

“Great. You know the Sugartree Motel?”

“Yeeah…?”

“Get us a room.”

“Now wait just a damn minute. I realize you found me on Craigslist, but you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re the one getting the room because I am not explaining a motel receipt to my wife. She doesn’t know about any of this shit and I’d just as soon keep it that way.”

“Why are we getting a room at all? We can talk anywhere, can’t we?”

“We can,” he agreed. “Frankly, I imagine we’ll do most of the talking in the car. But it’s going to be a long sleepless night and if I’ve done my job right, you aren’t going to want to go home at the end of it.” He got up, collected his jacket, dug a five dollar bill out of his pocket and tossed it on the table between their two coffee cups, then walked out, saying, “Sugartree Motel. Meet you in ten minutes,” without ever looking back.
Twelve minutes later, she was walking into a cheap motel room with a married man. ‘Cheating on my bunny,’ Ana thought and had to laugh.

“Something funny?” Mike switched on the lights and the A/C, since the room had that stuffy motel smell. He’d left his jacket in his car, but had brought a tablet, as well as a black binder stuffed with an ominous amount of paper, but what had all his attention at the moment was a fresh pack of cellophane-wrapped cigarettes, which was giving him some trouble.

“What am I doing here?” Ana sighed, asking herself as much as him. “I placed an ad for an animatronic repairman and somehow that led directly to you telling me about some child murders that were solved twenty years ago. It may not be funny in the classical sense, but you’ve got to admit, there’s a certain element of the absurd at play here.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Mike said mildly. “But on the other hand, you’re here, so you must be looking to be entertained.” He finally got the pack of cigarettes open and lipped one out.

“This is a no-smoking room,” she remarked.

“You don’t say.” He coughed on the first drag—a man who thought he’d quit—and offered her the others. When she shook her head, he closed the pack and put it back in his pocket. “I have to admit, I never thought I’d be getting into this again. I really believed I was going to take it to my grave. I was at peace with that, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. You want to maybe begin at the beginning?”

“The beginning?” He thought that over, tapping ash idly onto the carpet, then shrugged and nodded. “As good a place as any, I guess. You know there used to be a military base about twenty miles out in the desert, right?”

“Sure, out at the end of Cawthon.” She smiled. “You aren’t seriously going to tell me Freddy and the Fazbear Band are some top-secret escaped government super soldier program, are you?”

“Lady, you watch way too much Syfy Channel. No. What I am going to tell you is that the base’s two main functions were as research and development into the burgeoning field of rockets, specifically, self-guided missiles, and, on a somewhat related note, as containment and observation for a handful of scientists and technicians brought over as part of a little program you might have read about in school: Operation Paperclip.”

“Isn’t that the one where they, like, helped a bunch of Nazis get off scot-free at the end of the war?”

“That’s the one. So in the beginning there was Otto Faust, an engineer from Lieselott, Germany, whose loyalties during World War II were, shall we say, questionable. But he got out ahead of the fireworks and since he had some powerful secrets to spill for the Allies, he avoided trial and came over on Operation Paperclip, together with his son, Fredrich.”

“World War…? Nazi…? Are you fucking for real?”

“Hey, you said the beginning.” Mike puffed on his cigarette, freeing both hands to open up his binder. He pulled a photograph out of its protective plastic jacket and tossed it on the bed.

A black and white photo, grainy and washed out. A man in what sure appeared to be a Nazi
uniform standing with a toddler in short pants and just the cutest little swastika armband, both saluting. The man had dark hair beneath his cap, but the child was much fairer, with pale hair, pale eyes and pale skin—the very picture of Aryan superiority.

Ana studied it, shaking her head to show him she was not being drawn in, although she damn well was and he probably knew it. “This is where it begins, huh?”

Mike’s answer was to hand her another photograph, this one of the same boy, aged up a few years, now in a Mickey Mouse tee with his hair grown long enough to tumble around his head in unruly waves, not quite hiding the ears he had yet to grow into. He posed with one foot up on a toolbox and his arm slung around a bulky robot model almost as big as he was, narrow chest puffed with pride and showing off a broad, gap-toothed grin.

“Otto was all right for an engineer,” Mike said, tapping the photograph. “Paperclip was happy to have him, but his son was the real prize. The kid, Fredrich, was a goddamn genius. If Nikola Tesla and Jim Henson had a baby, that was little Freddy Faust.”

There was a blocky looking object in the kid’s hand, Ana saw. Some kind of primitive radio controller. And a screwdriver in his pocket, sticking out like a slingshot. And now that she was looking, she could see that the robot looked like it had been assembled out of hammered coffee cans, an old TV, some ventilation hoses and Legos.

“Did he build that?” she asked, impressed in spite of her skepticism.

“His first animatronic. Not that they called it that back then. In 1946, there wasn’t a word for the shit that kid could do,” Mike told her and put down another photograph. Same kid, same tee-shirt, same background, but now he was hugging on a giant, scruffy-looking teddy bear. And the bear was hugging him back.

“Meet Fredbear,” said Mike. “Just a remote-control robot stuffed inside a FAO-Swartz teddy bear, but he would have given old Ruxpin a run for his money any day of the week, and this was thirty years before Ruxpin was even a gleam in Hasbro’s eye. It was just a toy, but it sure impressed some important people and pretty soon, the kid is working down on the base next to Dad. And at first, Otto seems pretty proud of his boy, but before too long, it becomes spectacularly clear that the kid is a thousand times the mechanical engineer his dad will ever be. By the time he was ten, he’d sold enough patents to the US government to live off the rest of his life, but of course, because he’s just a kid, all that money goes to the old man.

“Maybe it was because he was expatriated or maybe there was some deeper psychological reason, but Otto Faust seems to have had an almost pathological obsession with acquiring real estate. It started with a tiny two-bedroom just as soon as the military allowed him to move off-base. After a few months, he bought another one in a better neighborhood and moved, renting out the old house but never selling it. As more money comes in, this starts happening more and more often. By the time the kid starts making the big money for him, he starts what he calls ‘investing’, purchasing local businesses and commercial lots. He’s not doing anything with it, mind you, and he’s not interested in property outside town. In just a few short years, the sleepy little town of Mammon was his. And let me tell you, when I say he owned it all, I mean he owned it all. Here.”

He handed her a topographical map, overlaid with color plates, overwhelmingly red with a few flecks of green, yellow and white.

“That’s Faust,” Mike said, tapping at the red. “Green’s outside interests, yellow’s government, white’s private citizens. By 1955, 65% of Mammon was in Faust’s pocket.”
“No shit?”

“No shit. Fun fact time. In 1955, Mammon’s official population was set at just under 2300. Would you like to guess what it is now?”

“I don’t know. About the same?”

“That would be weird enough, but no. To help you appreciate the significance of what I’m about to say, let me just preface it by telling you that Hurricane’s population in 1955 was 1200 or so and now it’s almost 15,000. Still considered a small town by national standards, but hell, we got a WalMart, a Starbucks, the major arcana of fast food and a pretty decent outlet mall. St. George, Washington, even Barlow and Warren have all tripled if not quintupled their growth, but here in Mammon, sixty years have passed and your small, quiet town has only gotten smaller and quieter.”

“That can’t be right. There’s a whole bunch of new houses down off…what?”

Mike was shaking his head. Now he said, “You’re talking about the Tudor Lane Townhouses, right? That new development that went up in the empty lot between the old Canyonview Apartments and the Somerset strip mall?”

“I guess,” said Ana, although neither name rang a bell.

And he seemed to know it. “Don’t worry. You don’t remember them because they’re not there anymore. Seventy-two low income apartments and a short string of hole-in-the-wall businesses, gone, replaced by twenty-eight big, beautiful townhouses with a tennis court and a picnic area. That’s how it works in Mammon. A trailer park gets a rec center and a playground for the kiddies to disguise the fact that half the lots are gone. Six shops close, but the seventh relocates to a bigger store closer to the main thoroughfare. There used to be three schools in this town, do you believe that? Now there is one school complex accommodating students K-12, but that one school has a basketball court, a track field, a baseball field, a hockey ring, a swimming pool and I understand plans are underway to build a playhouse solely for the school drama club’s use.”

“They’re using the theater downtown.”

“For now,” Mike nodded. “But the theater’s being demolished next summer, along with every other building on those four blocks. Then the road will be closed to vehicular traffic and a fountain will go up in the middle of the intersection.”

“Horseshit,” said Ana, startled. “You’re talking about the entire downtown area! No way would they tear it all down!”

“The plans are open to the public at the town hall for anyone to see. The new downtown area will consist of a town history museum, a gallery displaying the works of local artists, a war memorial, an information center, a senior activity center, a genealogy library and an afterschool safe house for teens. And the road will be replaced by the most charming cobblestones and there will be streetlamps with seasonal flowers and decorations faithfully turned over, and there will doubtless be canopies and kiosks run out for various fundraisers at regular intervals, and everyone at the grand opening will talk about how beautiful everything looks and how downtown has finally been restored, and then never go back again.

“And that’s how Mammon dies,” Mike went on as Ana stared at him. “That’s how it’s been dying for years, street by street, shop by shop, home by home. But you’d never know it to look at it, would you? There’s only grand openings in Mammon, never a going-out-of-business sale. In fact, we can get in my car right now and drive around all night, and I will give you a crisp one hundred
dollar bill for every for-sale or for-lease sign you see. Hell, you get on the real estate website of your choice and look for Mammon and if it brings up any listings at all, I will give you my firstborn child.”

“Horseshit,” she said again.

Mike shrugged. “She’s doing the thirteen-thing right now. I’ll be glad to get rid of her, to be honest.”

“No, I mean—” She checked herself, rallied. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. But I also know that the Faust estate is still snapping up every property that becomes available, commercial or residential. And once a property is absorbed into the Faust estate, it does not come out again. In fact, these days, it doesn’t do much of anything again. Most of the businesses acquired in the past five years were shut down, whether or not they were making their former owners money. There’s never more jobs in Mammon than there are people of working age.”

“Believe me, I know.” Ana picked up the map with its baffling array of lines and colors and squares and put it down again after only a cursory look. “But you said he’s buying homes too…and strongly implied he’s not selling them. So what is he doing? He buys a failing bar and shuts the doors so Joe Bartender has to work out of town, in the hopes that old Joe will move somewhere with a shorter commute, whereupon he snaps up Joe’s old house and shuts down, I don’t know, the coffee shop. Now Coffee Carol’s out of work, too.”

“Not to mention all the people who now have to drive out of town for coffee in the morning or a beer at night.”

“Throw in a talking dog and we’ve got us a gritty Scooby-Doo reboot,” Ana said, curious in spite of herself. “So you brought a map, can I assume you have numbers to go with it? How close are we to straight-up ghost town?”

“In 1955, 2300 people lived in a town that was roughly 65% owned by Faust.”

“Right.”

“As of this year, Faust owns 92% of Mammon, home to just 628 God-fearing souls.”

Ana whistled appreciatively. “Is it about the quarry?”

Mike’s expression did not change, but his eyes sharpened considerably. “In what sense?”

“I can only think of so many reasons why someone would want to quietly empty out a whole town,” said Ana with a shrug. “Either he has reason to believe there’s something worth pulling out of the ground and he doesn’t want to deal with a townful of people wanting a cut, or something’s already in the ground and spreading at an alarmingly toxic rate and he doesn’t want a townful of people suing him when they all sprout a set of eyestalks. Either way, the quarry is the most likely cause.”

“Very rational,” Mike said, nodding. “And very wrong. Remember, this is a story about Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria.”

“Seriously? You’re going to ignore the obvious connection between a defunct quarry, an eccentric billionaire and an insidious plan to buy out an entire town to chase down ghosts in a fucking pizza parlor?”
Mike sighed and rubbed his face. “Lord, it’s going to be a long night,” he murmured. “Look, lady, you can draw your own conclusions at the end of the night. All I ask is you let me tell the whole story and try to keep an open mind.”

“Yeah, sure.” Ana dropped onto the bed and leaned back on her hands, adopting a listening posture with a healthy dose of skepticism. “I spent sixty bucks on this room, might as well get my money’s worth.”

“That’s the spirit. So. Back to the story. Although he’s perfectly happy to spend the money it’s bringing in, Otto doesn’t particularly seem to relish the kid’s success. In fact, the more acclaim the kid gets, the more the old man obviously resents it. What starts as backhanded compliments and not-so-subtle criticism of the kid’s efforts turns into actual backhands and screaming tirades in some very public places, and God knows what’s happening in private. When it starts to affect the kid’s work, the brass steps in. The old man is removed to a new lab—a smaller lab—on the other side of the base while the kid is handed over to the supervision of another of Paperclip’s acquisitions, a guy by the name of Viktor Metzger.” Out came the inevitable black and white photo. “In Germany, Metzger was a pioneer in the field of neuroscience who may or may not have done his pioneering using some highly unorthodox methods as part of a top-secret Nazi project called Maschinengheist. How’s your German?”

The word sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place it. Ana shrugged, shaking her head.

“Maschinengheist,” Mike said again, slower, staring at her the whole time. “Ghost in the machine.”

It did give her a chill, but damned if she’d show it. “Uh huh. And Operation Paperclip was really all about office supplies, right? Come on, none of those code names are meant to be taken literally.”

“Hey, I’m just giving you a little free translation service. And you’re right. I don’t know what Maschinengheist was about, only that it had a lot of mechanics, a lot of engineers, and a lot of neurosurgeons working on it. But Viktor Metzger wasn’t a neurosurgeon anymore, just like he wasn’t a Nazi. Here in America, young Freddy Faust only knew Metzger as one of his father’s friends from work, a man who had a most particular hobby.”

“Macramé,” guessed Ana, annoyed by the dramatic pause.

“No. He was a doll-maker. When Fred was a kid in his daddy’s lab at the military base, the two of them passed many a long hour making toys together, with Viktor carving marionettes and Freddy making them move without strings. Understand, up until that point, the kid was working on propulsion engines, guidance systems for unmanned craft, and various mechanisms that could improve existing designs of missiles, but when Viktor’s chocolate background in neuroscience met the kid’s peanut butter mechanical engineering, the Reese’s cup of robotics was born, and you better believe the collective military mouths were watering. On the other end of the spectrum, the fact that the kid was using engineering skills his dad could only dream of to essentially make dolls only drove a wider wedge between them. The kid starts spending a lot of time over at the Metzger house, where Viktor is only too happy to fill in the father-sized hole in the kid’s life. Also, Metzger had a son, Erik, who took after his father in, oh, all sorts of ways. To say the boys bonded does not come close to describing that relationship. They were similar in many ways, complementary in most other ways, widely divergent in at least one way…the only word I can think of is symbiotic. Maybe parasitic.

“Pretty soon, Freddy and his father are only meeting at the base and their work relationship is only slightly more cordial than their personal one. It comes to a head in 1955, when one of the old man’s
projects fails to perform at review and the kid, now twelve, is called in to fix it. It’s been a while and the details are pretty fuzzy where they aren’t classified, but the story I got was, the kid, who was not told whose project this was, takes one look at the whatsis, tosses it on the nearest scrap pile, and builds a better one in a single afternoon, whereupon Otto Faust picked up a wrench and attempted to spill those golden-egg-laying brains all over the garage floor. Otto is escorted off the base and placed under house arrest, while Metzger is called in to comfort the understandably hysterical kid. With the military’s assent and no doubt a chaperone or two, Metzger and the boys go on vacation…to the opening of Disneyland. While they’re away, Otto has some sort of meltdown at the homestead. No one knows exactly how it happened, but between the drinking and the swimming pool, the old man ends up a floater and the kid comes home a millionaire, heir to the entire town while he’s still in his teens, a town bought by an immigrant, no less."

“Let alone a German.”

“Eh, the old man told everyone he was Jewish in the beginning and converted to Mormonism practically as soon as the first person offered. No snow on that roof. But the kid was never what you’d call a big supporter of that or any other church and as soon as he didn’t have to go anymore, he quit. Didn’t win him any popularity points around here, I can tell you.” He paused for a crooked little smile. “You may have noticed Mormons can be a little cliquish.”

“You don’t say.”

“Anyway, none of that matters. Back to the story. When Otto died, it only seemed natural for Metzger to take the kid in, which not only gave the kid a family, but kept him from slipping through the cracks into the social system and away from military supervision.

“Although Erik was quite a bit older than Freddy, the two had always been close. Best friends. Practically brothers. The two were inseparable until Erik went off to college and the kid is left alone. With Metzger’s encouragement, the kid channels all his energy, time and resources into his robots. His work was, as always, ahead of its time, but the government wanted the kid to move on in a more military direction. You know, more unmanned-bomber and less singing-bear. After a couple more years of friction on both sides, the government takes all the kid’s patents and drops him like a hot rock. Now with full creative control, the kid promptly works around not having access to any of his old engineering designs by revolutionizing robotics overnight with all new designs and, while the government is flipping its collective shit, draws up the first plans for animatronics that make Disney’s look like dimestore tintoys. They’ll sing, they’ll dance, they’ll walk around and talk to the kiddies…it’ll be amazing. He can’t actually make his animatronics do any of that on their own yet, but he can do most of it via remote control and he’s not one to sweat the small stuff. In 1960, two things of note happen: first, Erik Metzger drops out of school amid a cloud of rumor and comes home, and secondly, Fredrich Faust breaks ground on what will someday become Fredbear’s Family Diner.”

“Do we know what happened to Erik in school?”

“We know he had a lot of interests. Bounced around through various technical programs before allowing Metzger Senior to push him into neuroscience. He was not,” Mike stressed, “a bad student. His teachers had trouble holding his attention at times, but they all agreed he had an amazing intellect and an almost supernatural talent when it came to carving up grey matter. Possibly because he had so much extracurricular practice. Allegedly. Records are sealed, but rumor has it a couple cadaver brains went missing and young Master Metzger had some extra-smelly Tupperware up in his dorm room.

“Anyway, he came home. Daddy wasn’t pleased, but Fred was thrilled and for the next three years,
the two of them are once again inseparable. As an interesting sidenote, during those three years, the rate of missing pets in Washington and Parowan counties go up seven hundred percent.” Mike paced as far as the bathroom door to flick his cigarette into the toilet, then tucked the binder under his arm and said, “Let’s go for a drive.”

“Where?”

“No spoilers.” He opened the door for her and cocked an eyebrow expectantly.

So now she was going to get into a stranger’s car and let him drive her away God knew where. Oh yeah. Not happening. This night was over. Time to get her Betty-burger and go the hell home.

* * *

His car was a dark blue minivan, six years old. There was a sippy cup and a plushie unicorn in the back seat and a Febreze car freshener in the lighter socket. It smelled like French fries, lilacs and shoes.

He drove across town and, after asking once if the A/C was up too high (no), said nothing. Ana didn’t like quiet in the car, but she didn’t like the looks of the CD cases stashed between the seats either—one of the kids was a Belieber and the other was still listening to Muppets—so she sat it out.

He brought her to a cracked square of a parking lot with an abandoned strip mall in an L shape and a decayed building on the opposite corner. Mike pulled right up to the ruin and parked with his headlights aimed up at what used to be a set of doors. The façade overhead was weathered white, but the ghosts of letters were still barely visible here and there, along with a blotchy irregular shape at one end that sort of, if you squinted, looked a little like a deformed head. Wearing a top hat.

“In 1961, Fredbear’s Family Diner opened its doors,” said Mike, handing her a newspaper clipping. It came with a photo, but the building in the picture didn’t look much like this one, even forgiving the overgrowth. It took the strip mall behind it to convince her this was really the same place.

“Pizza parlor?” she inquired, scanning the article. Typical small town newspaper fluff piece, full of happy kids and excited entrepreneur. Brief mention of Otto Faust’s life and death, but mostly cheerful stuff.

“Pizza hadn’t made it to Mammon yet. The menu was hamburgers, cheeseburgers, French fried potatoes, onion rings, coffee and coke, and occasionally a tray of cupcakes supplied by one of the girls on staff with whom Metzger was rumored to be having an affair. Anyway, the food was nothing special, but no one came to Fredbear’s for the food.”

He handed her another newspaper clipping, this one with a larger picture of the diner’s interior. Half a dozen tables seating a couple dozen laughing kids, with three almost familiar faces towering above them. Freddy, sort of. Chica, even less so. And Bonnie, least recognizable of all. All three were clothed in the same golden-yellow fabric, with a satiny sort of finish to it, so that they almost seemed to be gleaming under the hanging lights.

“Despite the kid’s best efforts, the diner had to open without the animatronics he wanted,” Mike was saying, watching her squint at the photo. “He could build robotic bodies capable of a full range of motion, but computers back then just weren’t powerful enough to operate them.” He handed her another photograph, this one of a bank of three Star Trekkish-looking computers, covering an entire wall of a room floor to ceiling, all blinking lights, square buttons and reel-to-reel
tape. “These are the computers backstage at the diner. Cutting edge as they were, and believe me, they were better than anything anyone else had at the time, they still didn’t have enough memory to play an entire set. Someone had to physically change out the reels whenever the springtraps sang a new song and manually rewind them for the next set.”

“Springtraps?”

“That was what the employees called them. They were a kind of cross between an animatronic and a costume.” He gave her another picture, this one a photo of not-quite-Freddy bending over some kid in a birthday hat, offering his microphone. “You can see here, the release switch for the head. You push that in and you can lift the head off, then unzip the skin along the side here, down to the waist. The chest-piece comes off and the person inside can climb out. What you don’t see is that this isn’t a simple suit. It’s got a full endoskeleton that has to collapse in on itself to fit the person inside. See, when there’s no person wearing it, the springtrap can be anchored to ports along the wall. Once plugged in, they perform a series of pre-recorded songs and sketch routines, then when the curtain goes down, employees slip in the back and climb in the suits. The curtain goes up and the Fazbear gang actually step down off the stage and walk around the room. The kids went apeshit. Never seen anything like it. It was absolutely tomorrowland today. But it wasn’t what he wanted. Before long, Faust left the diner in the full control of Viktor Metzger and went back to the drawing board, but no matter what he did, he kept running into the same hitch, namely, that CPUs in the 1960s just weren’t good enough for what he wanted. The beginning of the end came in 1966, when a young boy named Billy Blaylock—”

Ana looked up sharply.

“—tried to crash some other kid’s birthday party. The other mommies called him out on it and maybe called him a little worse than that, although none of them admit it now. He started crying and made so much of a ruckus that his mother sent him outside.”

“Alone?”

“She couldn’t leave, she was working. Didn’t I tell you?” he asked, staring her down. “She was the one who baked the cupcakes.”

“No, you neglected to mention that bit. This is Jessie Blaylock we’re talking about?”

“The very one. She wasn’t supposed to use the restaurant as free day-care, of course, but the Faust kid was always a soft touch for a sob story and Metzger, well, he just really liked her cupcakes.”

“Which one?” she asked curiously.

“Lady, my research skills are mad as hell, but even I don’t know what flavor cupcakes Fredbear’s was serving back in 1966.”

“I meant,” she said, “which one of them was fucking her? You said she was having an affair with Metzger. Viktor or Erik?”

“Depends on who you ask. Anyway, Billy was sent outside for a Time-Out and twenty minutes later, she went out to bring him back in and he wasn’t there. No one saw a thing, no one heard a thing. The times being what they were, Mom just assumed he’d walked himself home. When she got there and he wasn’t, she figured he was off at friend’s house or playing in the hills. It may be worth observing here that she was never exactly in the running for the Mother of the Year award.”

“No,” Ana agreed mildly. “The Blaylock women have always been hard-hearted. Ask anyone.”
“It was hours before anyone thought to really look for him, and by then, Fredbear’s was the last thing on anyone’s mind. The whole town mobilized for the search, but he appeared to have vanished without a trace.”

Ana looked at the newspaper clippings again, at that bright golden Freddy bending over the birthday boy. Her uncle. This kid. This dead kid. “What happened to his mom?” she asked.

“When the search party was called off, she apparently hitchhiked out of town and off the edge of the Earth. Left her other children, twin girls, and them still in diapers. No one ever heard from her again. Why?” he asked, glancing at her. “What was the story you got?”

“Slutted out of town in the middle of the night and came to a bad end in some godless corner of the world. Left her ‘mistakes’ for her parents to raise. I never even knew she had a son.” In the photo, Billy beamed, caught eternally at the best moment of the best day of his life. Apart from the haircut and clothes, he looked so much like David, it was unreal. They could have been twins. “What do you think happened to him?”

“At the time Billy disappeared, the springtraps were behind the curtain on stage,” said Mike, not looking at her. “Of course, there was a door on the showstage wall that allowed employees to get in and out of the suits without being seen, but all the employees were accounted for by eyewitnesses. Except Mr. Viktor Metzger. As the manager, he was in the office, going over the books. Alone.”

“You think he did it.”

“Yeah, I do. I can’t prove it, but I absolutely believe it. I think he got in that suit and abducted a child in broad daylight. Eventually, he killed him. I also think it’s damned likely he killed Jessie when she came knocking on the right door looking for her son. But we’re getting ahead of the story. Billy was the first kid who actually vanished at Freddy’s, but he was far from the only kid who dropped off the edge of Mammon’s map during the diner’s six-year run.” Mike glanced at her. “You ready for this?”

“For what?”

He reached into his binder and brought out a thick sheaf of papers, stapled at the top left corner. Each page had a photocopy of a person’s face, usually a kid’s class picture, and a few descriptive lines. Some were police reports. Most were just missing posters, the kind that went up on community bulletin boards and in storefront windows.

“Before Billy disappeared, eight local youths, aged seven to seventeen, also went missing. Most of them were written off as runaways. But it was the sixties,” he said with an expansive shrug. “Counter culture was picking up steam and kids everywhere were starting to tune in and turn on. Dropping out wasn’t quite as commonplace yet, but it wouldn’t raise any eyebrows, especially in Mammon, which has always been on the lower end of the income bracket, in addition to being dropped in the middle of nowhere on the ass-end of Utah. Kids have been leaving town and never coming back for as long as there’s been a town to leave. A lot of the missing kids were what we’d today call ‘at risk’. Drinking. Smoking. Skipping school. As for the rest of them, there’s always trouble somewhere if you dig deep enough. Mom drinks? Kid must have run away. Dad’s got a girlfriend? Kid ran away. Even little Lisa Rutter here, only seven years old when she disappeared, well, her best friend moved to Florida over the summer, so of course, she’s on her way to Orlando with her teddy bear and her thumb out. And what’s more—” Out came another sheaf of papers, even thicker, to drop on top of the first batch. “—during the same six years, within the same ten square miles of town, at least twenty-one non-locals also appear to vanish. Now, that’s harder to prove, because we are talking hitchhikers, drifters and draft dodgers, and obviously no one knows
exactly where they drop off the map, but Fredbear’s offers cheap food, air conditioning and free
entertainment, and it’s a good bet a lot of them passed through those doors. One way, at least.
Most of the disappearances are never connected, not out loud, although the local teens joke about it
a bit, the way kids do. You know. Dare each other to sneak in after dark and shit like that. And
maybe some do.” He reached over to thumb at the corners of the missing persons pages. “Anyway,
if there was a shadow over the diner, it wasn’t very dark, in spite of everything. It took something a
whole lot bigger to shut Fredbear’s down.”

“Health violation?”

“Shit, in the sixties? You’d’ve had to be cooking out of the damn toilet to get a pink card back
then. Besides, Faust practically owned the health department. No, I’m talking about Springtrap
Chica.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Never heard of it, huh?”

“Not ringing any bells, no.”

“Well, I guess I’m not surprised. There was a non-disclosure clause in the suit. I only know about it
from the police reports. Once it went to the courts, radio silence.”

Ana waited politely and finally said, “Do I get to know…?”

“Yeah,” he said, but he wasn’t in any hurry. “It’s just…pretty bad.”

“I’m a big girl.”

“Yeah? So was Maria Osgoode.” He gave her a look. “She was inside the Chica suit when the
locking mechanisms that kept the animatronic frame compressed while someone was in the suit
failed.” He reached into his binder, but didn’t take anything out and after a few indecisive seconds,
pulled back his empty hand. “Maria was wearing the suit for a birthday party. Chica was supposed
to sing Happy Birthday and go around the table, talking to the kids. Like I say, the animatronics did
a lot of the movements and the singing and stuff, while the people did the talking, the interactive
stuff, and the walking. The springtraps weighed over three hundred pounds empty, but the unique
design of the suit allowed it to carry its own weight, anchoring to the human inside it when its
endoskeleton collapsed, and supplementing the human movements so the performer could
manipulate this incredibly heavy endoskeleton without a lot of effort.”

“Like a mechasuit.”

“God bless Japan,” Mike said with a sigh. “Yeah, like a mechasuit. Anyway, Maria Osgoode was
in the Chica springtrap, doing her thing at a birthday party. It’s hot in those suits, you know, so she
was sweating. And humidity, as it turns out, can affect those locking mechanisms, which had not
been replaced in years by this time and which had become, unbeknownst to anyone, unreliable. In
the middle of Happy Birthday, there’s a loud snapping sound and maybe a crunch, but with a dozen
singing kids and thirty others screaming and laughing in the background, who can say for sure?
One of the adults sees Chica, as she puts it, ‘do the chicken dance.’ Everyone thinks it’s part of the
show. A couple kids flap their arms right along with her. Everyone having a good time, right?”

“Right,” Ana said faintly.

“But after that, Chica’s awfully quiet. Her head is lolling. Her arms are hanging. She’s not
performing or anything anymore, just standing by the table, but hey, the cake is out and the kid’s
blowing out the candles, so what is there left for her to do? The party continues and Chica stands there and watches. Creepy. Worse, there’s a kind of smell starting to waft out. ‘Like batteries and dirty diapers,’ as one mom says.”

“Jesus.”

“The smell is getting stronger and Chica’s just standing there, so one of the moms politely asks her to push on. No reaction from Chica. Mom asks again and as she’s asking, she notices a kind of bloody froth or mucus around the nostril slits in Chica’s beak. Not a lot. She actually thought it was drops of ketchup, because kids get messy and condiments go flying sometimes. Then she sees what seems to be more of the same stuff on Chica’s eyes…but on the inside. Understandably freaked out, she goes to get the manager, who happens to be our old friend, Viktor Metzger. Metzger tries to have a word with Maria, but tar baby don’t say nothing and after a few minutes, he goes into the back room and comes out with a remote controller, like you find now in RC cars, only, like I say, this was 1966-67. Seeing Metzger steer a full-size chicken across the room was a big deal to those kids. Everyone was watching, so we’ve got dozens of witnesses to the way Chica was walking. Kind of lurching, they say. And I guess this could mean a lot of things and no one will ever know for sure, but to me, it says the human on the inside who’s supposed to be correcting for balance, wasn’t. By the time she got to the stage, she was also leaving wet footprints on the floor. Tiles were black, so there’s no one who can say for sure what those footprints were made of, just that they were wet. And stank.

“But Metzger got her on stage and dropped the curtain. Two minutes later, he’s back, flipping the Closed sign over on the windows and having quiet words with his staff. He doesn’t tell anyone to leave, mind you, just doesn’t let anyone else in. He also puts the springtraps to bed, and with Freddy and Bonnie out of sight, the kids get bored and the place empties out pretty quick. People over at the strip see just a sea of flashing lights the rest of night and at some point, Maria’s folks show up and the screaming starts.”

“What happened to her?”

Mike looked at her, looked hard. Again, he opened his binder. This time, he brought out a photo.

“They had to cut her out,” he said. It was her only warning.

Coroner’s photo. Unflinching. Unflattering. Unforgiving. Even washed and arranged on the table as she was, it was hard to know this had really been a person once and not a…a meat puppet. Bones protruded. Muscle and ligaments hung like streamers from every opening, and there were many. Arms off at the shoulder. Legs divided at the hips, knees and ankles. Body bisected at the waist, mostly emptied. Head off. The jaw gaped, toothless, silently screaming. The face itself was entirely gone, lacerated and pulled away into the scalp or down in folds around the neck. Her eyes dallied on stalks; one of them had popped. The torso actually looked as if it had been folded inside-out, vertebrae pushed through to the front and ribs fanning out along both sides like wings, feathered with strips of organ tissue. Ana had worked in a slaughterhouse once and still never seen anything so bloody or visceral.

“You’re not throwing up,” Mike observed. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or alarmed.”

“I don’t know what to say. This is…” She gave up and handed the photo back. “Put it away.”

He did. Face down.

“Maria’s folks sued Faust. He settled out of court for an undisclosed amount and a gag order and they moved out of Mammon. Fredbear’s Diner was shut down pending a full investigation, which
ultimately cleared the kid of all wrong-doing, but he never re-opened.”

“Well, we know he didn’t give up, so…”

“Faust had been working on those damn things for years. He was obsessed. Nothing would have stopped him from making those animatronics. But that didn’t change the fact that he didn’t have the computing power to make them do what he wanted them to do. So yeah, he did give up, in a way. He gave up on his own computer designs and went to Viktor Metzger for help. Just like in the good old days, they collaborated, only this time, it was the kid who made the bodies and Metzger who made them walk.”

“How?”

“Oh, Metzger spun some bullshit story about how his background in neuroscience allowed him to envision a unique methodology for synaptic transference modeled after a multi-dimensional capacitor similar in form and function to the cerebral cortex. You may recognize a lot of those words as making absolutely no goddamn sense in conjunction with the others,” Mike added dryly, “but I bet they sure sounded impressive back in ’67. The important thing was, they worked.”

“Yeah, but how?”

He slid a sideways glance at her.

“Oh come on.”

He looked back out the windshield at the diner.

“Oh, be serious! What are you telling me? That they’re…what? Evil? Seriously, are they supposed to be powered by demons? The ghosts of murdered kids? That Faust sold his soul to the Devil for what? The power to sell pizza? Come on!”

“You want to hear the rest of this or do I drive you back to the motel?”

Ana rolled her eyes. “Let’s hear it. But I’m not buying this Mephistopheles shit.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, lady. This shit’s crazy enough without your help.”

“You’re the one…whatever. Tell your story. It’s a long night, right?” she said, prophetically. “Let’s just make the most of it.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

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

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Following the unsolved disappearance of Billy Blaylock and the tragic accident that befell poor Maria Osgoode, Fredbear’s Diner closed in August of 1967 and never opened again,” said Mike, passing over a newspaper clipping to prove it from his binder of never-ending sorrow. “But the building stayed. Never renovated. Never leased. Never torn down. The springtraps were supposedly scrapped—”

“Supposedly?”

“We’ll get to that, I promise. The springtraps were gone, but the diner was still in working order and, as the hype surrounding Maria Osgoode’s death faded, a lot of kids and their parents started looking forward to a grand re-opening. The kid kept pretty close-mouthed about his plans, but at the annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony, the new and improved Fazbear Band made their first appearance, singing carols, dancing with the kids, and mingling with the audience. When the kid ended the party by announcing the impending opening of Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria, the roof damn near blew off with the cheers.”

He started up the car and drove. North to High Road, east three miles, as remote as the first site in its own way. She couldn’t really see how it was a better location. It didn’t even have a strip mall, just the restaurant and a parking lot, surrounded by trees. The resemblance to ‘her’ pizzeria was strong in that sense—the isolation, the quiet—especially when it came to bouncing over the broken asphalt, slapping grass that grew in the cracks and dipping in and out of mudholes, but the building itself was nothing special. Still, with restaurants, as with people, it was what was on the inside that counted.

“In February of 1968, the first real Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria opened,” said Mike, parking before the boarded-up doors. “With a couple big changes, some obvious, some very much behind the scenes. The biggest change of all wasn’t the name over the awning, but the name on the paychecks: Fazbear Entertainment, Incorporated. CEO, Fredrich Faust. Vice-President, Viktor Metzger. Stock options were made available. That had to have been Metzger’s idea, since by this time, his only source of income came from managing the restaurants, while the kid was making money in his sleep on patents he’d sold before his nuts dropped. Even so, the kid was smart enough to maintain a controlling interest in Fazbear Entertainment and he’s never sold it. Even today, when the stock can’t be worth the paper it’s printed on, he won’t let go of a penny’s worth. And there I am,” he added, shaking his head. “Getting ahead of the story. 1968. And in the months between the old site closing and the new one opening, it is perhaps worth noticing that Faust makes a lot of trips to the new site in the middle of the night and if you came close enough to it during the
day, you could hear music. Guitar, mostly. Not like someone left a radio on. Like someone was there learning to play.”

Ana rolled her eyes, but not at Mike. She knew Bonnie’s guitar was a prop, just like Brewster the Fake Rooster’s, with a speaker in it somewhere to pump out whatever songs had been programmed into it. She’d seen him ‘perform’ a hundred times over by now, had seen his hands strumming away on a stringless guitar, and if that wasn’t proof, nothing was. No, she wasn’t rolling her eyes at Mike Schmidt; she was rolling them at the little kid inside her who still believed Bonnie was a rock star who could really play if he had the chance.

“Anyway, opening night and Faust finally has his animatronics.” Mike handed her a small stack of newspaper clippings and photos celebrating the opening of ‘the first pizza parlor in Mammon’ and ‘the return of the Fazbear Band’. Everyone laughing. Everyone happy. And Freddy and the gang right there in the middle of it all, brand new, clean and colorful, smiling their animatronic smiles.

In appearance, if the Circle Drive incarnations marked the midpoint of the spectrum, these designs were as primitive as the present ones were advanced, but they were still perfectly recognizable. Gone were the shiny yellow suits. Freddy was not only in his final brown bear persona, but had his trademark top hat, bowtie and microphone. Bonnie was back in purple and if he also had what appeared to be freckles and a giant red bowtie, at least he also had a guitar, not his Flying V, but a regular acoustic. Chica was, in all honesty, a little homely and a lot pudgy, but in her bib, with a platter of cupcakes, she was still Chica. And Foxy could only ever be the indomitable Captain Fox, although he was no kiddie pirate in his first form. The hook was bigger, there was a jagged scar beneath the eyepatch and he had a lot more teeth showing in his smile.

“Yeah, it looks fun, doesn’t it?” said Mike. “Funnest place on Earth, I bet. Disney ain’t got nothing on Faust. Too bad about all the dead kids.”

Ana realized she’d been smiling and made herself stop.

“No. My mother never let me. I guess that makes me one of the lucky ones.”

“I bet it didn’t feel that way back then,” he said, without sympathy.

“No, it didn’t. How about you?” she asked, in some desperation to keep herself from falling back into that pit of those memories. “You ever been here when it was open?”

“Oh hell yeah. I went to all of them, all but the diner. I was born and raised in Hurricane, but there’s nothing can compare with this there and it’s not so very far to go, on special occasions. Had my ninth birthday party right here, in fact. Freddy brought me up on stage to do the birthday song and everything.” He was quiet a moment, then said, “You want to see inside?”

Ana looked out the window at the blackened shell of the building. “You sure it’s safe?”

“I don’t mean go inside. Although it’s probably safe enough now,” he added, leaning forward over the steering wheel to look the place over as he passed Ana a couple blown-up photographs. “Nobody’s here. But see those boards?”

“Yeah?”

“Underneath those boards are solid steel bunker doors. This place may not be getting any power, but those doors still weigh a thousand pounds, easy.”
“Why the hell would you need doors like that at a pizza parlor?” Ana asked, but it wasn’t the doors here she was thinking of.

“There’s only two reasons that spring to mind,” Mike replied. “To keep something out…”

“Or to keep something in,” Ana finished for him.

“Yup. So the only way we have to see it is through pictures.”

Ana looked dutifully at the first photo he’d given her. The dining room, which was pretty much the only room. One long counter ran the length of one wall, with signs reading Order and Pick Up and Tray Return at the proper points. The show stage occupied one corner of the room, with a door beside it that had a big gold star and a top hat on it, as well as a sign advising little fans that backstage was for Employees and Band Members Only. Across from the main stage were the restrooms, and between them, a little space closed off with deep purple curtains—the first Pirate’s Cove. The animatronics themselves were not in evidence, but beneath a hand-lettered banner reading GRAND OPENING, festooned with streamers and tinsel, were all the human employees, from wait-staff to cooks to clean-up, with the proud CEO and his much older partner in the front and another young man…a familiar face almost entirely hidden beneath the visor of a cap, showing nothing but the glint of the camera’s flash off the glasses he wore and the startling white slash of a smile. He wore the purple denim jacket and purple hat that were the forerunners of the Fazbear security uniform, but it didn’t stop there. He also wore purple denim jeans, purple shoes, purple gloves, a purple cap, even purple socks, just visible under the cuff of his pants leg as he half-knelt at the extreme right side of the first row, one arm casually draped over his thigh and angled to display the gold badge just under his shoulder.

“Who is that?” Ana asked, because she felt like she ought to know, like she already knew.

“That’s Erik Metzger,” Mike replied, watching her closely. “You ever see him before?”

She shook her head, but not in denial, not entirely. “Maybe. I don’t know. I couldn’t swear to it, but…”

“He looks familiar.”

Looks. Sounds. Looking at his shadowed face, she could almost hear a voice and although she couldn’t hear words, she knew it was asking her a question. She imagined she could feel the scruff of his stubble against her cheek, smell the phantom smell of his detergent, feel his arms around her. She knew him. Aunt Easter’s special man-friend. David’s father, maybe. The devil Aunt Easter fucked.

“Sure liked purple,” she said, feeling like she had to say something.

“That’s the thing I may not have mentioned about Erik. He had a neurological condition, a mild deficiency of some hormone or another that made him color-blind. Well, not the way most people are color-blind. He saw colors just fine, they just looked…dead to him. That was the word he used. Not washed out, not faded. Dead. All but the color purple. That was the only color that looked real to him. He wore it all the time. So when his good friend Fredrich gave him the job of head of security, he went ahead and made sure all the security uniforms were that godawful gaudy purple color. Just to make his friend happy. Nice guy, huh?”

Something in his tone made Ana look at him. “You’ve been leading me to believe Viktor was behind the disappearances all this time. Now you’re saying it’s his kid, too? Like, the family that slays together…?”
“They didn’t stay together. In fact, father and son split on opening night.”

“But you do think Erik was helping his dad disappear kids.”

“Yeah. I do.”

“And Faust? Was he helping, too?”

He seemed to think that over, but in the end, shook his head. “In 1968? No…no, I don’t think he knew. Not then, anyway. But we’re—”

“Getting ahead of the story.”

“Right. 1968, when Freddy Fazbear’s Pizza opens up, debuting Faust’s first true animatronic entertainers. There were only four of them in the beginning. Freddy Fazbear, of course, Chica the Baby Chicken, Bonnie the Bunny, and Captain Fox the Pirate. And unlike his springtrap costumes, these things didn’t need to be anchored and they didn’t hook up to wires and they especially didn’t have anyone inside. These things were fully mobile, fully interactive, fully operational animatronics.”

Ana nodded.

Mike looked at her and laughed. “1968,” he said again. “Understand something here. In 1968, pocket calculators were just starting to appear in stores for mass consumers, the first word processors were popping up in offices and were even less functional than the notepad program on your smartphone, Star Wars and its cutting-edge practical effects was almost a decade away, but Faust had apparently built robots that could walk around and sing songs to kids. To put that even more into perspective, we don’t have robots that can do that today. Bipedal mobility, fully-articulated endoskeleton and self-correcting balance, a guidance system that can not only recognize and adapt to obstacles and people, but can differentiate between adults and children, and even boys from girls.” Mike leaned forward, his face lit up like a demon’s in the light of his cell phone. “Faust built all that forty-five fucking years ago. For the singing animal band. In his goddamn pizza parlor.”

“I know you want me to ask how, but honestly, it’s the why that gets me,” Ana said, looking through the photos. The thought came to her that all of the kids she was looking at were grown now with kids of their own. Some were surely still in town, shopping at the same store where Ana shopped and passing her on the street. Some had moved away. Some might be in prison. Some were dead. This was not a birthday party; it was a haunted house, and these were the ghosts. “I’ve worked at a day care before and let me tell you, kids aren’t that hard to keep entertained. Just give ‘em some cough syrup and a cardboard box, they’re good for hours. Why was Faust so dead-set on having animatronics that could sing and dance?”

“And cook and play guitar and do card tricks, and the list goes on and on. But Faust’s fixation is really the easiest thing to understand about the whole mess. He wanted what he wanted and he wanted it now. Nothing more or less than that. As for Metzger’s involvement…” Mike leaned away again, shrugging. “I’ve got a bullshit theory or two, but we’ll get into that later. Right now, it’s still story time. This location, what we’ll call the Flagship, quickly becomes the most popular hangout in town. People literally come from all over Utah, even from out of state, just to see the Fazbear Band. That led to its own problems…but that’s not relevant at the moment, I guess. What is somewhat more relevant, is that Donn B. Tatum, chairman of Walt Disney Productions himself, comes by a few times and tries to lure Faust into the empire, but the kid won’t bite. He has his pizzeria and he’s happy.”
“So happy, he only stays open twelve years,” Ana remarked, moving the layout to the bottom of her stack of papers to study the picture again.

“And it’s a miracle he was able to do that much. Almost from the get-go, there’s scandal. Old Viktor’s been dipping it pretty regularly with the local girls and, as I say, Erik takes after his father in a lot of ways. The two of them get into it pretty aggressively over a certain young lady, who subsequently disappears. Runs away, they say. She’d apparently skipped town a few times before. Wild child, as so many small town kids are. Still, her parents are distressed and since Erik was the last person to see her, a cop is sent out to casa Metzger to question him. When he gets there, the officer sees a face in the attic window and insists upon searching the house, since he knows damned well there shouldn’t be anyone else living there. Viktor seems reluctant, but does take him upstairs where he finds the attic is essentially empty, except for a bed and a bunch of dolls. In his official, filed report, I want to emphasize, he takes the time to mention these completely irrelevant dolls and then goes on with his report, which amounts to a giant yawn and rubber stamp that says Runaway. So I called him. And even though it’s been decades, the now retired officer remembers—hang on.”

Mike shuffled through his papers and found one. He read, “‘At first, I thought I was looking at a bunch of corpses, because they were so big, but so thin. Life-size or taller. Nothing in there but these giant dolls and the bed. And to my eye, the bed had seen some use, you know? Although they weren’t that kind of doll.’”

“Gross,” Ana said, since he seemed to be expecting a reaction, but she was aware that made her something of a hypocrite, considering all the times she’d rubbed up on Bonnie.

“‘They were arranged around the room, most of them standing, and that gave me a start because I’ve got a little girl, you know. She’s got Barbies. You ever try to make those things stand? And these weren’t braced on anything, although they were all posed and they were all facing the door, as if they’d heard me coming and had all looked up. I’m not going to tell you they moved or anything stupid like that, but I have to admit, I got the strongest sense while I was there that they could move and just weren’t. The old man called them his collection, said he made them himself, and I thought that was creepy too, especially on account of certain rumors about him and some damned young kids around town, not to mention the whole Fazbear thing. So it was creepy, but he wasn’t holding some girl prisoner up there. I said good night and I left, and it wasn’t until I was actually in the car that I realized—’”

“None of them were at the window,” said Ana.

Mike looked at her, folding his paper away. “‘None of them were at the window,’” he agreed. “Anyway, opening night at the Flagship, Viktor and Erik are smiling for the cameras, but shouting behind closed doors. When the night is over, Viktor goes home alone and Erik moves in with Faust, which led to a whole new set of rumors.”

“You think the two of them…”?

“Me? No. Mammon is a conservative place and it doesn’t surprise me that people talked sideways about two guys who spend so much time together, but it doesn’t wash. Erik had one hell of rep around this whole area for tomcatting and Faust appears to have been almost entirely asexual, although he eventually married.” He hesitated, then shrugged. “That’s really getting ahead of the story, but what the hell. In 1980, the Mills family—father, mother, young son and teenaged daughter, Abagail—roll through town, stop at Freddy’s, and apparently roll out of town, off the road and into the canyon. The car is found a few days later, minus the girl, who turns up a few days after that with some signs of trauma, but no memory of anything beyond Freddy’s. Now she’s
sixteen, an orphan, and stranded in Utah, so the kid puts her up at the Sugartree while she sorts herself out. One thing apparently leads to another because when she can’t find anyone in her own family with the means or motivation enough to come get her, the kid lets her move in with him.”

“That seems a little extreme.”

“Doesn’t it? Especially since the kid doesn’t seem to have a whole lot to do with her once he gets her home. He’s much more interested in tinkering around in the basement, leaving Erik to entertain their new roomie. And entertain, he does. Under his wing, she goes a little wild and then a lot wild. And yet, it’s the kid who walks her down the aisle a few months later…and the kid whose name appears on the birth certificate seven months after that. This town being what it is, quite a lot of folks congratulated Erik on the happy event in front of Abby and the kid, but the kid never questions the new arrival’s paternity.”

“In public,” said Ana, who had some experience on the subject.

“Public, private.” Mike shrugged. “I talked to Abby. She never came right out and said the marriage was a sham, but about the kid himself, she only ever said he did his best to take care of her at a time when she was doing her best to self-destruct. And was she ever. According to rumor, Abby is hosting drug-addled orgies every weekend, but Fredrich remains oblivious, preferring to spend his nights down at Flagship or out on the town with Erik. However, when the boy, Randall, gets older, Mom starts dropping him off at Fazbear’s in lieu of daycare and Dad inexplicably lays down the law. He’s fine with the spending, he’s fine with the affairs, he’s fine with the mountains of cocaine that are allegedly blowing in and out of his house, but this man who has made a career out of entertaining children with his animatronics doesn’t want his own son anywhere near them. The couple finally separates, but never divorces. Dad sends Mom and Junior out of state, funding Abby’s continued adventures and putting the kid through school as far as he cares to go, but always from a distance. All this is in the papers, practically on a daily basis. Want to know what isn’t?”

The binder opened. Out came a sheaf of those stapled missing persons sheets and police reports, even thicker than before.

“Seventeen abandoned out of state vehicles, carrying twenty-two adults and eighteen kids between them, missing.”

“Never found?” Ana guessed.

“Actually, six victims eventually turn up, dumped out in the desert. Some of them showed signs of possible sexual abuse and two of them were decapitated, but all of them had been grossly mutilated.”

“Like Maria Osgoode?”

“Not exactly. There were very few actual cuts, but far more crushing damage, especially in the torso. Multiple broken ribs in every case, for example. The skulls of the victims who hadn’t been decapitated were crushed in the front and back. Broken collarbones, shoulders, hips…not so much the hands or feet, though…and massive bruising over the entire body. The two tallest both had breaks across their arms just above the elbow and their thighs, just above the knees. The other four had the same sort of breaks, but below the elbows and knees. In fact, if you laid all six of them out, those breaks in the long bones nearly aligned, give or take an inch here or there.”

“What in the hell could cause that?”
Mike looked at her and shook his head. From the cover pocket of his binder, he brought out a tablet and turned it on. There were no games on his desktop, no bluebird, no YouTube, just a neat row of folder icons with random numbers and letters for names. He tapped the first one in the queue and passed it over to her.

A video started playing. In the top right corner, a time stamp told her it was March 8th, 1968. Opening night. For the first minute or so, she watched Freddy, Bonnie and Chica work the room. It was amazing to see them, not just so clean, but moving so easily. Each of them had a distinctive walk: Chica’s was light and bubbly, almost a scamper; Bonnie sauntered; Foxy strode (he had a tail, Ana discovered with a start. Somehow, even knowing he was a fox, she’d never imagined him with a tail and now, seeing it, she wondered why they’d ever stopped including it in his design); Freddy, the consummate entertainer, moved through the crowd, one arm always out to welcome a small fan in for a hug or shake a parent’s hand. But when the time stamp changed to April 20th, so did Chica. Suddenly, she was lurching, reeling from side to side with every step, although it didn’t seem to be affecting her performance in any other regard. May 14th, and Chica was back to normal, but now Bonnie was doing the Living Dead routine, struggling to climb the three short steps to the stage and reeling like a sailor when he finally got there. And then it was Freddy on June 20th, dragging his way between the two rows of tables as he sang Happy Birthday and wagged his ears. September 25th, the band was back to normal, but Foxy was strangely stiff and reserved as he led his audience of little mateys in song. Just before the curtain fell on him, Ana saw his neck bend and his arms drop to cradle his stomach, like a man about to be sick. On December 13th, it was all of them, zombie-walking around the room and singing Christmas carols. When the screen finally went black, Ana kept staring, hardly knowing what to think.

“Did you see it?” Mike asked.

“Yeah.”

“No. Not just the way they were moving. Did you see the rest of it?” When she only frowned at him, he replayed the video. “It’s easier to see it around the eyes,” he said. “Just watch the eyes.”

So she watched. And halfway through the video, she saw it, all right—maroon colored stains spreading out from the eyes like oily tears. Or bloody ones.

Once she saw that, she saw it everywhere—around the corners of their mouths, bubbling up around their nostrils, staining the tips of their fingers, seeping through their joints at their elbows and knees...everywhere.

“What is it?” Ana asked.

“What do you think it is?”

“You’re going to tell me it’s blood.”

“No, I’m not,” he replied calmly. “That’d be speculation. All I can tell you is it’s a viscous, reddish-brown, mucoid substance that appears to have leaked into their cooling ducts. I can also tell you that there were a lot of complaints about the smell, especially in the summer.”

“Batteries and dirty diapers.”

“Yup. And what do you know, whenever I checked the dates on those videos, I just happened to find an out-of-state car abandoned the next day. Quite a co-inky-dink, wouldn’t you say?”

“You think he was killing them—Viktor Metzger, I mean—and stuffing their bodies into the
“Until it was safe to sneak them out and dump the bodies, yeah. That’s exactly what I think.”

“But that’s... That’s incredibly risky! This guy is supposed to be a genius? Why would he do something so stupidly dangerous as kill people at the restaurant where he’s working and hide their bodies out in plain sight? Oh Jesus,” she blurted as a new, horrified thought hit her. “You think he’s making them into pizzas.”

“What?” Mike swung around to gape at her and then, incredibly, to laugh. “Sheesh, I thought I was bad! No, lady, as far as I know, the sausage in the deep dish meat lovers is strictly on the up and up.”

“Then why kill them at the pizzeria?”

“Remember, officially, all these kids ran away. And none of them warranted a byline in the papers. No one was talking about Nina Vasquez or Peyton Price or Shana Uwertz or…” Mike shook his head and stared grimly at the face of the building. “Faust’s failing marriage was far more interesting to the citizens of Mammon than dismembered kids in their own backyards. I can’t even... You know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You don’t, actually, because you weren’t here. You’re just hearing about it. And you think it’s awful, I get that, I’m not saying you’re some sociopath or whatever, I’m just saying you can never really understand just how... how un-understandable it is that no one talks about this. Yeah, the local kids dare each other up to sneak into Fazbear’s and you’ll see some Freddy Lives graffiti here and there, but for fuck’s sake, by the time the first Freddy’s closed, fifty people had disappeared in or around one of the kid’s restaurants and they still had him lead the goddamn Fourth of July parade. And maybe he didn’t know what was going on at first, or maybe he just didn’t want to know, but by 1984, he had to have known, because he made sure his kid was clear of it. He didn’t stop it, mind you, but he got his kid out.”

Mike stopped to light another cigarette and take a few calming drags. “Anyway, back to the story. In December of 1980, the Flagship site throws one whopper of an employee Christmas party and then closes its doors forever. Again, the building is abandoned. Never put on the market, never renovated, never utilized, even for storage.” He pointed up at the corners of the windows where the boards had come loose and where strands of tinsel and wires still hung, obscured by cobwebs and dead creeper vines. “Never even took the party decorations down. That party, by the way, is the last time anyone sees Viktor Metzger alive. Apparently, he followed one of the teenaged hostesses into the back room while Santa Bear passed out presents and neither one of them ever came out.”

“Let me guess. The rumor crowd says they eloped. Case closed. No further questions asked.”

“More or less. And to be fair, the girl in question had been bragging to her friends for some time about bagging some ‘rich old dude’ at the place where she worked and, thanks to Metzger’s history with government work, a relocation is entirely plausible. The military’s no-comment attitude only helps seal the deal, but for a guy who’s going out of his way to suggest the old man is still alive, Erik sure acts like he knows Viktor is never coming back. The first thing he does after Dad disappears is drag one of his father’s life-size dolls out into the yard and tie it to a tree.”

“The totally normal act of a totally sane person,” Ana commented.

“It gets better. One by one, he brings the rest of his father’s collection out and burns them while
the first doll watches. Not the little dolls, you understand. Or the old ones, the ones you’d think would be worth more. Only the newest ones, the ones he’d built since meeting the kid. The ones he keeps in his attic. Rumor has it, Erik yells at his prisoner the entire time. Of course, rumor also has it the prisoner yells back. And the dolls scream as they burn. But folk aren’t exactly at their most sober over the holidays,” said Mike with a shrug. “The witnesses being who they were—hunters out of season on private property—weren’t the most reliable sources themselves. So it was weird enough to get around the rumor mill, but Erik just laughs along and by the time New Year’s rolls around, it’s all blown over. Erik rakes up the ashes and goes back to work.”

“To work?”

“You bet. He’s still the head of security, after all, and however it happened, Viktor’s gone, which leaves a void in the Vice-President slot at Fazbear Entertainment. Who else would fill it? He also takes over as manager of the next Fazbear’s Pizzeria, which we’ll call the Toybox. Shall we?”

“This is the one on Mulholland?”

He threw her an appraising glance. “You’ve been?”

She shook her head. “Never been inside,” she said again. “I peeked in some windows, but it had been closed for years already.”

“Did you see any of the Toys?”

“I just said—”

“It was closed,” he said for her. “But you peeked in some windows. Did anything peek back?”

“No,” said Ana, then sat and really thought about it, picking through the threads of her memory to that hazy afternoon. She could see herself, a small child with her hands cupped around her eyes where the boards did not quite meet over the windows, but of what that child might have seen through the dirty glass, she had no idea. “I don’t think so,” she said at last. “I’m not the most reliable witness myself, but I’m pretty sure even I’d remember something like that.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I don’t think they were there to be seen, so you’re probably remembering it right.”

“But you’re still taking me there?” she asked as he backed the car away from the Flagship.

“Yup.”

“All the way across town, just to look at another empty building?”

“Unless you tell me different.” He waited, then deliberately cocked his head and said, “You telling me different?”

Ana sighed and shook her head. “No. I’m still not saying I believe any of this, but I do want to hear it.”

“I guess that’ll do for now. And for the record,” Mike remarked as he navigated out of the parking lot, “I never said the Toybox is empty.”
“Although the Flagship closed suddenly, it was clear that a move had been in the works for some time,” Mike began as he drove down the silent streets of Mammon. There was no other traffic, few lights, no sign of life—the perfect setting for a ghost story. “The Toybox had been under construction for over a year already and it was only about another six months before it opened. You should know that Metzger had a pretty heavy hand in the design of all three restaurants so far, and he insisted on being involved in every level of the construction process. After his disappearance, Erik took over in that regard as well. Like his father, he brought in most of his workers from outside town, sometimes outside the state, and it was rare for any of them to stay on longer than it took to do any one specific job. As a result, hardly anyone apart from the Metzgers and the kid had any real idea of the full scope of the project. There were rumors of secret passages, secret rooms, hidden doors—the whole bit. One guy swore he got turned around in the basement and stumbled into a room where the old springtraps were being stored, and this is an especially bizarre claim since not only were the springtraps allegedly scrapped, but there is no basement on the filed plans for the Toybox, or for any of the restaurants.”

“And you’re telling me this because…?”

“I’m telling you everything,” Mike Schmidt replied. “Whatever you want to make of it, that’s up to you. And in that spirit, in that dead time between the closing of the old Freddy’s and the opening of the new, some human remains wash out of a culvert outside of town after a storm. It’s missing a lot of bones, including the skull, but even without dental records or fingerprints, it’s obvious to those in the know that they’ve got a young boy and with a little further investigation, he’s identified, thanks to a slight malformation of the right foot. Guess who?”

Ana glanced at her stack of missing persons, then looked at him. “Billy Blaylock.”

“You’re good.”

“How long had he been dead?”

“You’re very good. About ten years.”

“Meaning he’d been kept alive after his abduction for two years.”

“So the experts claimed, although they used the word ‘disappearance’ and not ‘abduction’. The idea that someone in their extremely small and close-knit community might have kidnapped and kept a boy for two years without anyone finding out being impossible, it was concluded that Billy
had run away.”

“And what?” Ana asked, not quite laughing. “Lived in the canyon on his own for two years?”

“Scavenging off campers and sleeping in caves, yeah. Plenty of kids in the world survive longer in worse conditions, according to them. The bones showed no signs of malnourishment or long-term abuse and the cause of death was put down to misadventure. His skull was never found. And what does that have to do with the price of tea in China, you ask?”

Ana didn’t ask.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. Who knows? Anyway, the Toybox opens late in May, just in time for summer, and the whole frigging town turns out for the grand re-opening, only to discover major changes. The Flagship’s animatronics had been removed, allegedly for cleaning and updating. All except for Foxy. Foxy was always Erik’s favorite, so he came back, but all the rest of them were gone, replaced with the most godawful plastic abortions you can even imagine.”

As he said this, he came to a stop for a convenient red light and used the break to pull up another video on his tablet. “Watch this,” he ordered as the light turned green.

“Oh.”

“Okay,” she said cautiously, trying to brace herself as the video started. But no matter how braced she thought she was, when the Fazbear Band appeared, her mouth dropped dumbly open. “What the actual fuck?”

“Yeah.”

“Those are hideous!”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I would definitely remember seeing one of these things, I don’t care how long ago it was. My God, they look like dildos!”

Mike snorted. “Yeah. Faust designed them mostly as a dig at the Disney guy, who had said his old animatronics were bulky and ugly the first time he came out. So he built these guys as a lark, and the next time Dunn’s cronies came out to headhunt him, he invited them over to his place for a party and unveiled these guys as the entertainment. Said he cut them up just for Disney.”

Cute. Sure, okay. She could see that, the same way Teletubbies and the Go YabbaGabba Gang were supposedly cute. They were plastic, that was the first thing. Hard, shiny, crayon-colored plastic. Freddy’s new body was pear-shaped; Bonnie had a pot belly and a polka-dotted bow tie; Chica had little pink shorts and a Barbie-doll figure only partially hidden by her bib. All of them, every one, had been tarted up with little round pink cheeks and big eyelashes. Bonnie especially suffered from this treatment. She wasn’t even sure he was still meant to be a boy.

And he was blue. Not purple-blue, not bluish just in this light, but bright, bright robin’s egg blue.

_What color was I?_ Bonnie had asked that one time when she’d told him about her treasured childhood poster. _Are you sure I wasn’t blue?_

Had he known about this incarnation of himself? If he had, why hadn’t he just told her when she asked when he’d ever been blue? Why had he just shrugged it off as one of his crossed-wire moments?

Why had he hid it?
For that matter, why had the Toybox itself been hidden? Of all the photos in the lobby at the Old Quarry pizzeria, there were no Toys, not the slightest glimpse. It was as if whoever had put that collage together had attempted to erase Mulholland from Fazbear’s history.

And then the scene on the tablet changed and thoughts of the lobby at Freddy’s and Bonnie’s color-changing casing dashed away. She saw a small stage with a starry curtain, rising even as she watched on the bow of a plastic pirate ship, and there behind the ship’s wheel, she saw a familiar face, one so fantastically out of place that she physically recoiled, bumping her head on the high back of the passenger seat. “But that’s—” she blurted and then had to honest-to-God clap a hand over her mouth to shut herself the fuck up.

“What?” asked Mike, his attention too occupied by the turn he was making to look for himself. “What is it?”

Good question. What was it? She’d thought it was either a white wolf or maybe an arctic fox on seeing it on the Grand Opening banner hanging in the real Freddy’s foyer. Now that she was seeing the whole thing, it was definitely a fox, but more to the point, it was one of the ‘New Faces of Freddy’s’. It was, in fact, Polly Pull-A-Part. What was it doing here, almost thirty years ago?

Mike finally glanced over and smiled. “Who do you think it is?”

“It can’t be Foxy,” she said finally. “He’s a girl!”

“Naw.”

“Naw, nothing, he’s been fucking transgendered! He’s got lipstick! He’s got a pink fucking heart on his chest! He’s got tits!”

“Yeah, but that’s not Foxy. That’s his first mate, Foxanne.”

“First mate? Horseshit! Since when?”

“Since Erik Metzger said so. Keep watching.”

Right on cue, the cabin’s door opened and out came the real Foxy, thank God. But only sort of. Gone was the flocked furry look, replaced by hard plastic skin to match the rest of the toys. He still had a tail, sleeker (a bit snakish and evil, actually) than the full plume of his female counterpart. His frame as a whole was longer and leaner, giving him a hungry look. Even his face was different, more angular, with a longer muzzle and so many teeth, they showed even when his mouth was closed. Still, there was the hat she remembered from all Aunt Easter’s videos, red feather and all. He had a proper pirate coat, embroidered in gold braid, and a blue gem set in the buckle of his sword belt. His boots were black and shiny, well-cared for.

He strode out and down the gangplank, hook raised in greeting, calling all his little mateys over and introducing himself, his ship, and his first mate. He waited, one arm outstretched toward the unmoving figure of Polly…of Foxanne, then introduced her again, a little louder. Belatedly, she staggered toward him, her good hand raised against the stage lights, flinching as she stared around the room.

Like Foxy, she was dressed for the part of a pirate, although an effort had been made to girlie her up quite a bit. She wore a flouncy white blouse spilling out over the top of a black corset (not the sort of thing one expected to see on a kid’s show pirate) and a pink striped skirt that was really just a scarf tied around her waist, split in the back to allow for full mobility of her weirdly jointed tail and surely only coincidently granting anyone who might be looking a peek at her round, plastic ass.
She had a bright red bow around her neck and another around the tip of a full, foxy tail. The hook she wore on her left arm was capped with pink leather. There was also a pink parrot on her shoulder, and as Foxanne stood and stared vapidly out at the auditorium, it flapped its plastic wings and squawked, “Hey Foxanne, why does it take pirates so long to learn the alphabet?”

Foxanne jerked hard and took a clumsy swing at it with her hook, then blinked, shivering, her ears flat and eyes wide.

The parrot waited a few beats, then squawked and said, “Because they only know ten letters—I, I, R and seven Cs!” and laughed raucous, plastic laughter.

Foxanne stared at her hook, turning it slowly in the stage lights, while the cameras in the pupils of her eyes irised larger and smaller. When the parrot continued, “I was great in school myself,” it was Foxy who said, “What was yer favorite subject?”

“Arrrrrt!” said the parrot and squawked that shrill laughter again. “But you like school, don’t you, Foxanne?”

Foxanne blinked.

“Not so much,” said Foxy. “Yar, I cut class so often, they used to call me Captain Hooky!”

And on it went—the parrot doing one half of a routine and Foxy doing the other half, while his first mate stood painfully silent, occasionally looking at one or the other of them, but mostly just staring at the audience.

“Oh, that’s fucking creepy,” Ana said.

“Keep watching. Four minutes in, it gets real.”

And sure enough, at four minutes and eleven seconds, right in the middle of a chorus of the Dead Man’s Reel, some young mother in the audience put her crying baby on her shoulder and headed for the exit. As she passed by the stage, Foxanne suddenly leapt over the side of the ship. If Foxy hadn’t slung his arm across her shoulders and swung her around for the chorus, she might gone right off the edge.

“Rewind it,” Mike said before she could say anything. “Half-speed.”

She knew what he wanted her to see and she really didn’t want to see it, but she did as he said. And watched as Foxanne’s eyes locked on the crying baby, her pupils irising wide until her eyes were swallowed by black, just sockets in her grinning, kid-friendly face. Once more, she leapt overboard, her hooked hand pulling back, glinting in the stage lights. Real metal. Really sharp. Her boots hit the stage and she lunged again, jaws opening wide—

—and Foxy’s arm trapped her. His hand clenched, disguising the grip like a hug of camaraderie. He yanked her away as her jaws snapped shut, too damn close to that baby’s head and her harried, oblivious mother. Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum, sang Foxy as Foxanne glared at him. He twirled her away to his other side, putting himself between her and the audience so smoothly, Ana hadn’t even noticed it the first time. Slowly, Foxanne’s pupils irised small. She blinked and began to sing.

“Jesus tapdancing Christ,” breathed Ana, replaying it yet again.

“Yeah, they’re biters,” said Mike dryly. “I have no idea how many kids got bit during the Toybox’s run, but there were twenty-one for sure because that’s how many counter-suits were filed by Fazbear Entertainment after the parents of bit kids talked about it in spite of a non-disclosure
agreement when their own suit was settled out of court. Of those, Foxanne bit a whopping twelve kids, Freddy got five, three by Chica, and Bonnie only bit one, but that one was a doozy. He actually severed a kid’s arm.”

“Bonnie?!”

“Yeah. People think it couldn’t have happened because his teeth are so blunt, but it’s not the sharpness that counts, it’s the bite force. Those animatronics can close their mouths with over eight thousand pounds of pressure per square inch, twice the biting power of a fucking crocodile. And those teeth are steel. Blunt or not, Bonnie’s teeth snapped that kid’s bone like a breadstick. And he didn’t just bite it. The guy I talked to said he tore it off and ate it.”

“Oh huh.”

Mike glanced at her. “Lady, that is easily the least unbelievable thing you’re going to hear tonight.”

“That Bonnie ate a kid’s arm? Come on, they’re robots! Maybe he chewed on it if the kid was dumb enough to stick his hand in there when Bonnie was talking, but they can’t eat anything!”

“Of course they can. All the animatronics can eat. It was part of their schtick. They’d come out, have a slice of pizza and a swig of pop with the kids. Once in a while, the gen-1 and gen-3 Bonnies would swipe a beer. He wasn’t supposed to, but he was kind of famous for it. Anyway, my point is, if you look in one of their mouths, you’d see two sets of teeth, one up front to smile with, and one in back, to help grab food and pull it down their throats.”

“Is that—” Ana caught herself before she could say what that’s for and instead, rather lamely finished, “so?”

“So if the kid’s arm was deep enough in Bonnie’s mouth when he bit it off, yeah, he ate it. And for your information, no, the kid didn’t stick his hand in Bonnie’s mouth for a gag. Witnesses say Bonnie grabbed him. Bonnie snapped the kid’s arm at the shoulder and tore it right the fuck off. And Bonnie ate that screaming kid’s arm right in front of him, yumming like it was the drumstick on a Thanksgiving turkey.”

Ana sat with that for a while, then said, “I kind of hate myself for asking, but what’d the kid do?”

“Poked him in the nose,” Mike replied, like he’d been expecting the question. “The noses make a little honking sound on all the animatronics. All but Chica, I guess I should say.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think any of them like it. I got a video somewhere that shows gen-4 Freddy getting booped and he gets this absolutely perfect fuck-you face, although he doesn’t do anything about it. Kid was, like, four. And it was daytime. At night…things are different.”

On the video, the plastic Bonnie—she couldn’t call him that. Blue, then. Blue was playing his guitar for a crowd of kids. It was an electric guitar this time, so much cooler than his first acoustic, but definitely a step down from the one he had now. Blue’s guitar, forked shape and bright colors aside, looked like a toy. So did he, of course—

Wait, what was that?

Ana rewound the video slightly and watched as Blue raised his head and looked out at the audience, grinning his idiot bunny-grin. Yes, she really had seen that: his eyes turned black, just
like Foxanne’s before she’d tried to make a snack out of a baby. Come to think of it, she’d seen Freddy’s eyes—her own Freddy, there on Edge of Nowhere—do it too.

“What’s going on with their eyes?” she asked.

“I’m really not sure. It could be related to their facial recognition program or their cameras taking in more light for some reason. Creepy, huh?”

“Everything about them is creepy. God, I really hate the look of that Freddy. He’s so…frumpy. And he waddles. Look at him waddling around the—holy crap, he just hit that kid!”

And he had. As he walked through the dining area, singing his songs into the mic, some small boy had run up for a hug—although who would want to hug that blocky plastic, Ana had no idea—and just as a startled donkey will kick when approached from the rear, Freddy had let fly a backhand and knocked the kid on his ass. And then just stood there, staring down at him with his arms at his sides and his eyes full of black space until Erik Metzger in his purple security uniform came up and led him away.

“That guy again,” said Ana.

“Yup. It’s funny, because he was the only security guard working at the Flagship. I mean, who the hell even needs security at a pizza place? But at the Toybox, he had a whole team. Two day guards under his watch. One night guard. We’ll talk more on that later. Roll that segment back, though, and pay attention to the background.”

Ana obediently rewound to the beginning of the clip, just as that poor kid was starting his innocent run, but kept her gaze focused on the action beyond Freddy. And sure enough, she saw it.

She had seen the little monster in other parts of the video already, but hadn’t really given it much notice, thinking of it more or less like a prop. It looked like a doll, a spherical body supporting a spherical head, with arms sticking straight out, holding bunches of balloons on brightly-colored ribbons. To Ana, its huge eyes, triangular nose and rictus of a grin made it look skull-like, but she knew she wasn’t exactly objective about the Toys. Still, at least this one couldn’t move around.

Except it did. When Freddy hit that kid, the balloon-holding thing turned its big head to watch. Then it turned its body. Then it waddled forward a few steps. Beneath the angry ranting of the crying child’s mom and the usual hubbub of the pizzeria, Ana could swear she heard a high, happy laugh, of the uncanny kind a doll would make if you pulled its string.

“That’s Balloon Boy,” Mike said.

“That’s nightmare food, is what that is.”

“Oh lady, you ain’t seen nothing yet. Where are you at? What time?”

“Uh, twelve and a half minutes.”

“Oh, okay, you’ve got a clip with Chica and then it should come on next. It’s the last one and we’ll probably get there before you finish.”

The clip with Chica was nothing too bad, although Ana couldn’t help but feel a bit awkward about those tiny shorts. The shape of the plastic body didn’t bother her so much—it was just hips and boobs, no worse than a Barbie doll, and to be honest, the chest was fairly flat and the hips pretty chunky—but the shorts were practically panties, turning the relatively underdeveloped female figure into something sleazy, almost pornographic. Even worse somehow was the bib, the same
exact bib that the real Chica wore now (almost. This one said Let’s Party; the real one said Let’s Eat, but those were details), but just the fact that it was a baby bib on top and hot pants below made everything wrong. However, the most disturbing thing of all wasn’t anything Chica was wearing, but something she carried.

A cupcake. An oversized plastic cupcake. It had a single striped candle and two eerily human-like eyes set in its plastic pink frosting, and it was, at this moment, in the secret room in the basement of Aunt Easter’s house.

At no point did Ana think she might own a replica or a toy. No, there was only one cupcake, Toy Chica’s cupcake, and Aunt Easter had taken it home and put it in that creepy playroom she’d made for her vanished son.

If there was anything else she was supposed to be seeing in that segment, she missed it, distracted as she was by that cupcake, which put her even more on edge when it came to its sudden end. She waited, tense, as the next clip started.

The Toybox had an arcade, smaller than the one at her Fazbear’s, but pretty impressive for Mammon in the eighties. In the foreground, she could see a token machine, the old fashioned kind, where you put in a dollar and get five tokens, bright gold, probably stamped with Freddy’s face or at the very least his top hat. Kids, mostly teens, packed the small space, throwing tokens into games and taking away tickets. The camera panned over them slowly, following one kid in particular as he wandered from game to game, trying skee-ball and darts, Galaga and Pac-Man, Polybius and Team Turbo Racer.

Not knowing what she was waiting for made the few seconds stretch out, so that her eye soon wandered from the customer to any other kid who wandered in and out of the shot. There was no other action to focus in on and nothing really interesting or ominous about the scene. After all, this was just an arcade and, except for the games themselves and some small variation in the layout and color scheme, it was the same as the arcade at her Freddy’s, right down to the giant novelty gift box behind the prize counter.

There, Ana’s eye was drawn as time trickled by, not because anything was happening there, but just because the box was deeply unpleasant to look at. The one at her Freddy’s had been filthy and falling apart and she’d thrown it out without a second thought, but somehow seeing it in its intended form was more disturbing. Not-quite squared and not-quite white, with a plastic novelty ribbon in bright, bright scarlet, it dominated the scene. It was taller than the counter and its slightly irregular angles gave it a looming quality that Ana really did not like.

The kid who the camera was following apparently spent the last of his tokens and headed for the prize counter. There was no cashier to take his tickets. Nor did he seem to expect one. When he made his decision, he stepped up and pressed a button. Oddly, it was not until the music stopped that Ana realized she’d been hearing it all along. A kid’s song, familiar but not immediately nameable, and easy to miss in the noisy arcade. But when the kid pushed the button, the song stopped and a few gamers looked around, some of them grinning in anticipation.

Arcades, by their very nature, could never be truly quiet, but enough kids watching instead of playing, this one achieved a kind of hush, enough for Ana to hear it when the music started up again. A different song this time, although still a kid’s song—a slightly manic calliope version of Pop Goes the Weasel.

Everyone was watching the box behind the prize counter and everyone who had ever wound a jack-in-the-box and heard that music knew what to expect. Ana knew. All the same, it hit her like a punch when the lid flew up like it did and for the…the thing…the puppet-thing…to pop out.
‘Like a spider,’ she thought and felt a brief surge of vertigo so strong, she thought for a moment there was a very real chance she was about to faint. Like a trapdoor spider, that was exactly what it was. One second, harmless gift box, and suddenly, a puppet.

“Pull over,” said Ana and she must have looked like she meant it even if her voice wasn’t much more than a whisper, because Mike took one look at her and took it to the shoulder, braking hard.

Fighting free of her seat belt, she kicked open the door and leaned out, gulping dry Utah air, and gradually the feeling subsided.

“You okay?” Mike asked.

“Yeah.” Ana spat, even though she hadn’t thrown up. The taste of it was right there at the back of her throat, bilious and coppery. She spat again and folded herself back into the car.

Mike had recovered his tablet and as soon as she was buckled in again, he passed it over. He had rewound the video playback before pausing it, which meant Ana had to watch the puppet pop out again. That sick/spidery feeling passed over her, but the kid in the video wasn’t fazed at all. Even when the puppet flew right at his bored face, he just held out his tickets.

The puppet took them. Another animatronic.

It was tall, seven feet at the very least, if that counter was the standard size, and cadaverously thin. Its arms and legs were thin as a child’s and did not appear to be jointed, instead bending snake-like wherever needed. It had hands, after a fashion, with four long, long, long pointed fingers and no thumb, but no feet. Its legs just ended. Its hips were no wider than necessary to accommodate its legs, but its chest was fairly broad, and the waist that connected them was no more than a tube. The effect was undeniably skeletal.

She couldn’t tell if it was dressed in clothes or just painted, but it was made to appear as if it were wearing almost a harlequin’s garb—all black, with Burtonesque stripes from the wrists to the elbows and the knees to the ground. It had no visible face, only a porcelain mask strapped to its featureless head. The mask had slightly slanted, empty eyes, rouged-up cheeks, and a wide toothless gawp of a mouth, but the most noticeable feature were the bluish stripes painted down the sides of its face, like tear tracks spilling from its eyes to its vapidly smiling mouth.

It took the kid’s tickets and listened to what the kid wanted. It did not turn around to get it, though. Its head turned. The rest of it just…bent backwards and became the front. And that was awful. That was so awful.

The puppet took a Fazbear sticker packet off the lowest shelf and gave it and about three tickets back to the boy. It raised its hand—God, those fingers—and then flipped backwards like a Slinky in reverse and sort of…poured itself back into its box. The lid closed. The original music began to play and now, because she knew to listen for it and because the noise of the arcade was at its lowest ebb, she heard it. Not clearly, but enough.

My grandfather’s clock was too tall for the shelf, so it sat ninety years on the floor.

‘This was my father’s favorite song,’ someone who loved her said, as plainly as if he had leaned in from the backseat of Mike Schmidt’s dadmobile and whispered it into her ear. She could feel the scratch of his stubbled cheek, smell the good detergent/pizza/sweat smell of him. ‘This was my father’s favorite song. It’s about death.’

“You okay?” Mike asked, wrenching her out of those safe arms and into the front seat of this car.
Ana shook her head, then shook it harder and said, “What is it? Who made it and for fuck’s sake, why?”

“That’s one of Metzger’s dolls. Viktor, I mean, not Erik. It’s modeled after a toy he had as a kid in Germany, apparently. You can see it in a few family photos.”

“Please tell me I don’t have to look at any.”

“You won’t. I didn’t bring any. I don’t like looking at them either. As bad as that thing is, seriously, the inspiration is so much worse. Anyway, Metzger apparently built that monster for the first pizzeria, but Faust thought it would scare the kids. One of the few times he ever said no to the old man, but he couldn’t say no to Erik.”

“You said Erik burnt his father’s doll collection.”

“All but those two, the puppet and Balloon Boy. Erik wanted them as a kind of tribute to his father, which is weird, since a, his dad allegedly wasn’t dead, and b, they weren’t close, and c, Erik was often witnessed talking to the marionette in a very disparaging fashion. Taunting it, like. Occasionally in German.”

“I know I’m overusing the word creepy here, but…that’s creepy. Did he talk smack to the other one, too?”

“Not that I ever heard of. Balloon Boy was more of a…a gift.”

“To Faust? Why would anyone want that giggling little freak?”

“No, not to Freddy. He gave it to…well, maybe we’ll go into that later. Maybe not. We’re here.”

Ana looked up from the tablet to watch as they pulled into the third abandoned parking lot of the night. In what was becoming a pattern, there were no other buildings nearby, no street lamps, nothing but enclosing trees. It was twice the size of the previous Fazbear’s and irregularly shaped, like three buildings squished together in a line: the first, the entrance, small and squarish; the second, tall and rectangular; the last, squat and windowless.

“This is it,” Mike said unnecessarily, parking the car. And then he unbuckled his seat belt. “Come on.”

“Inside?”

“Yup.”

“It looks pretty damn locked,” said Ana, which was a silly excuse and she knew it.

“It’s cool,” Mike assured her. “I’ve got keys.” He got out of the car, went around to the back and opened the hatch. When he closed it, he had a bolt cutter in one hand and prybar in the other. He held them both up. “Which key do you want?” he called.

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Her key dealt with the barricading boards. His took care of the padlock on the doors behind them. Then they were in, crunching across broken tiles, past a trophy wall filled with washed-white newspaper clippings, community awards and peeling posters. On either side of this dubious display were short halls, closed off by more doors. The only difference between this lobby and the one at
her Fazbear’s was the painted plyboard cutout still inviting guests to get their picture taken ‘with Freddy!’ instead of a rotted Brewster Rooster.

The right-hand door slipped its hinges when Mike pulled it open. He heaved it all the way off and leaned it against the wall. He took two small flashlights from his pocket and passed one to Ana, shining his down the short hall already and gazing at whatever the light revealed, his expression blending back and forth between grim caution and something that was almost nostalgic.

She had no nostalgia to distract her. While she waited for him to move, she leaned over the cashier’s counter and tried to make sense of the surviving posters hanging on the back wall. The only halfway legible one was the sign that started with, First time at Freddy’s? and followed up with a short list of dos and don’ts for small children not at all ominously titled Rules for Safety.

“Where’s the rest of them?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s only eight rules here. Aren’t there supposed to be thirty-two?”

Mike leaned back on his heels and just stared at her for a while before saying, with genuine confusion, “Where did you come up with that number?”

And what was she supposed to say to that? Freddy told her?

“Don’t run,” Ana read, very aware of Mike watching her. “Don’t yell. Don’t scream…Huh. You know, I never thought about it before, but that’s kind of a fine line, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Don’t poop on the floor,” she continued and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Some of the Toys used to wander into the bathrooms,” he replied. “If you were a grown-up or if you weren’t alone, they’d wander right back out again, but I talked to a bunch of former kids who remembered going in the bathroom all alone and having a Toy follow ‘em in…stand outside the stall…sometimes peek through the crack or rattle the door.”

“So naturally, the only logical response is to poop on the floor?”

“You have a basement in the house where you grew up?”

“No,” she said, already knowing what he was getting at and smiling. “But my aunt did and yes, it was absolutely infested with monsters. We never went down there.”

“Now imagine that was the bathroom. What would you do?”

“Stop coming to Freddy’s.”

“Would you? Really? Because the Toys were never scary on stage. They were horrible, sure…but they were horror that comes wrapped in a candy coated shell and as a father myself, I can tell you from observation that kids have a real instinct for compartmentalization. Santa may scare the piss out of them when they have to sit on his lap at the mall, but they still love him when he brings them toys on Christmas. So Freddy doesn’t scare them. Freddy is wonderful. It’s the bathroom that’s scary.”

“Stay close to Mom and Dad,” said Ana, reading more of the Rules. “Don’t touch Freddy.”
“Funny sort of rule for the main mascot at a kids’ pizza parlor, huh?”

“You don’t want some germy little brat getting snot and marinara sauce all over your expensive animatronic.”

“I see your point, but you’ll note it doesn’t say, ‘Don’t touch the animatronics.’ It says, ‘Don’t touch Freddy.’ Now I don’t know from the Flagship or the Toybox, but as far as Circle Drive goes, I can tell you Chica will hug on a kid whether it’s snotty or not and Bonnie will let a toddler chew on his ears any day, and even Foxy doesn’t mind a little light pawing now and then, but Freddy… Freddy fucking hates being touched. He’ll let a kid hug him, but his tolerance for handling gets visibly thinner the older the kid is. My first night working there, I was watching the previous day’s tape, and I saw a trio of gigglebitches—you know the type—practically molest the son of a bitch. He just stood there for it, but you could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears, he was so pissed. And then one of them grabbed his hat.”

“She still alive?”

“I can tell you’re joking, but I seriously thought he was going to knock her head clean off her skinny shoulders. Instead, he grabs his hat back right off her head, and when she went for it again, he swung her around, bent her over and blistered her butt in front of fifty people.”

Ana let out a smothered whoop of laughter. “So much for rule number seven.”

Mike grinned, the grim sort of smile that comes from a man who really doesn’t want to, but damn it, it is funny. “Oh yeah. He gave her a baker’s dozen of the best, and him with hands the size and tensile strength of frying pans. He marched her and her friends to the door while she’s crying and doing the ass-dance and threw them the fuck out. Got a standing O for it, but he didn’t take a bow or anything, just stomped off backstage and stayed there. He hates, I mean fucking hates, to be touched. But yeah, it’s funny how the whole, ‘Don’t hit,’ rule flies right out the window when it’s Freddy.”

“The rules are what he says they are.”

“Guess so.”

“And last but not least, leave before dark. Before dark?” she asked, turning to him.

He shrugged. “Things are different after dark. If those gigglebitches had snuck in after hours, it’s a sure bet Freddy wouldn’t have settled for ruffling her tailfeathers and pitching her out on the sidewalk.”

“Yeah, but is that literally the way the hours of operation were written here? ‘We close at dark’?”

“Not exactly. They never had the hours posted on the doors themselves, but there was always a marquee-type sign out by the road. Every month, they’d roll out a new special and new hours, so it’d be like, I don’t know, ‘January Special! Family-size double pepperoni $7.99! Doors close at 5!’ And every month, those closing hours moved forward or back, depending on when the sun set.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s when the monsters come out, lady. Everyone knows that.” He gestured deeper into the restaurant. “Have a look around. What do you see?”

Ana leaned over the counter to squint at the menu. It seemed the new, improved Freddy Fazbear’s
Pizzeria offered exactly four kinds of pizza—four cheese, pepperoni, meat lovers, and supreme. Chocolate or vanilla cupcakes baked fresh daily while supplies last. Birthday cakes must be ordered in advance. No outside food or drink. No special orders. No substitutions. Also no checks, although there was supposedly an ATM in the arcade.

Ana swung her flashlight around to see if it was still there, and froze as she discovered what squatted between the In and the Out halls: the puppet’s prize corner. Most of the shelves were empty, scavenged by brave looters over the years, but a few remained. Cheap plastic top hats. Child-sized bibs with Chica’s face on them, her happy smile made crazed and ghoulish by grime and time. Paper pirate hats and eyepatches in either pink or black. Rotted-cloth bunny ears in fake-Bonnie blue. And below them all, wrapped in a dull red ribbon, the puppet’s box.

Ana moved past Mike, circling the prize counter as much as she could, seeking and ultimately not finding any way for a person to get in, apart from climbing over the counter. So she did.

Mike didn’t try to stop her, didn’t say anything at all. He watched, his light fixed on her while hers stayed fixed on that giant gift-box, now greyed and grimed. The lid was closed and at one point, it seemed to have been nailed shut all the way around the top, but the nails had been pulled and there was a splintered place where a lockplate had been chipped out. When she lifted the lid and peered over the edge of the box’s high side, she could see the puppet’s spring-loaded seat, the spring rusted into tight coils, but no marionette.

“Feel better?” Mike asked.

She did, a little. No, tell the truth and shame the Devil, a lot.

He didn’t press her for an answer, just waited for her to climb back over the counter before he turned his flashlight out over the dining area.

It was immediately apparent they were not the first ever to invade Fazbear’s after its doors closed for the last time. Vandals had been busy here over the years, but they hadn’t done near as much damage as Ana would have expected. Oh, the roof had collapsed. The entire middle of the dining area was a forest of rotten support beams and wires, with real trees sprouted up among them where stray seeds had taken root, some of them as thick as her wrist. Graffiti covered the peeling walls and moss covered the graffiti. Generations of plant growth had sprouted, seeded and died across the floor, leaving behind a desolate landscape of brown stalks and thorns tangled up with chipped tiles.

But for all that, Ana’s eyes could still see it the way it was back then. She could see three rows of lunchroom tables lined with party hats in the center of this huge room, see dozens of excited faces turned toward the show stage as the curtain went up and the lights came on and there was Freddy and the Fazbear Band.

Ana managed to take her eyes from the stage, but couldn’t seem to stop looking around. So much was similar to ‘her’ Fazbear’s, in color and style if not in actual layout, that she kept trying to bring the two into alignment, kept expecting to hear those heavy footfalls and grinding gears, maybe see Freddy’s eyes light up in the dark hall and hear the Toreador March start playing.

“First impressions?” Mike asked, coming to stand beside her.

“It’s smaller on the inside than it is on the outside.”

He didn’t ask what she meant by that admittedly confusing observation, just nodded. “The whole Flagship could have fit in this one room,” he told her. “I have the blueprints. I’ve done the math.
Not just the dining room, but the whole damn building. It sure doesn’t look that way, does it?"

But it should have. There were more tables among the dead forest where the roof was gone. The show stage was obviously bigger. The arcade occupying the southern end of the room had dozens of machines and games, as well as a whole freaking carousel, not as big as the one she’d taken out of the gym back at her Freddy’s, but still with room enough for four lucky kids to ride. All this, yes, but still it seemed so cramped.

Like a dollhouse, she thought suddenly. Packed with pretty things, or what had been pretty once upon a time, but without any sense of proportion. Everything too big, too bright, too close together. And something was missing, something that should have been obvious.

“Where are the bathrooms?” she asked.

“Down the hall.” He turned his flashlight to the northwestern corner and the shadows opened up to show there was indeed a dark hallway. “What else?”

“Tell me.”

“I’ll give you a hint. This is supposedly a restaurant.”

Ana started to laugh, then executed a genuine double-take as she realized what he meant. “No kitchen!”

“Yes. And no. There is a kitchen, but it’s easy to miss, isn’t it?” He stretched out his arm to start her walking and then went ahead of her toward the show stage.

Once they were through the forest, Ana could see two doors, one on either side of the stage, narrow and easily overlooked, probably even back when the place was open.

He went through the one on the right, close to the hall that had let them in and how on Earth had she managed to miss it? It was nearly the same color as the wall, overgrown with dead thorns and all but invisible, but it was still a door and she’d passed within arm’s reach of the damned thing.

Mike used his bolt cutters on the worst of the thorns and kicked the door until it reluctantly gave. There was another door on their immediate right, leading to the cashier’s station, she supposed, and beyond it, a second door with a brass name plate that said Manager. Once past the wall that separated this area from the show stage in the dining room, was a space only a little wider than this short hall, lined with wire rack shelves still sturdy enough to support the outer edges of the ceiling after the beams had long ago waterlogged and rotted out. The center of the room was being held up by—

“That’s the oven,” said Ana, recognizing the massive contraption in the middle of this small space, in spite of the obvious beatings and graffiti it had endured over the years.

“Yeah. Most people don’t realize how seriously ahead of its time it was, either. I mean, pizza goes in on one end and comes out this end, perfectly cooked, no big deal in the new millennium, but back then? Huge. I think Faust actually invented it for the Flagship, which makes it even more impressive.”

“So…” Ana looked around again, seeing the same shelves, the same clutter, the same narrow space. “This is the kitchen?”

“Yup.”
“No.”

“Yup.”

“No!” she insisted, even though the proof was right in front of her, and now that she was looking, she could see some sinks through the jungle of dead thorns and insulation, as well as what was clearly a walk-in freezer on the other side. “Jesus, you could fit three of these in the one—”

—at the real Freddy’s, she was about to say.

Mike was looking at her now with eyes that remembered being a reporter, regardless of what he might be now.

“—at my house,” she finished, only a little too late.

“It’s probably not that bad,” Mike said, after a little pause of his own, just to let her know he’d noticed hers. “It’s twelve feet by twenty on the blueprints I’ve got, but that’s not big at all, is it? Not for a place this size. And you may notice there’s nowhere to actually make the pizzas.”

She’d hadn’t gotten that far, but now that he mentioned it…

“That’s because they didn’t make pizza at the Toybox. They bought it. From your friendly neighborhood grocery store, my sources say. Two-dollar frozen specials they turned around and sold for ten. But hey, hey, like I say, no one comes to Fazbear’s for the food. Come on.”

He led her past the oven, behind the show stage to the second door, which opened close to the hallway. Mike set off down it at once.

Ana lingered. She wasn’t afraid, but the hall was dark. So much darker than just the absence of light. Watching Mike walk into it was like watching a man be swallowed up by the mouth of a living Hell.

When he noticed he was walking alone, he stopped and shone his light back at her. She couldn’t see him at all, just the light, and suddenly it wasn’t the mouth of Hell at all. It was the eye of one of the animatronics—that open black eye with a pinpoint of white light—the eye that said the bite was coming.

Mike’s voice came quietly out of the blackness. “You have to see this. I can tell you, but it won’t be the same. You have to see it.”

“See what?”

Mike’s receding footsteps were the only answer.

More of his film noir bullshit, thought Ana. Unnecessarily dramatic. Trite even.

Damned effective.

She followed.
Chapter 21

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The hall bent to the left not long after Ana and Mike passed the restrooms (someone had spraypainted a monstrous Freddy, big enough to cover both doors, with a dead little boy in one clawed hand and a dead little girl in the other), and right where it bent, there was a door. No gold star and top hat insignia here, just a few stark signs reading Employees Only, No admittance beyond this point, and Parts and Services. It had been locked at one point, but someone had kicked it in. Nevertheless, Mike stood in the hall a long time, searching every inch, every dark corner, and especially the air vents in the ceiling before he took his first steps inside.

“The Toybox opened in 1981, under Erik Metzger’s management,” he said. The walls caught his voice, made it echo unpleasantly, muted and distorted, as if some Other were slyly mocking him with his own words. “The kid wanted nothing to do with the place. At first, it was assumed it had to do with some legal trouble he was in—the whole Fredbear and Friends thing—but even after—”

“What Fredbear and Friends thing?”

“Not relevant. We’ve got a lot to cover tonight, can we just—”

“You brought it up,” she pointed out.

Mike looked at her, then sighed a little and said, “Fine. Bare bones, no questions. Remember I said when the Flagship opened, it opened as Fazbear Entertainment, Inc? Well, when the kid was securing all his intellectual property, he forgot to include Fredbear’s Family Diner. With the roaring success of Freddy’s, it was inevitable some gold-digging asshat should come along. In ’78, that asshat arrived in the form of a man named, honest to God, Malice McGee.”

“No fucking way is that a real name.”

“I know, right? Sounds like a Bond villain. Anyway, McGee opened a themed diner called Fredbear’s in Salt Lake City, using animatronics on stage and people in suits on the floor, and from what I’ve seen, they were substandard even for the time. He modeled his animatronics after the Flagship group, with some slight color changes, and even claimed to be a ‘sister site’ to the pizzeria. He probably thought the kid would never hear about it, but he did and he sued the everloving shit out of everyone involved. McGee retaliated by adding a bunch more animatronics and suits, using other animals and color schemes, and argued that the kid didn’t have a monopoly on the concept of a singing animal band. Since the kid had failed to trademark Fredbear’s, McGee went ahead and did that too, although he did ultimately add ‘and Friends’ to further distance
himself from the name he was obviously trying to cash in on.”

Mike paused to check his watch, visibly reined his reporter’s instinct under control, and went on, “After years of lawsuits back and forth, suddenly, one afternoon in 1983, a real prize of a kid and his prize friends grab said kid’s little brother at the little brother’s own birthday party, and haul this terrified, crying child up to the main stage to give Fredbear a kiss. Right as they lift him up, Fredbear throws back his head for a laugh, then snaps forward and somehow catches the kid’s head between his jaws.”

“Jesus.”

“But he’s not one of Faust’s animatronics. He’s just a machine and that machine keeps going with its program. It takes six minutes to shut it down and in the meantime, it’s singing, it’s telling jokes, and with every word, it’s crunching away on that poor kid’s skull. Kid was in a coma about a week on life-support before he finally died, and McGee got hit not only with the family’s suits, but a class-action suit from every other family that had been there—and probably a few that hadn’t—claiming emotional damages. Understandably desperate, McGee offered to sell the legal rights to the name Fredbear back to the kid, but the kid wouldn’t buy. His reputation and finances in ruins, McGee struggled through six more months in legal battles before eating a bullet. Rumor has it, he climbed into one of his totally-not-a-Freddy-Fazbear costumes before he put the gun in his mouth, but I don’t know. That sounds a little too poetic, even for a guy named Malice.

“Anyway, all this gave the kid a great reason not to go to work, but McGee killed himself in 1983 and even afterwards, the kid stayed away. In the whole time the Toybox was open, he only ever came here once and it wasn’t to fix anything. So although the old animatronics were brought here, ideally to be fitted out with the new technology, they never were. Foxy was the only Flagship animatronic that moved on to the Toybox and even though he got some…” Mike paused for a pointed, unexplained snort. “…shall we say, upgrades, they were mostly cosmetic.”

“And the significance of this is?”

“My own personal bullshit theory is Erik fixed Foxy up himself, but he lacked the motivation, not to mention the skill, to fix the others. As for the rest of the Fazbear Band, they were left in the back and used as parts, stripped down for wires and joints and whatever it took to keep the Toys running. Erik did that, too, and not very well, frankly. He was considered to be something of a genius when it came to computer programming back in those days, but he wasn’t very good with the hardware end of things. You may have noticed Bonnie’s always got his guitar up like he’s ready to play it in all these posters. Take a good look and you’ll notice—”

“His left arm is way longer than the right one,” Ana said, nodding. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“That’s because it’s Gen-1 Bonnie’s arm. The whole arm. Erik just pulled it off, removed the fur, painted it blue and slapped it on Gen-2’s torso.”

Against her will, Ana found herself staring at the worktable in the middle of the room, only she was picturing it more as the Pull-A-Part table in Kiddie Cove, with two Bonnies locked into restraints, side by side—a blue Toy Bonnie and a purple Bonnie, her Bonnie. She imagined Erik Metzger in surgical scrubs, bright purple of course, laying out the tools for operation: a welder’s torch, wire clippers, maybe a chainsaw.

“Erik probably wasn’t expecting so much trouble with the parts,” Mike was saying, bringing her out of this dark little fantasy before the first cut could be made. “The old animatronics needed surprisingly little maintenance and the ones that came later needed even less, but the Toys were breaking down practically from the get-go. You see, the kid had built them only as a joke, for the
Disney guy, for that one party. They were never intended to last any longer than that and certainly never intended to get out in the public. They had…secrets.”

“Worse than the biting?”

“You tell me.” With a final sweep of his light across the vents and high shelves, Mike left the Parts room. He didn’t turn around; he backed out, pushing Ana out behind him.

“We are alone here, right?” Ana asked, watching him.

“As far as I know.”

“Then why are you—”

“I may not know everything. Just stay close and keep your eyes open for any kind of…movement.”

They walked on. This leg of the hall was wider than the first and lined on both sides with the remains of posters that showed each member of the new Fazbear Band—Waddles, Hotpants and Blue—their faces washed out to leers, but their eyes somehow still bright, seeming to stare right at her and to follow as she passed. It was difficult not to look at Bonnie’s left arm or the deliberate way Blue kept himself turned and the guitar positioned to hide it as much as possible, no matter how he posed.

There was no door at the end of the hall, merely an opening into a small room, but there were doors on the way there, four in all, two on each side, and Mike opened each one. They were all the same, more or less. Different color schemes, but the same layout. Two long tables and a few chairs, no windows, and lots of open space, especially when compared to the general squeeze of the rest of the place.

“Birthday rooms?” Ana guessed.

“Party rooms, anyway. Not so much for birthdays.”

“Four of them?”

“Yup. This was the Toybox’s real money-maker. The pizzas sure weren’t paying the bills, but for a hundred bucks, you could rent one of these rooms for an hour. And for two hundred bucks more, you could rent any one of the animatronics you liked to give you a private performance.”

Ana gave him a moment or two, then sighed and said, “I know you’re trying to tell me something —”

“They were made as a joke, you see. Just for the Disney guy, who made such a point of calling Faust’s animatronics ugly and not very kid-friendly. And Disney, as you may know, has a long history of slipping sex into their cartoons.”

“Yeah.” Ana laughed. “I had the VHS tape of The Little Mermaid. First dick I ever saw, in fact. But what does that have to do with the price of tea in China, as someone or another once said?”

“The Toys had an unusual design feature: Hidden compartments that allowed them to be kid-friendly in the dining room and very, very adult in private. You mentioned Freddy looking fat in his Toy skin? That’s because they needed the extra room. I understand he was hung like a fire hose.”

Ana stared.
“Each of the Toys had a different design and different programming that allowed them to cater to
different interests, but by far the most popular floor show was Foxy and Foxanne. I admit three
hundred bucks is a pretty steep price, but this was before the internet put boobs in every growing
boy’s easy eye-reach. If you got enough kids to chip in, it wasn’t impossible. And if you had
enough time and didn’t mind your friends watching, you could join right in.”

“You’re…You’re saying…”

“I’m saying Foxanne was first mate to a lot of the boys who grew up during the Toybox’s run.”

“Horse. Shit.”

He took out his tablet, brought up a video and held it out.

She did not reach for it.

“This was filmed in 1987,” he told her. “It may have been Foxanne’s last party. Kind of makes me
wonder what else was going on that day, because they were usually pretty paranoid about cameras.
Justifiably so.”

Still Ana didn’t take the tablet.

Mike set it on the closest table and walked out. “I’ll be in the security room,” he called. “You don’t
have to watch the whole thing if you don’t want to. But you do have to watch. Some things…need
a witness.”

She listened to him walk away as she stared at the tablet, the video screen open to featureless black
with that white arrow waiting in the center. She didn’t need to touch it. She didn’t want to see. She
didn’t believe it anyway.

She picked up a chair and sat down and from that point on, even if it took several minutes to
actually touch that stupid arrow, she knew it was going to happen.

She watched.

They were kids, that was the first thing. The oldest of the group might have been eighteen, the
youngest, maybe fourteen or even a very tall twelve. They all had that brash, bragging manner of
boys who had grown up in Mammon acting like they knew anything at all about mean streets. The
camera was hidden, some spycam from the Stone Ages, probably hidden in a fake book or
something equally innocuous. They all knew it was there. As they settled around the room,
laughing and bullshitting each other, their eyes kept going to the lens and they giggled, high and
shrill, just boys. They giggled again when Foxy and Foxanne came in and then got quiet when they
were joined by another man.

A man in a purple security uniform. Erik Metzger.

“Good evening, boys,” this man said and once again, that feeling of déjà vu swelled in the black
space of Ana’s un-memories. She knew that voice, could almost hear it singing to her, actually
singing. “Is this your first time in a party room?”

A short chorus of grunts.

“Well, here at Freddy’s, we have a few rules. The rules are for your safety, so please pay attention.
The animatronics are here to perform, so it’s okay to touch them.” A pause. A smile. “But don’t do
anything to upset their balance. If you want them to stand or…position themselves in a certain way,
just ask them. Don’t try to move them yourself.”

“Do they bite?” one kid asked and laughed when some of the others looked at him. “Someone told me... you know... they can bite.”

Foxanne turned her head and stared at him with her black, empty eyes.

“They certainly can,” said the purple man, smiling. “But they shouldn’t while they’re in the party room. Their programming is very specific to this location. Of course, if you’re nervous about it, you can hold their mouths shut like this.” He reached up and squeezed Foxanne’s narrow muzzle in his fist. She tried to shake his hand off twice, then just stood there and waited it out. “They can’t open their mouths as easily as they can close them and it’s really for the best if you’re not... nervous... around them.” He smiled. “Any other questions?”

Apparently not.

“Okay, so have fun! Watch the light over the door. It will start flashing when you’re down to ten minutes and turn red when your time is up. Their programming is very specific to this location,” the purple man said again, smiling even wider. “And when your time is up, the animatronics... don’t always play nice.”

A few of the boys laughed. Only a few.

The purple man left.

Ostensibly, this was a party. Ostensibly, there would be a performance. But Foxy did not greet the audience. He did not launch into one of his terrible pirate jokes. Didn’t sing. He stood in the center of the room, his eyepatch up and ears flat to his plastic skull, saying nothing. Foxanne paced around him, restless, her eyes gone black and empty as she stared at them, these boys. And when they were done laughing and drinking and pretending to be bored, one of those boys turned to the others and said, “Want to see ‘em fuck?”

Ana stopped the video, but even as she did it, she could feel disbelief like a second skin over every part of her. She didn’t believe it. She had to see it. She had to and so she pressed play again.

“Do they actually do it?” a kid asked curiously, moving close to pull the top of Foxanne’s blouse away from her body and peek at her plastic chest. His attention thus diverted, he did not see the way her head cocked and her mouth opened, inches from his bent head. She trembled, but did not, could not, bite.

Ana wondered if Foxy would have stopped her that time. He was watching, but he didn’t say anything.

“They do it,” the first boy assured them all. “Take your clothes off.”

Foxanne made one of those familiar clicking sounds, twitching hard, then looked dazedly around. When she saw Foxy silently shrugging out of his captain’s coat, she plucked once or twice at her corset and then just stood, her arms dangling, staring. Foxy unbuckled his belt, took off his hat, stepped out of his boots, and then wordlessly turned and unclasped the fastens of his first mate’s corset. The blouse and skirt came away with it, just one piece, like a cheap Halloween costume, exposing the pink plastic heart of her ruff.

Foxy glanced at the boys.

“All the way off,” the first boy said, nodding, and then turned to his friends with a grin. “Check
Foxy pressed on the top of Foxanne’s heart and dug his hook in at the bottom. The heart lifted off with a dull popping sound, exposing her perfect white plastic tits, complete with perfect pink nipples.

“Yeah, but how’s he going to do it without a dick?” one kid wanted to know.

“Pull it out, Foxy.”

Ana couldn’t see what Foxy did, but he reached down and did something that made a distinctive, flat click, and all the boys suddenly hooted together and started laughing in that high, excited way.

“Holy shit! Nice one, Captain!” one of them said, slapping Foxy on the back.

Foxy’s eyes went briefly skull-socket black and came slowly, slowly back to white.

“All right, get in there. Fuck her like you’re getting paid.”

At this witticism, the boys all laughed again.

“How?” asked Foxy, and sure, he was an animatronic and sure, he didn’t have feelings, but in that one word was more hate and rage and shame than Ana had known in her entire miserable life.

There, in that moment, Ana Stark believed all at once and without reservation what she had stopped believing nearly twenty years ago—that he was real, he was alive, he understood everything that was happening and everything he was about to do. She could feel it swelling inside her until her heart wanted to split open from the awful weight of it, and then it sank back down and was buried, not because she was thirty-for-crisakes-years old and he was just a giant toy, but because she couldn’t see a way to believe in this without believing all of it. And she couldn’t go home to him tonight believing that.

“How do you think?” the boy was saying now, leering as his pumped his narrow hips at the air to make his friends howl. Life of the party, this kid. “Foxy-style.”

Ana paused the playback and sat with her hands pressed over her eyes a long time in the dark, a long time. It was this room. She knew it even without looking up to see the color of the trim that lined the walls. Mike would only have brought her to this room because he’d seen the video. And he hadn’t wanted to see it either. She knew that without needing to ask. He’d watched and he’d probably watched more than once, and every time he’d seen it, it had made him sick, but he’d watched because, like he said, some things demanded a witness.

Ana started the video again.

The camera was not in a great place for spying and the boys were…excitable. One of them bumped the camera just as Foxanne bent over, so that all Ana could see was her head and shoulders and Foxy’s hand gripping her upper arm. She could hear, through. Plastic tapping together. Servos and gears whirring, mostly. The rhythm of it, so loud. The silence, even louder. And the boys, loudest of all, telling him to go harder, harder, make her feel it, and laughing as Foxanne whined.

The thought came again that these boys were grown up now, older than Ana. They had wives who kissed them when they left for work in the morning. They had kids whose hair they tousled when they came home. They were grown men who never spared a thought for this scene, beyond maybe a vague dread of finding it splashed across RedTube someday. Certainly they would not consider themselves bad men or even bad boys back then. It wasn’t like they were hurting anyone.
The video was fifty-five minutes long. Ana could stomach just ten. She waited until she was sure she was all right and then she took the tablet and went to go find Mike.

The security room was not large. The desk that was its main feature took up most of its space, leaving just enough room to walk all the way around it. There was a chair, aimed so the guard whose office this was could see down the hall. The walls were lined with more of those posters as well as crayon drawings done by Fazbear’s youngest patrons under the printed byline: *My Day At Freddy’s!* Most of them showed happy children, but more than one showed sharp teeth on smiling bears and bunnies, looming claw-handed puppets, and stick-figure children pouring tears.

“This is the security room,” Mike said, sitting in the chair and putting his feet up on the desk, one at a time. “Notice anything missing?”

She looked around. The party room video made it hard to feel anything at the moment, curiosity least of all. She wanted to leave and whatever it took to make that happen, she’d do, but she didn’t care. “I don’t see monitors, but surely they’d have taken them with when they closed up.”

“You think so?”

“Or someone stole them. They were TVs.”

“Oh, they were better than that.” Mike lifted one leg and thumped his heel down on the desk.

And up from the middle of the desk, like a rabbit from an old silk hat, came a panel. Slowly. With a wheeze of effort that told her the years had not been kind to this particular rabbit, but it still opened.

“1981,” said Mike. “The first commercially available flip-form laptops were still two years away, but Faust had one built into his desk, where his security guard could flip through the feeds from each of the twelve cameras, wirelessly. Oh, and did I mention this was a color monitor in 16:10 resolution? In 1981.”

“This is an awful lot of security for a pizza parlor.”

“It sure is. What do you suppose they used it for?”

“Knowing what went on in those party rooms, I’d have to guess they were recording blackmail fodder.”

“Good guess, but you’d be wrong. The cameras weren’t set up to record here, not even in the dining room.”

“Then…they were here to keep an eye on the kids.”

“Doubt it. Here.” Out came the black binder, and from it, a sheet of paper with simple shapes in black and white showing a floor plan with the locations of cameras marked with hand-drawn eyes in red and thumbnail screenshots to demonstrate the direction of their gaze: One on the show stage; one aimed at the puppet’s box; one pointed at a corner of the arcade where a life-size poster of Foxanne waved, her chest and abdomen casings removed and all the parts within helpfully labeled…

Mike caught her staring. “We’ll get back to that, but not yet. Keep looking and tell me when you see it.”

See it. See what? A camera aimed at the rest room doors. A camera in the parts and services room.
One in each of the party rooms. And two off in shaded areas to either side of the security room. The images accompanying them appeared to show the interior of crawlspace or airducts. Ana looked at the walls and sure enough, there were vents, half-hidden behind stacks of broken, rotten boxes. Vents, not high on the walls, but low to the floor. Very low. And very large.

“That’s not it,” Mike said, interrupting her thoughts. “But we’ll get back to that, too. I’ll give you a hint. You ever work a register?”

“Sure, a hundred t—”

And again, a double-take as she realized there were no eyes in the sky keeping unscrupulous hands from dipping into the till. And for that matter, no cameras in the parking lot, watching over the customers’ cars. None in the kitchen, making sure employees weren’t screwing on top of the pizzas.

“I don’t get it,” Ana said at last. “What were they watching?”

“What do you think?”

She shook her head, shook it again, and said, “You want me to say it’s to watch the animatronics. But that’s…that’s crazy.”

Mike pulled his feet off the desk, closing the panel in an absent manner as he stood. He went to the vent on the left side of the room and moved the boxes blocking it.

“Oh hell no,” said Ana.

He got on his hands and knees, put his penlight in his mouth and crawled in.

“Oh hell no,” Ana said again, scowling, but she was already hunkering down. Spider webs everywhere. Rats and roaches and God knew what. Fuck, no.

She crawled in.

The duct ran maybe twelve feet and turned sharp right, following the perimeter of the lower left party room. Party Room 1, it had said on the floor plan. Mike was waiting about five feet up after the bend, just staring at the inward wall.

Not at it. Through it. One of the black tiles making up the checkerboard runner on the wall had been replaced with black mesh, easily seen through. A spyhole.

Mike was crawling on, leaving her to stare in horror, not at the empty room, but at the thought that the vent served no other purpose but to spy on that room. Which meant the party room had been built for no other purpose but to host the events that needed spying on. This entire restaurant…the Toybox…had been built around these rooms and the games that went on inside them. The pizza was nothing but a cheap costume, like Foxanne’s one-piece blouse and corset, to wrap around it.

Mike stopped at another point long enough to show her the spyhole into Party Room 3, and then he was moving on, all the way to the end of the duct, where he slid a panel aside and let himself out. Into the parts room, she saw, and no, there was no door. The moving panel had been designed not to be seen. A secret fucking passage. A secret fucking door.

“The other vent?” Ana asked.

“Peeps on the other party rooms. Also on the carousel, the arcade and the dining room.”
“Jesus. And you think the animatronics were using it—”

“Not for spying. No, that was someone else, someone human. Mostly human. But they were definitely built for the animatronics to use, or they’d be a lot smaller. The Toys were smaller than the Flagship models, but they were bigger than people and not as maneuverable.”

And she didn’t believe it, she absolutely did not, but still she thought of that ductwork at her Fazbear’s, those ducts that were way too big and way too sturdy…and where she had once heard something moving around now and then…something she knew damned well wasn’t really a raccoon, no matter how many times she told herself it was.

But it wasn’t an animatronic either, she told herself now. She could account for all of them.

She could account for the ones she knew of, that little voice whispered. But clearly, there were a lot more animatronics in the history of Fazbear’s than just the ones she knew.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re trying to do here,” Ana said, “but I have reached the point where I need you to just tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“I’m not trying to be mysterious for the fun of it, lady. But the truth, or what I believe is the truth…it’s not something I know how to just say.”

“Try.”

He glanced at her, then looked away at the empty room and nodded. “Erik Metzger was the security chief here. And he assembled a team. Now, it’s impossible to know for sure how many security guards worked at the Toybox, because companies get a week or so to file 10-40s and, according to the tax records from the years between 1981 and 1987, only six employees ever worked the night shift long enough to need to turn one in.”

“You think Metzger killed them all?”

“No, not the guards. But I think he had these vents built to spy on the customers so he could see which of those he wanted to hunt. The guards, those were a completely different game.”

“Game,” Ana repeated. She meant it to sound derisive and perhaps a bit impatient, a tone calculated to make him stop this stupid film script and just tell her what he was thinking, but as soon as the word was out of her mouth, she knew it was the right word. It was a game. She didn’t know the rules and didn’t want to know the goal, but she was standing on the game board sure enough.

Mike started walking back to the security room. Ana fell into step without comment and he took up his narrative again like he’d never stopped.

“During the years the Toybox operated, there were no more abandoned cars along the local roads and only a relative handful of kids went missing.”

“How much is a handful?”

“Twelve.”

“Big hands,” Ana remarked.

“Compare that with the number of security guards. A lot of them ran away. For real, I mean. But these days, ten seconds on Google can find a lot of folks, provided they only disappeared
themselves, and I found most of them, alive and well. A few of them even talked to me. But a lot of them were never seen again.”

“How many is a lot?”

“A hundred and three.”

“A hun—? That’s…That’s one every month!”

“Give or take.”

“And nobody looked into that? Seriously?”

“Ask anyone around here why and they’ll probably tell you they didn’t know it was happening. It wasn’t in the papers. It was never on the news. And that’s half the what-the-fuck right there, that silence. That’s the kind of silence that suggests everyone knew, but no one wanted to be the first to say out loud that Freddy Fazbear was singing happy birthday by day and eating people at night. And as much as I’d like to, I can’t really blame them for that. If this was a book or a movie or a video game, not only would everyone believe you, but you’d probably have a priest, a cop and a vigilante mob outfitted with torches and pitchforks on your lawn after the fourth or fifth dead kid, but here in the real world, the guy insisting that the animatronics are not only alive but evil are usually wearing straightjackets. Or will be soon.”

“So what shut this place down? Another body?”

“No. There wouldn’t be another death officially connected with Freddy’s until James Royce Reardon in ’93, in spite of the fact that kids were disappearing here on an obscenely regular basis. In fact, Owen Cooke and his twin sister, Erin, disappeared out from under the noses of their grandparents just two days before the Bite of ’87. It seems someone borrowed…you know what? I’m going to let this one speak for itself.” He took the tablet, loaded up an audio file and started it playing.

The sound of a phone ringing was interrupted by a man’s harried, “Hello? Hello? Uh, what on earth are you doing there? Uh, didn’t you get the memo? Uh, the place is closed down, uh, at least for a while. Someone used one of the suits.”

Ana looked at Mike, who continued looking straight ahead as he lit another cigarette.

“We had a spare in the back,” the voice on the phone was saying. “A yellow one. Someone used it…now none of them are acting right. Listen, just finish your shift. It’s safer than trying to leave in the middle of the night. Uh, we have one more event scheduled for tomorrow, a birthday. You’ll be on day shift. Wear your uniform, stay close to the animatronics, make sure they don’t hurt anyone, okay? Uh, for now, just make it through the night. Uh, when the place eventually opens again, I’ll probably take the night shift myself. Okay, good night and good luck.”

The call cut itself off and the playback ended.

“A yellow suit,” repeated Ana. “One of the springtraps?”

“That’s my bullshit theory, but when the place was investigated, no trace of a suit, yellow or otherwise, was ever found. Neither was Owen or Erin. Eventually, it was decided—”

“They ran away.”

“Well, they weren’t happy about having to spend the summer with their grandparents in Mammon
while their folks went on a cruise, that’s for sure. And they weren’t local, so who cares, right? It’s a tragedy, but it was someone else’s tragedy.” He took a deep drag, tapped ash on the floor and said, “Anything else about that call seem strange to you?”

“Yeah, almost all of it. Like, how were they ‘not acting right’ and why would it be ‘safer than trying to leave’? ‘Stay close’. ‘Make sure they don’t hurt anyone’. ‘Make it through the night’? These are things you say to someone guarding, like, tigers or something. Not a singing robot band at a pizza place.”

Mike nodded. “Glad to see you can appreciate that. Makes me feel like I may not be entirely wasting my time tonight. To answer your first question,” he went on before she could begin to bristle too much, “the Toys were apparently acting more aggressive as the years went by. They’d be okay with the kids, more or less, but when it came to the staff and even some of the parents, they’d just…” Mike shrugged. “Stare. Or laugh. Or both. Worse, some of the old gen-1s were caught walking around and they weren’t supposed to even be able to do that. Chica allegedly wandered out into the hall with her head hanging half off and wires sticking out of her arms where her hands used to be, and scared the literal piss and metaphorical bejesus out of a whole herd of kids. The place was still trying to deal with the fallout from that little stroll when the Bite of ’87 happened and shut the place down, at least for a little while.”

“Is that when Blue took the arm off that one kid?”

“Naw, that was in ’84. But in November of 1987, the Toybox hires a kid named Jeremy Fitzgerald for the night shift. That phone call we just heard was meant for him. Jeremy was not an imaginative kid, but he had a few things to say about the conditions after dark, specifically, about the animatronics walking around and trying, as he put it, to ‘get’ him. Now, talk is talk and this wasn’t the first time that particular story had been told. Like I say, if you were a teenager in Mammon, sooner or later, you were going to hear about some kid who’d tried sneaking into Freddy’s after dark or do it yourself. But Jeremy didn’t say it to other kids.” Mike slowed and finally stopped walking, there in the doorway of the security office. He started to speak a few times, shook his head, then turned to her with an air of determination and shame in equal measure and quietly said, “He told me.”

“Why you?”

“I wasn’t local. If I had to guess, I’d say that was the first thing. My school newspaper had a kind of thing going with the Hurricane Watch…that’s our quaint small-town paper, by the way. So I had a byline now and then in fluff pieces. I was a reporter, in his eyes, but I was a kid too. Trustworthy. Approachable. He called me up and said he had a story. We went to the Gallifrey’s on Majestic Ave,” he said with a bitter smile. “He told me everything, gave me recordings he’d made of all his so-called training calls, told me all about the animatronics and how they were at night. I thought he was nuts, frankly. I shook his hand and got in my car and he got in his and the next day, he went back to work at his new position on the day shift. His first job was at a birthday party, kind of running interference, keeping the kids back from the animatronics. He did keep them back. But in keeping them back, he got too close.”

Mike started to say more, but shut his mouth and went on over to the desk and his black binder. “It’s amazing,” he said, taking out a photo for her, “what the human brain can do without a frontal lobe.”

It was a long time before Ana could bring herself to look down.

Even knowing Fitzgerald was old enough to hold a job, the boy in the hospital bed looked like he was twelve years old. The bandages wrapping his head were huge, slumping down over one eye
“It was Foxanne, in case you were wondering. Foxy was in the parts room that day, getting cleaned. The kids didn’t like that. Foxy was always everyone’s favorite and no one ever really took to the Toys except the kids who were ‘playing’ with them in the party rooms. I understand they were booing her. Throwing food. You know how kids are when they’re sugared up and the mommies don’t rein ‘em in. And Foxanne…”

“She’s a biter.”

“Yeah. She is. You know, looking into all this when I finally got around to it, I heard so many crazy things. That it was Foxy, jumping off the stage to bite half the head off some little girl. Or Toy Freddy, biting some kid who everyone swears had to wear a helmet the rest of his life because his skull never grew back. Or it was old Chica pecking a hole through an employee’s head while they were salvaging parts off her. Or Toy Bonnie, who ate the kid’s whole head in bites, like he was eating an ice cream cone, singing The Yum-Yum Song the whole time. So many stupid stories, when the truth sure as hell wasn’t that hard to find, and the truth is, it was Foxanne and she bit Jeremy Fitzgerald, crushing a large portion of his skull and penetrating the brain in six places. It didn’t kill him and it sure didn’t carve out a chunk of his head like the stories go, but it did enough. He was in a coma for weeks on life-support, with Fred Faust paying his medical bills and Fazbear Entertainment Inc. settling the lawsuit out of court.”

“Three weeks…and then he died?”

“No, he woke up. If you can call it that. His eyes opened, anyway, but he had massive brain damage. He stayed on life support another month. With therapy and surgery, he was eventually able to be released to some…I don’t know…care facility?” Mike took his photo back. “But as far as I know, he never said a sensible word again. And it was all for nothing. The Bite of ’87 closed Freddy’s down for about a month, so the animatronics could all be maintained, they said, but whatever. When the doors opened again, there they all were. Most of them. Pirate’s Cove was gone. Foxy was gone. Out of order, they said, to the great disappointment of all those kids.”

“And Foxanne was gone,” Ana guessed.

“No, she was still there. As an attraction, a kind of build-and-take-apart thing. They put her in the corner where the pirate stage used to be. Called it the ‘Kiddie Cove’."

Ana looked sharply around at him.

He nodded, holding her gaze. “Every morning they’d strap her to the wall—you know, her wrists, her ankles, her neck—and let the kids pull her skin off. Pull her arms and legs out of their sockets. Get their grubby hands all over her inner works. And put her back together, with the help of the diagram you saw back in the security room, like a giant 3D puzzle. Take her apart, put her back together, over and over, until most of the pieces were lost or destroyed and she was nothing but an endoskeleton and a head with hands and feet and bits of that fucking parrot attached. Once her cooling system broke down, all the other systems overheated and shorted out until literally nothing worked anymore but the battery that kept her alive. And her speaker, I guess. Sort of. She didn’t talk anymore, though. If the employees forgot to turn her voice off, she’d just stand there and scream, this endless mechanical static-filled scream. You want to talk nightmare food. Pull-Apart-Foxanne was only an attraction for the last month or so of the Toybox’s run, but it’s the one thing everyone remembers, even though hardly anyone I talked to remembered her name. Even the old employees just called her the Mangle.”

“Jesus.”
He cocked his head to look at her, but not in a curious way. “You feel bad for her?”

“Well…I mean…”

“She bit Jeremy Fitzgerald’s fucking brain. Bit him until he needed a machine to breathe for three months. Until he couldn’t button his shirts or tie his fucking shoes. Until he forgot how to piss in a fucking toilet. He was seventeen years old.”

Ana said nothing. There was nothing to say.

“I am ashamed to admit I lost track of him. I didn’t even know he’d been bit until I came across his name in the morgue at the Deseret Truth. I looked for him, of course, but his trail went cold the second he left the hospital and it had been six years by then.” Mike’s gaze dropped to the binder in her hand. He opened it for her, flipped down through papers until he touched the one with Jeremy’s name on it, but he didn’t pull it out, didn’t even look at it. “I can’t imagine he’s still alive. And there is not a day goes by that I don’t wonder if I could have stopped…changed…done something. But I didn’t. Jeremy Fitzgerald died because I didn’t want to be the one who said the animatronics at Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria were killing people.”

“But they don’t really.”

He looked at her.

“Metzger’s killing them. I mean, okay, maybe the animatronics were programmed to get people…hold them for him, but they weren’t—”

“Lady, a lot of this stuff I’m telling you is coming second or third or tenth-hand, but I can tell you this much myself: those things kill people. All of them. From first-gen to last, they kill people.” He stared her down a few seconds, then turned deliberately away to fetch his tablet. “But don’t take my word for it,” he said, tapping up a new video. “Listen to Nate Donahue. He was the one who did what no one else had the balls to do. He told the truth.”

He held out the tablet.

“I don’t want it,” said Ana.

“He told the truth,” Mike said again, taking Ana’s wrist and forcing the tablet into her hand. “And you are going to listen. Not another goddamned word do you have to hear out of me, if that’s what you want. But you listen to this man. All of it.” He released her trapped wrist with a shove and turned around. “I’ll be in the car.”

Ana watched him go until he turned the corner at the end of the hall and blackness closed in on his wake. Then she sat down in the security guard’s chair. It felt time-stiff and unpleasant under her. She looked at the tablet, the black block of the screen, the white arrow. The time stamp at the bottom said it was eighteen minutes long. How bad could it get in just eighteen minutes?

She’d only lasted ten of the last one.

Well, she didn’t have to watch the whole thing. Just get the gist of it. Mike Schmidt would never know.

Except he would. Of course he would. He’d only have to look at her and he’d know.

She started watching.
Chapter 22

The video was in black and white, shot from a high angle downward to a table with two chairs. Mike was in one of them, smoking his third cigarette, by the looks of the ashtray between them.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” Mike asked. The audio was bad, tinny.

The other man shrugged. He was not a young man, but there was something about him, something more than just his too-thin build and hunched way of sitting, that gave that impression. Not of youth exactly, but of age cut off, stunted, and it wasn’t in his body, but his face. His eyes, mostly. Those staring eyes, looking out a thousand yards away to watch some other time play and replay and play again, never really over.

Ana’s finger twitched, wanting to find the pause button and end this before it ever started. She was not the least bit curious what this man had to say. She believed it, whatever it was. She didn’t need to hear it to believe it, and she didn’t want to. Whatever had destroyed this man…it could still hurt.

“Tell me your name,” Mike said.

“Yeah. Right. Okay.” The man looked directly at the camera and said, slowly and clearly, “Nathan Donahue. Nate. In 1987, when it happened, I was fifteen. I’d have to look up the date, I don’t remember it. But it wasn’t long after their big re-opening. After, you know...you heard about the Bite?”

“Yeah, I heard.”

“Yeah, so the place was closed for a while after the Bite, but then it opened up again, and it really wasn’t very long after that. I get the feeling it was cold, so maybe...winter? I don’t know. Weather in that town is weird. Anyway, it had to have been a weekend, because I was staying over at my best friend Robert’s house and he and his big brother, Steve, and Steve’s girlfriend, Tessa, all got the idea to sneak into Freddy’s. The one off Mulholland, the one with all the plastic toys. And the puppet in a box.”

That was all he said for a few seconds.

“You okay?” Mike asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, quit asking. Let me just say it. You’d think it’d get easier, but it doesn’t,” he added and laughed. It was an awful laugh.
“We snuck in okay. You wouldn’t believe how easy that part was. We didn’t know there was a night guard there. Seriously, no idea. We thought we were alone and we were making, like, zero effort to be quiet. Freddy and Bonnie and Chica were up on the stage, all in a row. I don’t know where the fox was at. I remember I looked for her in her corner, because, you know, she kind of freaked me out even before she got mangled, but she wasn’t there. I kept thinking I heard her, that sound she made…sometimes I still dream that sound…but I never saw her that night. Anyway, we got in and went straight for the arcade, but all the machines were off. Steve and Tessa went off to find the power switch. They didn’t come back. Can I get one of those?"

Mike passed his cigarettes.

“I don’t smoke,” Nate explained, laughing in that terrible way. “Not these, anyway. Weed, every chance I get. Relaxes me. I tried meth. I thought it would help me forget, but…it made me remember. So I quit that. You got any weed?”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just a thought. It relaxes me. It’s hard to get through this, you know…this. It relaxes me.”

“Sorry, man. I would if I had some.”

“Okay. Sure. Okay.” Nate tried for a while to light his cigarette, but his hands were shaking. Mike took the lighter and did it for him. “Thanks,” said Nate and smoked in silence for almost a minute.

“The power to the arcade games came on,” he said at last. “Robbie and I figured his brother had found the switch and started playing. When Steve and Tessa didn’t come back, we started joking, you know, that they’d gone into one of the party rooms and were having a little private party. The other kids used to say stuff, you know…about those rooms. Anyway, we were playing. When we ran out of tokens, we went back to the machine and that was when I saw the stage. And they weren’t on it anymore.

“I never heard them leave. You’d think you’d hear that, how heavy they are when they walk, but the arcade’s pretty loud. But people said that too, that they walk around at night. Steve had a friend who worked there as a night guard for a few days and he said it had something to do with their servos, like, they’d lock up if they didn’t move around, but I don’t think he believed it. Anyway, I remember we kind of looked for them, when we noticed they were gone. But they weren’t, you know, obvious. So. We went back to the arcade, but we hadn’t been playing long when Robbie announced he had to piss. And that was weird because, you know, we’re not girls. We don’t announce that stuff. And he said it and then looked at me like he was waiting for me to say me too and we’d go off together. So I laughed at him. Called him a girl. Maybe said a few more things, kind of teasing. Like you do,” he said dully, “when you’re trying to make someone upset so they don’t notice you’re scared. And Robbie went to the bathroom. And I never saw him again. I heard him, but I never saw him.”

He smoked almost two minutes this time.

“I never heard her,” he said, crushing out the butt. “I just got that feeling, you know? Like you’re being watched. I looked around and there she was. Chica. Toy Chica, I should say. Right behind me. She could have reached out and broken my neck, if she wanted to. I think about that a lot. She could have, if she wanted to. So what she did do, that was what she wanted to do. Because she liked it. I don’t know what those things think,” he said, “but I know they feel. It made her happy, what she did to me.”
“Do you need a break?”

“Naw. I’m good. Just let me say it and don’t ask questions. You don’t get questions. You just get what you get. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. So. There’s Chica, watching me. And when I looked at her, she turned around and peeked at me over her shoulder, like a…a calendar girl, you know the kind? Hip out. Arm up. She winked at me. It was…sexy. I know, I know. I was fifteen, all hormones. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I’m pretty sure I wasn’t using the bigger of my two heads.

“She winked and then she turned the rest of the way around, facing me again and lifted up her top. That bib she wears, you know? Let’s Party. She lifted it up and she had tits, I swear to God. Not big ones, but real tits and not just Barbie-doll bumps. She had nipples. Who’d put nipples on something like that? But I was fifteen. And I popped one. You know what I mean? Popped one?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. And she saw it. She looked right at the front of my jeans and she turned and started walking. I swear to God, she wanted me to follow her. And I did.

“She took me to this room called Parts and Services. To service me, you know? The lights were on inside and I could see all these, like, empty heads and pieces of the animals. Not just the new ones, either. The old ones were back there, too. Foxy was…you know Foxy? The real one?”

“I know him.”

“He was my favorite when I was a kid.”

“He was everyone’s favorite.”

“Yes, well…he was there, lying on his side on this big table in the middle of the room, kinda curled up. I remember thinking he looked like a kid, sort of. A kid who’d been crying. He had his hook up around his nose and his other arm around his stomach. It didn’t look like someone put him there. It looked like he was lying there, do you get the difference?”

“Yes. Yeah, I do.”

“Anyway, that’s where he was. And Chica hip-walked over there and kind of rolled him onto the floor. It made this huge banging noise. I noticed there was stuff on the table where he’d been lying. Little puddles. Dark. I remember thinking it was oil, but not really. Like I specifically remember thinking, ‘That’s oil,’ the way you do when you don’t want to think it’s blood, mostly because you’ve got this boner and there’s Chica bending over the table and winking at you over her shoulder. And all the other old guys are there. The real Chica, the real Freddy…the real Bonnie would be watching except he had no fucking face. She bent over, like I say, and she’s got this little tail, like a chicken, right? Peeking out the top of her shorts. And she lifts that tail up, like it’s on a flap and there’s this opening underneath and yeah, I know, she’s plastic. She’s totally plastic, it’s all hard and shiny, but there I am, fifteen, looking at an ass and I can see her asshole and underneath, with her legs a little bit open, there’s this…I don’t even know what to call it…like an in-seam on her shorts? Only it splits a little, and it’s her pussy I’m looking at. Her plastic pussy and I’m fifteen and that’s all I can really say in my defense. I was fifteen and the fact that she’s a goddamn plastic fucking chicken means nothing to me. I’ve got pussy and ass and tits right in front of me and I go in that room. I walked in. My own self. I walked in there on my own feet. No one
made me.”

He smoked. Eleven of the eighteen minutes had gone by.

“I touched her,” he said in an emotionless voice. “Her pussy, I mean. Like, if it had been a woman, it would have been different, but it was a robot, so I just went for the goods. It was cold and slippery and not hard plastic like the rest of her. At the time, I didn’t know what the fuck I was feeling, but today, I can tell you it had to be silicone or something. It didn’t feel good, exactly, but I remember thinking it would be good practice. For a real girl. Someday. Chica was watching me, grinning, how they do without lips. I could see her teeth. Chicken teeth, who thought of that? I didn’t like it, so I didn’t look. I looked at her ass instead and she lifted up her tail again and kind of wiggled her hips at me. So I unzipped and shuffled over with my jeans around my knees and right as I’m about to stick it in, the old Freddy on the floor, remember him? His eyes light up yellow and he starts playing that fucking music. DUM-da-da-di-DA, dum-de-dum-de-dum. Fuck. And the other Freddy grabs me from behind and says, ‘You shouldn’t play with your food,’ right in my ear. Chica starts laughing and it’s awful, this fake robot voice, but so sincerely happy, you know? Not like some fucking…I don’t know, Disney villain, just laughing to sound evil. Like it was really funny to her. She’s laughing and laughing and Freddy’s got me with his arm around my neck and he reaches down and gets me by the dick too and he says something I don’t remember exactly because I screamed. He’s got my dick in his hand and I remember being afraid he was going to pull it off, but I swear what he did was worse. He started jerking it for me. He…”

“You okay?”

“No, I’m not okay! Fuck! Just shut up! Shut up and let me…let me do this. I can do this, but only if you shut up and let me.” Nate took a fresh cigarette and lit it, trembling, off the last one. “He was jerking me off,” he said again, “and he’s nuzzling my neck and kind of…growling? Maybe it was supposed to be sexy purring, but shit, man, I really don’t think so. He was growling and he says, ‘If you cum, I’ll let you run. I’ll give you a ten second head-start, if you can cum in the next minute. Think you can reach the door in ten seconds if you really, really wanted to?’

“That’s the part that I don’t know if I can ever really make you understand, because you’d think I would have fought or something, but I never did, never even considered it. I was so scared. I was so sure I was going die. It should have been crazy, you know, to think I didn’t fight, but I didn’t. All I wanted to do was nut and get the fuck out of there. He was jerking me off, and, not to get too gross, but he knew what to do, you know? It wasn’t just a handjob, he had, like, techniques. But it’s no good. He might as well have been pulling taffy and he knew it. I start pleading with him, you know? Like, ‘I can do it, I know I can do it, give me a chance!’ Freddy starts counting down the last ten seconds and when he hits the end, he grabs my dick and this time, I know he’s going to pull it off, and I piss myself, I’m so scared. It comes squirting out of his hand and they both laugh like it’s the funniest thing they’ve ever seen. He wipes his hand off on my shirt and he says something like, ‘Well, it’s not what I asked for, but it’s something. I suppose I have to give you a runner-up prize.’ That’s not it exactly, but it’s close.

‘Chica turns to the old Freddy in the corner and says something like, ‘You almost gave it away. Just for that, you can have him.’ And she grabs him off the ground and puts him on the table. She takes off his head and opens up his chest and there’s all this stuff inside, like, filling him. Wires and metal and stuff. And Toy Freddy lifts me up higher and throws me down on top of him. And they start—him and Toy Chica both—shoving my arms into Freddy’s arms and my legs into his legs and everything’s scraping on me. There wasn’t room, you know? All this stuff was in there. But I was a scrawny kid and so scared, I figured I’d play dead and maybe they’d stop, so I went all limp and they wedged me into him and put the chest and the head back on. There was hardly room to breathe, it was so tight, and all this stuff was poking at me all over, but I stayed quiet and after a
while, the Toys went away. Laughing. Like it was funny. Like they were happy. Like it was just the best time.

“So there I am in the dark, inside Freddy. I can feel stuff inside him, humming, like. And I’m trying to breathe and can’t, really. And I can’t move at all. My arms and legs are pinned inside his arms and legs so tight, I can’t get them out, can’t even wiggle them back and forth. If he’d moved, if he’d lifted his arm just an inch, mine would have snapped, that’s how tight it was. Every breath he takes—well, they don’t really breathe, but they do something and every time he does, my ribs feel like they’re breaking. The whole back of my head feels like it’s being crushed in one of those turn things, like…a vise. You know? My eyes are throbbing from the pressure. I was afraid they were going to pop out or burst or something. I was so fucking scared. I didn’t even try to call for Robbie or Steve because I couldn’t breathe and I was afraid the Toys would hear me anyway. I just lay there.

“And then I heard Robbie’s voice. He was crying and screaming for help. For me. For Steve. For his mom. Toy Bonnie brought him in. I couldn’t see through Freddy’s head, but I could hear Bonnie talking to him, so cheerful, telling him no one was coming, no one could save him, and he was going to die. And then wanting to chat with him about it, you know? Like, did he have a family that would miss him? Did he have a dog he had to feed? Would they keep the dog once Robbie was gone or would they take it to the pound and kill it, too? Would they have another baby and forget all about him? What would they do with all his stuff? And I guess he dropped him then, because the next thing I hear is Bonnie saying something like, ‘Oh no you don’t!’ in this happy way and then Robbie screams and something snaps. Like a bone,” Nate said in that remote way. “And something tears. And something crunches. And it goes on and on and on and Robbie’s screaming and crying the whole time.”

He smoked and smoked and said, “I’m pretty sure he broke Robbie’s leg off to keep him from running away. Not just broke, broke it off. And I’m pretty sure…yeah, I’m pretty sure he ate it. Not because he was hungry. They don’t get hungry. He ate it because Robbie was watching. And when Robbie quit screaming, Toy Bonnie picked up one of the old animatronics—I couldn’t see which one—and put him beside me on the table.

“I heard him put Robbie inside. Robbie was bigger than me. He didn’t fit. There were…sounds. He wasn’t dead yet or maybe he was and what I heard him do was just…just the air coming up out of him. It sounded like choking, though. It sounded like maybe words, like he was trying one last time to talk, but he was broke up too bad. Then he went quiet. And there were more sounds.”

He smoked. The video was forever. What the hell else was there left to say?

“When he was done, Toy Bonnie opened up my Freddy’s mouth and looked at me. I was stupid, didn’t have time to pretend I was dead. My eyes were open and everything. He looked at me and I looked at him and then behind him, I saw that thing. The puppet. The puppet came in the room. He kind of looked around and he said, ‘You really must learn to share. I didn’t even get to play with them.’ Toy Bonnie said, ‘You got the guard.’ The puppet said, ‘But the children are so much sweeter.’ And Toy Bonnie said, ‘Well, this one’s still alive. I don’t know how sweet he is, but he’s here if you want him.’ And Freddy, the one I’m inside, I feel this humming in my skull and he does it again with the music, only it’s right there with me and it’s so fucking loud, I would have screamed if I could. Dum-DA-da-di-DA, Dum-de-dum-de-DUM! And Bonnie laughs and the puppet says something like, ‘Quiet, you,’ in this…this smirking sort of way. Bonnie leaves and the puppet comes over and it’s looking down at me. It says, ‘You are alive, aren’t you? You must be a very little little boy. Do you want to come out?’ And I don’t know why, but I’m so fucking scared, I actually think he’s going to save me. And I manage to get just enough air to say, ‘Help me,’ or something and he tsks at me, you ever hear anyone actually do that? Like, tsk tsk? He tsks and he
says, ‘Ask nicely.’ And I do. You know? I do. I say please and I say sir and I say anything he tells me to and he keeps me there asking him nicely for fucking ever. And I do.”

Still three minutes left of this. Three whole minutes.

“But I finally ask nicely enough and he takes the Freddy head off and that helps and then he opens the Freddy chest and I can breathe again and I’m thanking him—” Tears, first in his voice, then on his face, but Nate’s words never broke and his expression, or the stony lack of one, never changed. “—I’m saying, ‘Thank you, sir,’ and he pulls me out of Freddy and hugs me and I’m hugging him back and he’s stroking my hair with his long, black claws and I’m crying and he turns me around and bends me over on top of the table, on top of Freddy, and he knots up one of his legs around his waist and through his thighs like a dick and he rapes me. He rapes me all night long. And everything he did…he made me ask nicely. He made me say thank you. And I did.

“The last thing I hear him say, he says, ‘Oh, you bad boy, you made me lose track of time,’ and then I hear this other voice say, ‘It’s six o’clock. The game’s over,’ or something like that. And they talk a little, but I don’t remember too well. I get the feeling it wasn’t all in English. I don’t know. The puppet went away and this guy came in the room, this purple guy. He took off his jacket and put it over me like a blanket. He helped me get my jeans on. I think he may have carried me to the room at the end of the hall, where the phone was. He gave me something to drink and he sat down on the desk and he smiled at me and by this time, I don’t even know what I’m thinking. I just looked at him and waited, you know? Like if he’d said he was going to kill me, I don’t think I would have done anything different. I just waited and I don’t think I’ve ever waited for anything so hard or felt so…so empty doing it. He asked what my name was and I told him. He asked me if I wanted him to call someone and I said the police. It wasn’t a threat. I only knew Robbie was dead and I was hurt and when bad things happen, you call the police. And he did. And they came. And I told them the truth. And they went back into the parts room and opened up the old Bonnie…and Robbie wasn’t there. They’d cleaned him. Those fucking toys. When I was back there with the police, they’d cleaned everything all up. I don’t know how. I only know they did.

“And that’s it, really. I kept telling the story, but it didn’t do any good. My ass was all raw, but that didn’t mean anything. The cops decided me and Robbie had snuck into Freddy’s to do sex stuff and I got caught by the night guard. They said Robbie ran away because he didn’t want to get outed as a queer in a place like Mammon. They said Steve and Tessa ran away too, but for different reasons. They tried to get me to tell the truth and I kept telling them I was telling the truth and finally they actually fucking locked me up in a fucking cell for fucking trespassing. My mom came and got me in a few hours and she hit me the whole time she was driving me home. I kept trying to tell her what really happened and she kept hitting me. By the time Monday rolled around, everyone at school was calling me queer. Eventually, I ran away. For real, not like Robbie. Robbie’s dead. And that’s all there is,” he said, crushing out his last cigarette. “You’ve probably got questions, but I don’t give a shit. That’s what happened and that’s all I’m going to say. Turn it off.”

The video stopped. The replay icon floated over the center of the screen, just under Nate’s tired face, like a comic white beard.

Ana was fine as she looked at that. She was fine as she got up and put the tablet into Mike’s black binder. She was fine as she walked up the hall in the dark, alone. She was fine until she got to the dining room and saw the prize corner straight across from the hallway and realized she’d have to walk past it, had to, to get out. And it was still empty, she knew that, but she also knew it wasn’t. The puppet was in there now, crouched down like a trapdoor spider and just waiting for her to come within snatching range.
She managed only a few more steps after that, and then everything went cold and prickly and sweaty and she lurched over to the forest where the roof had caved in and threw up on thirty years of abandonment and neglect.

* * *

Mike was waiting in the car with his window rolled down, smoking and looking at the stars. Ana got in and buckled her seat belt, then said, in a not-at-all-level voice, “If I thought you’d let me, I’d hit you for making me watch that.”

“I’d let you,” he replied.

She looked at him. He looked at the stars.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“He died. Not long after that was recorded. He’d been drinking. There were pills. Not a lot, not enough to make you think he meant to die. Not on the surface, anyway.” Mike took a last pull and tossed his cigarette out into the empty lot to burn itself out. “Not everyone knows they’re suicidal.”

She faced straight out the dash again and said, “Let’s just finish this.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Damn you.”

He nodded, just nodded, and said, “Nate Donahue was attacked just two weeks after the Toybox reopened. The following morning, Faust came down to the restaurant in the middle of the day with an axe in his hand and hit the button in the prize corner to stop the music box. When the puppet popped out, Fred Faust, in front of a whole room full of wide-eyed kids and their wide-eyed parents, hacked its head open with the axe and then went after Freddy and the rest, running them down and chopping away until there were brains all over the walls and the floor and the people and the pizzas.”

“Brains? Like wires and circuit boards or actual brains?”

“I heard brains, although it’s a safe bet most of our witnesses were grabbing their kids and running for the door, so they can be excused for some confusion. Whatever else happened, the Toybox closed its doors and never opened them again, but again, this appears to have been the plan all along, since construction on the next site had already been underway for some time. The local paper had a few things to say about the poor traumatized children who had to watch their beloved Fazbear Band get hacked up with an axe, but the kid was never arrested for anything. When it comes right down to it, he may have gone about it in a weird way, but all he did was take apart the Toys he built in the first place. And you know what they say, poor men go crazy, but rich ones—”

“Are eccentric,” said Ana.

“Right. And after all, it’s not like anyone died. And life goes on in a small town. The kid recovers from whatever fit he had, and in 1988, the third Freddy Fazbear’s opens, this time on Circle Drive. The Stockyard. You ready?”

“Go.”
He lit a new cigarette and started the car.

“When the Stockyard opened, all the old animatronics were back. The old designs, I mean. You know, I call them gen-1 and gen-4 and whatever, but you should know that I don’t believe it. The Toys were something else, all right, but the others? Having seen them myself, I have to say I believe they were the same as the Flagship animatronics, just cleaned up and reskinned. I mean, they looked a little different, but, I don’t know, if I change my clothes, I’m not a different Mike. I’m the same Mike in a different shirt, you know?”

“Uh huh.”

“Foxy was for sure the same as the Foxy that worked in the Toybox. I can’t prove the others were reskinned gen-1s, but I can prove Foxy was the same.” Keeping one eye on the road, he took his tablet from her and tapped open a video. “Not that anyone would call it proof in any legal capacity,” he added. “But just watch and see if you don’t agree.”

The video opened up in a dining area as familiar to her as the one in Aunt Easter’s own house. Circle Drive. She knew that room, knew those walls, knew the purple curtain hanging open now in Pirate Cove at the opposite end of the room from the main stage, and after hearing Nate’s story, seeing it was as good as crawling into her own bed and pulling those safe blankets over her head.

The camera had no immediate target. It swept the room in an aimless manner, autofocusing now and then on this or that scene, but always returning to the stage in Pirate Cove, where Foxy was at the end of his set, finishing off with his signature song.

Ana watched, allowing herself to be captivated, no different than this time-frozen crowd of squealing kids. She supposed something horrible was happening somewhere in this shot, or was about to happen, but for the moment, she didn’t care. It was good to see him, on stage with lights and music, his skin uncracked and everything working like it should. That snake-like tail was gone at last, along with that awful plastic skin. His features had been reshaped in a less-cartoony profile and flocked over with fur. It was the Foxy she’d loved so long ago, the one she used to dream would come in through her (tower) window some night and sail her out of her old life into a pirating new one. He had a hat, a belt, sword and pistol, shiny black boots and an embroidered coat. He looked alive as he paced back and forth in the bow of his ship, leading the room in another verse of how great it was to be a pirate. Damn it, he looked happy.

It took her an embarrassingly long time to notice what should have been obvious from the start—the video itself, shot low and angled upward, with a blurry not-quite-level bar along the entire top of the screen.

No happy mommy was filming this, capturing her little darling’s big day for all posterity and potential humiliation in the future. Whoever was shooting this was doing it under the table, with a spycam and one of those wire microphones that could be aimed to catch sound across the room.

No sooner had this thought occurred than Foxy finished his set. The curtain closed on Pirate’s Cove. The camera resumed its restless sweep as on the main stage, Freddy and Chica launched into one of their George and Gracie routines. Bonnie was nowhere to be seen, but the muted sound of an electric guitar Hendrixing the hell out of the birthday song suggested he was headlining in the party room.

Ana settled back, more aware of Mike listening as he drove than anything else, waiting tensely for whatever was about to happen, but it all looked so innocent.

The camera focused sharply in on Pirate’s Cove again as the curtain twitched open and Foxy
hopped down from the stage, swaggering out into the crowd to greet the inevitable Foxy-fans. He shook hands, patted heads, carefully crossed swords with the braver lads (and he was right, not many lasses. How times had changed) and hunkered down to catch shy whispers in his plastic ears. Alive, Ana thought again. Working the room. Not just doing what he’d been designed for, but doing it damned well and with an unmistakable air of professional pride.

Foxy’s attention was caught by something. His eyepatch raised to give him a good look, then closed again, going into character. He straightened up and headed over to a birthday party—a refreshingly informal affair, just a half-dozen half-sized kids, mostly girls, clustered around one end of a long table with a loose knot of chatty moms at the other end. Between them, grossly out of place, a high-school aged boy going through his 90’s emo phase, determined to be too old to be here. He leaned on his elbows, watching the birthday girl, presumably his sister, holding court with her own little mateys in a paper pirate hat and plastic hook-hand. She never saw Foxy coming until he dropped his hand over her shoulder. The girl’s eyes went wide as saucers when she looked up and in the next second, she hit that register only little girls can make and dogs can hear: “Foxy!”

“That’s Captain Fox to ye, little matey. And what have we here?” He reached for her soda as she giggled and shook her head. He knocked back a swallow, tipped her a wink. “Getting into the rum, are we?”

She giggled. “It’s root beer!”

“And what brings ye here, eh?”

“It’s my birthday!”

“Is it now?” He looked the table over, then plucked up that dull gold doubloon Ana knew would be there, somewhere. “Looks like ye found yerself a piece of me cursed treasure. I’ll just be taking this back now. What’s your name, lass?” he asked, tucking the doubloon into the pocket of his fine captain’s coat.

“Katie.”

“Katie? Katie?! What kind of a name be that for a pirate?”

“Girls can’t be pirates,” the brother drawled, and if he’d physically reached out and dumped that pitcher of soda over his little sister’s head, he couldn’t have dampened her spirits more.

Foxy looked at the boy, moving nothing but his eye, then turned all the way around and leaned in close to say, “Shows what ye know, don’t it? The oldest written account of pirates in the world be a woman.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Queen Teuta of Illyria.”

“No such place,” the boy said confidently.

“Aye, keep talking, ye pig-ignorant swab. Illyria were a country in the Balkan Peninsula, conquered by the Romans in 168 BC or thereabouts and absorbed into their empire. But I’ll grant ye not many have heard of it these days,” said Foxy with a narrow-eyed shrug. “Maybe ye have heard of Norway? Hundreds of sea-wolves in skirts come out of Norway, including Princess Sela, who gave up the throne to be a piratin’ captain, aye, and Princess Aethelfled, who seized command of a whole fleet o’ pirates and led them against the Viking raiders that killed her husband. No? Not familiar? How about France? Jeanne de Clisson, the Lioness of Brittany—there be a piratin’ name!
—‘Bloody Anne’ Dieux-le-veut, Charlotte ‘Bonaventure’ de Berry, Jacquoette Delahaye…ah, Back From the Dead Red, they called her! England! Ye must have heard of England! Lady Mary Killigrew and her daughter, Lady Elizabeth, had fifty years of piratin’ between them as Red-Hand Mary and Little Boots Lizzie! Sacked bloody Cornwall and Falmouth Harbor, they did! Mary Read, Maria Cobham, Christina Skytt—flew her knickers for a flag, that one. Feisty—Charlotte the Badger, Margaret ‘Madcap Meg’ Croake…no? Ireland, then. Anne Bonny, one o’ the most famous pirates in all history come out of Ireland, along with Grace O’Malley, the sea-queen of Connaught, ‘Fey’ Mary May, and Nessa Dunn the Tigress. Still no, eh? Ye familiar with a wee little place called China? So many female pirates to pick from…Ching Shih, the Steel Lotus, led a fleet of 1500 ships and dominated the South Seas. Weren’t no other pirates dared her waters while she lived. Or Lo Han Cho, took her first ship when she were twelve years old and her last at eighty-eight. Huang Pei-Mei led over eighty thousand pirates under her flag. Any of this ringing yer bell, lad? No? America, then! Ye must have heard of some of the she-devils hailing of yer own bloody shore! Sadie the Goat, used to headbutt her victims after she disarmed ‘em in a duel. Gunpowder Gertie Stubbs, who had more cannons under her than the navy. Rachel Wall, the Waterflower, quit piratin’ long enough to fight the Redcoats in the Revolutionary War. I could go on, but I wouldn’t waste me breath. Girls can’t be pirates?” Foxy scoffed, raising his hook over the boy’s flustered, beet-red face. “Ye pea-brained fool, one of every ten pirates on deck were a girl and half of them were what run the towns! Can’t be pirates? They were captains! They were commodores! They were bleedin’ pirate queens! What are they teaching ye in school today?”

The room erupted in applause and girlish cheers as the boy slumped, looking off as though bored and pretending he wasn’t in the room.

Foxy straightened up, adjusting his hat and turning his attention back on the birthday girl. “But Katie fer sure ain’t no kind of name for a pirate,” he said good-naturedly. “But Katie fer sure ain’t no kind of name for a pirate,” he said good-naturedly. “It ought to be Slippery Kate the Fierce or Jolly Kate the Bold or—” He leaned over to raise his eyepatch on his hook for a conspiratorial whisper. “Black-Eyed Kate, first mate aboard the Flying Fox!”

The girl clapped her hands to her mouth and giggled, nodding, and just then, her brother, watching sullenly from beneath the hanging curtain of his emo bangs, suddenly got that Look. That Look that said the bad thing was coming. Whoever held the camera thought so too. The focus came off Foxy at once and narrowed in on the boy. As Foxy and the birthday girl talked cannons and pillaging, the boy reached stealthily out and hooked his fingertips in the top of Foxy’s loin-panel. It seemed to Ana that it moved a little, as if on a hinge, like he meant to pull it down or push it in or something, she couldn’t tell what. And she never got the chance to see.

Foxy moved fast, his good hand snapping down around the boy’s wrist and yanking it not just up and away from his groin but pulling the kid out of his chair and off the ground, so that he was dangling from one arm in the air before he even knew to yelp.

“Going for me sword, are ye?” Foxy boomed while the room cheered. “Mutiny! What say you, Black-Eyed Kate? Do we keelhaul the yeasty swab or make him walk the plank?”

“Walk the plank!” cried Katie, the color of excitement high in her cheeks at this rare opportunity to get one over on a brother twice her size.

“Plank it is!” Foxy swung the kid around and put him on his feet hard, shoving him ahead of him and moving fast and none too friendly through the crowd. On stage, Freddy and Chica reached the punchline of one joke and waited, knowing better than to compete as the whole room watched Foxy take the kid to Pirate’s Cove. The boy was laughing in that high, nervous way, trying to say no, trying to wriggle free, but Foxy never even slowed down. He hooked the curtains aside and jumped up on stage, lifting the boy up beside him like a squirming sack of grain when he refused to
step up on his own and thumping him down hard on the gangplank. The curtains closed; whoever was filming this aimed the microphone and caught, through the cheers and expectant laughter, Foxy’s voice in a low growl, saying, “Ye want me cock? Ye can have it. Say the word, any word, and I’ll pound it through yer fucking heart like a stake through a fucking vampire.”

Ana’s breath caught. Her mouth fell slowly open.

“Wonder who programmed him to say that?” Mike said evenly.

“No? Then walk. Don’t ye shake yer blubbering head at me. Ye walk or I’ll run this hook up yer ass and pull ye.”

Footsteps, striking hollow on the gangplank—Foxy’s sure, the boy’s, stumbling. The heavy blow of Foxy’s fist hitting something hard, his control panel, she guessed, since the curtains went up immediately after, letting her see them there on the bow of his ship. The boy was pale, his hand still trapped in Foxy’s fist, and Foxy’s hook tucked right up under his chin, against his throat.

“What do we do with mutineers?” Foxy roared and the whole room roared back, “Walk the plank!”

The boy started to struggle. Foxy yanked him back hard against his chest and waved at the crowd for another covering crash of cheers, then growled, “Ye wiggle like a worm one more time, ye little shit, and I’ll hook ye like one. Shut up and stand still. Wave to the nice people. We’re giving them a show.”

The boy raised one shaking hand and waved.

“Smile.”

He smiled.

“And listen to me.” The camera shifted, losing and regaining focus in a tight iris on Foxy’s face just as his eye opened up black and his eyepatch lowered. He put his mouth, his sharp metal teeth, right up against the boy’s ear, and as the room screamed and laughed with anticipation, he growled, “This here be a family place. If yer bored, go play in the arcade or jump in the ball pit or find yerself a quiet stall in the boy’s bathroom and jerk yerself raw. I don’t care what ye do. But if ye ever, ever—”

That hook, that sharp metal hook, dug at the boy’s neck. The unblinking camera watched a bead of blood well up and wind a ribbon down to his leather-capped wrist.

“—put yer hand on me again, I’ll cut it off and eat it in front of ye. See if I fucking don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” the boy whispered. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m—”

“Aye, ye are. Yer the sorriest little shit I ever seen. And ye wouldn’t be the first I’ve gutted, sorry or no, so smile for the kiddies, ye sorry son of a bitch, and WALK THE PLANK!” he finished at a theatric bellow.

He let go of the kid with a shove and the boy all but ran off the plank and jumped into the bouncy pit below. He was too big for it by far. His feet caught on the safety nets and tumbled him, ass in the air, undignified, to the delight of all. Foxy waved his hand and hook, playing to the crowd, and when the cheers died down and the boy was out of the pit and running, snot and tears just beginning to pour out of him, for the bathrooms, Foxy shouted, “Where’s me matey? Where’s me Black-Eyed Kate?”
“Here I am! Here I am!”

“Come on up here, lassie! Let’s see what manner o’ swag I have for ye here in me cabin. Since ye gave it up to me so freely,” he said, lifting little Kate onstage, “I’ll give ye an extra dip or three, what say ye?”

“A birthday girl?” Chica cried, clapping her hands. “Let’s sing a song!”

Freddy obliged, and as the Fazbear Birthday song opened up, Foxy walked the girl up the gangplank to his cabin to trade her fake doubloon in for the cheap shit kept for the occasion. Sure enough, she came out a few seconds later with a new pirate hat, a string of gaudy plastic pearls and a ring with a rock on it to rival the Hope Diamond if it were real. She hugged his waist tight before running down the gangplank again and over to catch Freddy’s outstretched hand so he could pull her onstage. It was a birthday she’d probably never forgot. And neither would her brother.

“Where did you get this?” Ana asked, putting the tablet aside. “You said you didn’t come in on this until 1993, so all these videos…who took them? Who gave them to you?”

“Most of them came to me by way of a fella by the name of Cody Quinn, but he didn’t film them.”

“Do you know who did?”

“For a fact? No.”

“But you have a bullshit theory or two.”

“Yeah,” he said evenly, “and so do you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Immediately after she said it, she wished she hadn’t. It sounded scripted, like a lie. When she said, “I’ve never seen any of these in my life!” it sounded even worse.

“I believe you. But they’re familiar anyway, aren’t they? Like, the way you always know a Kubrick film or a Spielberg. There’s just a way some people have of filming, distinct as a fingerprint, impossible to suppress. And I’ve been watching you watch those videos all night. I know you know who made them.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t want to admit it, you mean. Out loud.”

“I mean, I don’t fucking know! Do you hear yourself?” she demanded. “Do you? You know, there may actually be a conspiracy here, I’m not going to say there isn’t, but you are so fucking deep in it, you can’t tell what’s really part of it and what’s not! I left Mammon when I was ten! How the hell am I supposed to recognize someone’s film style from these clips? Half of them were made before I was born!”

“Same could be said about Kubrick. Or Spielberg. Damn, I’m getting old,” he muttered.

“Marion Blaylock?” she said angrily, just to throw it out instead of letting it stink up the silence. “Is that what I’m supposed to say? Because she worked at Freddy’s and she liked to make home movies? She loved David! She was a great mother! So if that’s what you’re telling me, you can stop this fucking car right now! What happened to her family was a tragedy, just as much as anything else in your fucking binder, so don’t you fucking dare paint her out to be—”

“Purple?”
“Part of it,” Ana said through tight jaws.

“But that’s the thing. She is part of it, whether you like it or not. So are you. So am I, for different reasons and in different ways. We’re all part of it, and yeah, I’m in deeper than most, and no, I don’t know where all the pieces fit, but I know at least one big fucking piece more than you do.”

“And what’s that?” Ana demanded.

He didn’t answer, just drove. She glared at him for a while, then looked out the window and did not ask again.

“So the Stockyard opened,” he said at last. “And the Toys were all gone, all but Foxy, who doesn’t really count since he was never a real Toy. The puppet was gone. Balloon Boy was gone, thank God. And Erik Metzger was also gone.”

Ana looked at him, not forgivingly, but with some damnably sense of curiosity.

“But hey, lots of people go missing in Mammon. Erik had money, a notorious history and a fresh scandal. It wasn’t so impossible to believe he’d skip town.”

“And what do you believe?”

Mike didn’t immediately answer and when he finally did, he started with a low sigh and a heartfelt, “Fuck if I know anymore. When I was first looking into all this, I thought—I knew—Fredrich had killed him. He killed the puppet and then he went after Freddy and the other Toys, and then he ran Erik down and got him too. The Toybox closed and the Stockyard opened with your aunt as the new head of security and when I was reading up on all this, I was so sure Metzger was dead.”

“But?”

“None of the night watch guards would stick around. Most of them left after only one night. Half of them just walked right off the job. Or ran off, I should say.”

“Never to be seen again?”

“Some of them. But even in places without killer animatronics, there’s a lot of turnover in the food industry, especially in a low-income town like Mammon, and the sixteen-to-twenty-five set isn’t exactly known for reliability under the best of circumstances. And then there was your aunt, who worked there for years, day shift or night, without any trouble at all. So in spite of everything I’d heard and seen…I didn’t think anything of it.”

“What happened to change your mind?”

He took a breath to answer, only to let it out again as a bitter puff of a laugh. “Did I? God, I would love it if I was the hero of this story, lady. That I solved it, like you said, solved it from the morgue of the Deseret Truth, of all places. Mike Schmidt, armchair detective. Yeah.” He shook his head and adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, his knuckles on the plastic cover creaking with strain.

“Thing is, I don’t think I did change my mind or I never would have done what I did. I mean, when I started reading, putting it all together…when I found Jeremy’s report, when I found Nate’s…that’s when I started believing. But I genuinely thought it was over when the Toybox closed. Everything else that happened—the Reardon murders, the Fazfright fire, the Trap…hell, seeing all these tapes—none of that had happened yet. I thought it was over. I thought I was safe.”

“And you weren’t?”
“Not when I worked there. Look, no offense, lady, but…can you just be quiet for a bit? This…This is the first time I’ve been back to the Stockyard since…since the last time, I guess. I never thought I’d be going back, never in my life. I don’t…I really don’t want to do this. Can we just be quiet?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks. It’s not you, it’s just…”

“It’s fine.”

He drove.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ana watched the world outside the window, all black trees and black hills on a black sky. Her stomach growled once, indifferent to human suffering. She never had gotten her dinner.

Mike turned off on Circle Drive, the heart of downtown Mammon, and that was something too, wasn’t it? Of all the pizzerias, this was the only one that wasn’t set down in the middle of nowhere. George W.M. Reynolds Elementary, where Ana and David had gone, was just five blocks east; Elizabeth Gaskell Middle School and Blackwood High, ten blocks south. Once upon a time, it had been surrounded by the sorts of shops that catered to kids, but they were all gone now, leaving nothing but their empty shells and signboards without letters. She could see the ghosts of Pop-In Video and the Book Bin (New & Used!), victims of the changing times and their own outdated media, perhaps, but she could also see what had once been a Gamer’s Paradise, a Comic Corner, a Maybe’s Candies, and even the hulking remains of a Toy Barn, also dead and gone. And right in the middle, alone now in a vast, cracked ocean of asphalt, Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria, just the way she remembered it, except…

“It’s smaller,” Ana said unthinkingly as Mike pulled up and parked. Smaller than she remembered, she meant. It had seemed huge to her that day—a castle, a fortress, a kingdom unto itself. Now it was just a building. One she had only ever put one foot inside.

But Mike couldn’t hear her thoughts. He said, “That it is. Less than half the size of the Toybox. What’s that tell you?”

“Bigger isn’t always better?”

“Yeah, my wife used to say that before she met me,” said Mike with a rare smile. “But funnily enough, bigger is usually better when it comes to the restaurant biz. More seats means more paying customers, after all. So it is odd that Faust would have scaled back, especially since the Toybox’s success proved he could handle a business twice this size.” He cocked an eye at her. “Thoughts?”

“It wasn’t about the money for him.”

“I agree.”

“You don’t sound like you like it, though.”

“If it’s not about the money, what’s that leave? And I don’t believe that either.” Mike shoved a hand through his hair and looked at the building—a frustrated, baffled, beaten-down stare. “Even
after everything I’ve seen and heard…and done…I just don’t have a handle on that kid. That kid,”
he repeated with a self-deprecating laugh. “He was fifty when the Stockyard opened. Hell, he’s
over seventy now and I still see him in my head as that grinning little kid with the fucking mouse-
ears on. Naw, it’s not about the money. Partly because he’s so fucking rich, he could shit out a
failing restaurant every year for the rest of his life and still make money, but mostly because it was
never about the money when it came to Freddy Fazbear. I honestly believe he thought of this place
as his last chance to do what he only ever really wanted…entertain people with the best
animatronics in the world.”

“His last chance? But this wasn’t the last Fazbear’s.”

“No. But that’s getting ahead of the story. Christ, this is a long story.” He checked his watch, shook
his head, then opened the door and let himself out, taking the ‘keys’ from the backseat.

Ana helped him with the unlocking and soon, they were on the other side of the In-door, where a
faded Freddy decal still wished them a weathered welcome. She thought nothing as she stepped
over the threshold into the lobby. She felt nothing. Nothing but a phantom ache across her back and
a phantom stinging in her eyes. She was fine. It was a long time ago and it was all fine.

Ana’s flashlight did its best to dispel the dark, but managed only to push it back just out of easy
reach. She could see nothing beyond this short hall, only a vague sense of openness and emptiness
where a stray wind blew and where once a little girl had taken one step toward lights and music and
a waving bear before it had all been yanked away. Now it was dark, but there was plenty to see
here in this hall. Peeling posters—Time to Eat, said Chica; Time to Rock, said Bonnie, Time to
Party, said Freddy, Time to Play, said Foxy—and the Rules for Safety, unchanged from those
posted at the Toybox, along with dozens upon dozens of children’s drawings celebrating all their
special days. If she looked hard enough, she would surely find David’s name scrawled across one
of them.

She did not look.

“Here,” said Mike, drawing her attention to the open doorway on her left and the small room
beyond that connected this hall with the hall on the other side, leading to the Out-door. The room
had been stripped bare over the years. Even the light fixtures were gone, just a tangle of wires like
corpse hair hanging down from the center of the ceiling. The only remaining features of any kind
were the control panels attached to each door, each with just two square buttons, one grey and one
red.

“Lights,” said Mike, pressing the grey button on the opposite panel. Nothing happened. He pressed
the red one next, undaunted. “And this one for the doors. See the doors?”

There were no doors. But since he asked, Ana leaned back and had another look at the doorjamb,
noticing only then that they were more of those pneumatic, steel security doors and they were, in
fact, still present, just retracted, not into the wall, but the ceiling, designed to close like a portcullis.
She immediately stepped clear of the doorway.

“Yeah, it’s funny, isn’t it? At the Flagship, the doors shut when the power was switched off, yet
here, when the power goes off, the doors open. And it gets so quiet. The fan goes off and the lights
and the monitor and all that white noise, gone.” His crooked smile faded. “So you can hear him
His footsteps. And then his eyes, all lit up and flickering, and the music starts.”

He hummed a few bars of the Toreador March while Ana watched him, very quiet, very still, and
then he turned around and just stared out into the west hall.
“You okay?” she asked at last, knowing damn well he wasn’t.

“You have no idea, lady. You have no fucking clue. I sat in this office for five nights. I survived. It was supposed to be over. Do you get that?” He looked at her then, his eyes like cigarette burns, as black and empty as the eyes of an animatronic just before they bit. “Every day since, it’s been like a part of me is still waiting for six o’clock. Like it never stopped. And here I am and it’s—” He checked his watch and laughed, too high and strained. “—midnight. And I just don’t think I can do this again.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Yeah, we do. I do, anyway. I don’t really care what you do when my part’s done, but I have to finish. I’ve been waiting twenty years for this goddamn night to end.” He straightened, braced himself, and came back to her. “Here we go,” he muttered as he passed her.

She followed him, crunching over broken tiles. The layout was deceptively simple: the dining room dominated the building, with the main stage occupying most of the north wall. To the left of the stage, on the west wall, was the Parts and Services room, its door boarded up and the boards sprayed with a startlingly good depiction of a blood-drenched Freddy holding a headless child in each hand. Opposite this, to the right of the stage, was a doorless, empty room that Ana would have thought was a party room except for all the stripped power outlets. The arcade, then, scavenged down to the paint on the walls. To the east, the bathrooms, their doors hanging off and the stink of stagnant sewer lines reaching out like an invisible hand to choke her. The kitchen was in the corner on Ana’s right—all rusted industrial machinery, broken tiles and exposed pipes split by parasitical roots and grasping vines—while the building’s one party room was in the corner on the left, just below Pirate Cove.

A rotting purple curtain embroidered with pale stars closed the Cove off from the rest of the dining area. A small sign lay on the floor nearby, but it disintegrated in Ana’s hands when she tried to pick it up, leaving her with the Out of Order and most of the Sorry in Sorry for the Inconvenience. When Ana moved the curtain to have a look at Foxy’s stage, she found a stained and rumpled mattress and a sprawl of pornography, beer cans and broken bottles. Graffiti covered the walls, but beneath the poser gang tags and profanities, dripping hooks and squirting dicks, Ana saw something else, something that reached right in and closed her heart in a cold fist: lines. Arranged in lots of four with a fifth to cut across them. A prisoner’s calendar, tallying days that had stretched out half a year at the very least. And they weren’t drawn on the walls, but carved into them.

Not with a knife though, thought Ana, staring at the marks. With a hook.

“What happened?” she heard herself ask.

“To Foxy? Not sure.” Mike joined her at Pirate’s Cove and pushed the curtain back, his lip curling in disgust at the sights it concealed. “He was out of order when I got here and had been for a while. All the animatronics looked pretty bad by then. Everything did. I remember the walls being all cracked and peeling, even though the place had only been open five years. Parents were already complaining about conditions, even before Reardon and the murders. But Foxy was definitely the worst. He actually had holes in his skin. When he ran down the halls, you could see the lights shining off his endoskeleton. I remember…” He lapsed into quiet, then laughed without humor and said, “You ever see Pirates of the Caribbean? The movie?”

“Of course. I wasn’t raised under a rock.”

“My wife kind of has a thing for Depp. She doesn’t think I know,” he added with a husbandly
eyeroll. “She wanted to take the girls to see it when it came out. The first one, I mean. The one with
the cursed pirates.”

“Yeah.”

“I was loving that movie right up until that first scene when the pirates storm the town and turn all
dead and zombiefied when the moon hits them. That one pirate reached out and his arm turned all
to bones in the moonlight and all I could think of was Foxy. I managed not to bolt out of the
theater, but I sat the rest of the way through it in a cold sweat. Not a figure of speech, lady. I was
pouring sweat, cold sweat. It stank, not like sweat stinks. More like wires. God.” He laughed again,
that same awful laugh. “I had nightmares for weeks after that movie and every last one was Foxy.
Running down the hall. Banging on the door. Looking at me through the curtain.”

He seemed to see the curtain for the first time again and let it go, wiping his hand on his thigh to
take away the feel of it. “And singing,” he finished. “He used to sing, you know. I’d be sitting
there, two in the morning, dead calm, and hear him way off down the hall, singing to himself.”

“The Ballad of the Flying Fox?”

“No, some other one. I didn’t know it and there was never any words, just the melody.” And he
faked it for her, his voice lowering and roughening slightly in what might or might not be a

And Ana’s mind promptly queued up the next line: For I leaves them all sleeping or stomping and
weeping on the sand of the shore by the sea.

Mike looked at her. “You know the Ballad, but you never actually heard Foxy sing?”

“My aunt—”

“Made a lot of videos,” he said for her. “Yeah, you said. But it’s funny. My mom took a lot of
home videos when I was a kid, too, but damned if I can remember the song playing in any one of
them.”

Ana shrugged, showing him no expression. “I never got to go to Freddy’s. You remember the stuff
you always wanted better than the stuff you got, I guess.”

“I guess so.”

“If you think I’m lying to you, why are you still talking to me?”

Now it was his turn to shrug, stone-faced. “I don’t always think you’re lying.”

“But you do now.”

“Because you are now.” He looked away, first at the empty main stage and then at the boarded
entrance to the parts room beside it. “Not in any way that matters, though. And I want to get out of
here, so let’s just drop it. Okay?”

“Fine with me.”

“Okay. The Stockyard opened its doors in March of 1988 and I honestly believed the story of
Freddy Fazbear, the dark part of it anyway, was over. So in 1993, when I was putting all this
together from the comfortable distance of Hurricane, I got the bright idea to go undercover as a
security guard and write up a feature from the inside perspective. My boss needed some
convincing. For a guy who routinely published lurid murder bits and celebrity scandal sheets, he thought the idea of tying a bunch of very real missing and dead children to a haunted pizza parlor and a bunch of murderous animatronics built by the son of a former Nazi, who could easily afford to sue a piss-ant paper like ours into the ground…well, he didn’t love it. But I was determined and I said I’d pay my own expenses, so he let me do it. My interview, as I recall, was me calling to ask about an ad in the paper and the lady on the other end asking if I could start that night. The guard who was scheduled had quit the night before, you see. Without notice. Just ran off the job. Screaming.”

He stopped to fish out his cigarettes and lit one. The cherry’s glow jittered in the dark room, betraying his nerves. He saw it and crushed the cigarette out after just two puffs. His voice was calm and steady when he said, “I made it five nights at Freddy’s. When I showed up the next day, it was to pick up my one and only paycheck. That was November 13th, 1993. That mean anything to you?”

The cold hand that had gripped her heart on seeing Pirate Cove now withdrew and punched her in the stomach. “You know it does.”

“Tell me.”

“That was the night James Royce Reardon was arrested.”

“For?”

Her jaw clenched. She had to force herself to relax. “You’re kind of a sadist, you know that, don’t you?”

“Masochist, more like,” he said wearily. “Just tell me.”

“Abducting and killing kids.”

“Yeah,” Mike said with a nod, his eyes never leaving hers. “You think he did it?”

“Of course he did it,” she snapped. “He confessed!”

“Yeah, he did. After seventy-two straight hours of interrogation, with the whole of Mammon screaming for a lynching on the courthouse lawn, and after falling down in his holding cell hard enough to shatter six teeth and break three fingers, he confessed. But oddly enough, he was never able to lead investigators to the bodies of the missing children. In fact, they were never found.”

“You are not seriously telling me you think James Royce Reardon was innocent.”

“Innocent? No. He was a pedophile with years of escalating behavior behind him and no good reason for hanging out at a pizza parlor and talking to little kids, but do I think he abducted those five missing children? No, I don’t.”

“Five? I thought there were only two.”

A shadow of dark surprise passed over Mike’s face. “I thought you knew. You never heard that part?”

“We left right after David…” Ana broke off there, slamming the door on that night and all the fear and confusion that came with it—a door as heavy and final as the pneumatic doors that protected the security office here at Freddy’s. She shook her head instead. “We were already gone by the time Reardon was arrested. I heard it all second-hand. Never got the full story.”
“Okay,” said Mike after a moment. His expression remained reserved, but his voice was sympathetic, almost gentle, like a man trying to coax a stray to him, one he thought as apt to bite as lick. “Okay, well, on November 8th, Reardon was caught on camera talking to Scott Nickels in the arcade room for about three minutes. A security guard came through and Reardon backs off. He goes back to the dining area for about ten more minutes, then out to the play area and watches the little kids for a good hour, then goes to the boy’s bathroom for about five minutes, then goes back to the dining room for another hour and finally leaves. Let me remind you I was the night guard. The cops had copies of all those tapes, but I had the originals and I had all night to look at them and make copies of my own. I could show them to you if you want.”

“I don’t want to see it!” Ana said angrily. “Why would I want to? Get to the point already!”

“Okay. The point is, Reardon is a person of interest right off. The initial search of his trailer turns up plenty of kiddie porn, but no evidence connecting him to any of the missing kids. Scotty’s jacket and the other trophies don’t pop up until the next day.”

“You’re saying they were planted.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Twenty cops went over a single-wide trailer for twelve hours and found nothing. Then one of Reardon’s interrogators visits the scene and lo and behold, there’s a paper bag with all the necessary evidence to incriminate him. It couldn’t be more obvious.”

“Dahmer had a head in the refrigerator that the cops couldn’t find right away. Gacy had, like, a dozen people buried under his house in a crawlspace smaller than the area of a single-wide trailer. Stuff like that isn’t found all the time, that doesn’t make all those guys innocent!”

“I saw Scotty Nickels talking to Reardon on those cameras,” Mike said quietly. “And I saw Reardon clear over in the play area on another camera when Scotty started talking to someone else, someone who knew where to stand so he wouldn’t be on the cameras. I saw Scotty hold out his arm like he was going to hold hands with this person and I saw him walk off-screen. And that was the last anyone saw of him, but whoever it was that took him away, it was not James Royce Reardon.”

“Who, then? There had to be other kids in that arcade, someone who saw the guy Scotty was talking to.”

“There were and they did,” Mike agreed. “They saw Bonnie the Bunny.”

“Fuck you.” She didn’t mean to say it, didn’t plan to, didn’t feel it building in her heart before it came slapping out her mouth, but once it was said, she was instantly, violently, murderously angry. “I don’t know what your game is, but you can pound it and all your fake shit evidence right up your ass. Bonnie did not kill anyone.”

“They saw Bonnie,” he said again, unmoved. “But the real Bonnie was on stage in the dining room, plain as day, on camera. The kids in the arcade said this Bonnie looked different. They said he was gold. Not just yellow, but shiny. Who does that sound like?”

“You said the springtraps were scrapped.”

“No, I said Faust and Metzger said the springtraps were scrapped. I also said at least one construction worker bumped into them in a basement that doesn’t appear on any plans. And now I’m saying that while Reardon was on the other side of the pizzeria, someone climbed into the Springtrap Bonnie suit and convinced Scotty to follow him into some similar secret room right here. And when he was done with whatever he did, Springtrap Bonnie came out and lured Emily
Schaffer away from her birthday party exactly the same way. Nobody had noticed Scotty was missing yet—his home life wasn’t great and he rarely left the arcade before closing time anyway—but Emily’s mother noticed Emily was gone almost straight off. I watched her on the tapes. She searched for fifteen minutes before she went to the security office and got the staff to help her try and find her daughter. It was that commotion that made Reardon leave the building and probably what put him on the suspect list, but it was all kept real quiet. Hell, I hadn’t heard about any of it when I came to work that night, but by the next day, not only was Reardon in custody, but suddenly, there were three other abductions. Dionne Graf, age twelve, stops by the parts and services door like someone called her over, then goes inside and never comes out. Her Hello Kitty purse is later found in Reardon’s trailer. Until then, she’s assumed to be a runaway. Isiah Belacourte, age fourteen, talked to someone off-screen for three minutes before he walked off camera and vanished from the arcade, another runaway, at least until his underwear is found stuffed in Dionne’s purse. Archer Calaigh, age six, ran across the play area with his arms out like he was going for a hug and was never seen again. His parents had just gotten a messy divorce and it’s assumed his dad stole him after he lost custody, so no one even knew to look for him before his shoes are found in that magical paper bag, along with Scotty’s jacket and Emily’s bracelet. Five missing kids in less than a week. Guess what happened a week before this all went down?”

“You were hired,” Ana said coolly.

He looked at her, not angry, only tired. “Guess what else?”

She tried to stare him down and couldn’t. In the end, she was the one who looked away, the one whose voice cracked when she said, “My cousin David disappeared.”

“So let me ask you something. If you really believe Reardon was responsible for the other kids, why don’t you think he killed your cousin, too? I mean, one week? What are the odds two completely different psychotic killers were operating in Freddy’s the same week?”

Ana could not make herself speak for far too long, but at last said, “You don’t know what I believe.”

“I know you told me your cousin was one of the kids this cursed fucking place ate. Practically the first words out of your mouth, in fact. This place eats kids, I said and you said, I know, my best friend was one of them.”

Ana pressed her trembling lips together and said nothing.

“What do you think happened to him?” Mike asked. “I’ve looked into it as deep as I can go, but since he’s not considered missing, the hole doesn’t go that deep. Your aunt told the school he was with his father, but no one ever sent for his records. And from that point on, whenever anyone in town inquires—a happening that occurs less and less often over the years as your aunt goes quietly, cheerfully crazy—she simply repeats that David is with his father and everything is fine, but no one ever heard from him again.”

“What else do you know about us?”

“Your family?” He shrugged. “You and your mom disappeared around the same time your cousin did. Frankly, until tonight, I thought you were all taken together. What happened? Do you mind me asking?”

“We just left.”

“Just…?” Mike shrugged expressively and watched her even more closely.
“My mom lived hard. The fact that she had to leave as suddenly as she did that night pretty much set the tone for the rest of my childhood. We must have moved like that a dozen times over the next five years.”

“And then she straightened out?”

“And then she died.”

“How?”

The trunk. The deafening rattle-thump of tires on the pier just before the car hit the water. The smell of the lake filling the car and the coldness of it closing around her like a fist. That last gulp of air. Squeezing through the broken window, cutting her hands and her back and her thighs. Looking up and seeing moonlight on the surface of the water; looking down and seeing her mother’s pale face through a cloud of pale hair, watching Ana swim away.

“She was drunk and she was driving,” said Ana. “The car left the road, as they say. I’m not talking about it. Move on.”

“Well…anyway, years go by after David disappears, when out of the blue, Marion Blaylock stops paying her bills. A couple cops swing by to make sure, you know, she’s not being eaten by cats, and discover she has disappeared. They file a missing person’s on her behalf and wait ten more years so she can be legally declared dead by the great state of Utah. She’s got a sizeable estate, but she owns the property and her delinquent utility bills only rack up a few bucks—”

“They racked up thirty-five thousand bucks, actually.”

“Yeah, but that’s nothing compared to the value of the property, is my point. If the bank held her mortgage, that would be one thing, but neither the water department nor the electric company wanted to deal with the Gordian knot of heritage property laws tying up that particular piece of real estate. They sold her debts to a private collection agency, who were thrilled at the prospect of auctioning off the property until they found out Mammon’s heritage laws prevented them from dividing or rezoning the lot. Fortunately, their investigations into her financials turned up this problematic next-of-kin, who might have a legal claim on the estate and who definitely could be squeezed for the debt if she was dumb enough to take possession of the property without reading the fine print about existing liens.”

“Yeah, I did not consult a lawyer,” Ana admitted with a careless shrug. “So you knew I was back in town and you still pretended you didn’t know me when you called?”

“I knew Anastasia Stark was back in town. I made no connection between that fact and the listing for an animatronic repairman by BlazinBitch420.” Mike emphasized her user-name with a hard stare that would have done Freddy himself proud. “However, I do keep tabs on the various people connected with Freddy’s, so yeah, I did know you’d moved yourself in at the Blaylock house. I also know you got a job with the local contracting company. How’s that going for you, by the way?”

“When did this turn into a story about me?”

“Round about the time you were born.”

“Well, I’m not answering questions.”

“Answer one, at least. Just one, for my own peace of mind, which has been fairly hard fucking pressed the last twenty years or so.” Mike came a step toward her, but only one. It felt like he came
much closer, such was the intensity he brought with him. “What do you think happened to your
cousin?”

“I think he’s dead.”

“Who killed him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who killed him?”

“I said I don’t know and that’s more than one question!”

He stared at her until she looked away and then he backed up again. “All right,” he said and turned
around. “James Royce Reardon was arrested November 13th, 1993, six years to the fucking day
after the Bite of ’87. And once again, it proved the killing blow. The pizzeria limped on another
couple of weeks, but Faust finally seemed to have given up. He retreated to his house and let his
lawyers announce that Freddy Fazbear’s would be closing by the end of the year and no plans were
made to open another. December 10th, 1993, just two days before Reardon’s fatal stabbing in
prison, the Stockyard closed for good. Like all the others, it was boarded up and abandoned, more
or less intact. The occasional teenage break-in did happen, keeping rumors of walking, rotting
animatronics alive in young imaginations, but the rest of Mammon was only too willing to move on
and for five years, that’s what they all did. And then, in the summer of 1999, Charles Murray of
Uncle Chuck’s Amusements rolled into town with his sons, Sean, Mark and Felix. They owned and
operated one of those rolling carnivals, the kind that set down in an empty parking lot for a
weekend and push on before the local cops realize how much meth they’re dealing on the side.”

“Do you know that for a fact or is that just a comment on carnivals in general?”

“Oh, it’s a fact. Uncle Chuck had a rap sheet ten miles long, heavy on possession with intent to sell
and contributing to delinquency. His boys were each working on their first mile, mostly drunk and
disorderly and criminal mischief. When they came to Mammon, they attempted to set up in the
Flagship’s parking lot, but Faust’s lawyers put a stop to it. Then they tried to set up in the Toybox’s
lot and got the bum’s rush again. When they got shot down a third time—in front of the old
Fredbear’s Diner—Uncle Chuck allegedly threatened to sue for harassment of an honest working
man. Someone finally told him about the Fazbear incidents, and what should have been a rolling
carnival turned into a summer-long engagement while Uncle Chuck and the boys made plans for
their real money-maker: The Fazbear Fright Terror Attraction.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nope. They actually thought it would be fun to set up a permanent haunted house attraction
wholly devoted to stirring up the old bones of all those dead kids, and charge the locals twenty
bucks to walk through and get jumpscared by guys in costumes. They planned their grand-opening
for September 25th, thirty years to the fucking day after the Springtrap Chica incident. They
designed a banner poster around that whole theme, with Maria Osgoode’s smiling face on one end
and her autopsy photo on the other.”

“That’s sick.”

“No argument here, lady. Anyway, they originally wanted to run the thing out of one of the real
pizzerias, but Faust put the hammer down hard. Unimpressed, Uncle Chuck rented a piece of
property on the outskirts of town, then bought a dozen or so shipping containers and sort of
cobbled them together, and hired a local kid, Cody Quinn, to keep watch on everything until it was
set up and maybe play one of the roles for a share of the ticket sales once they opened. They started innocently enough, if you can call anything they did innocent. Going over old newspapers and finding photos of the place in the public domain, so they could make the interiors of their place match up. Then they started talking to ‘witnesses’, as they put it, to get more information on what the animatronics looked like. Chuck threw together some pretty good replica heads and other stuff to scatter around, but that wasn’t good enough. Wasn’t authentic. So he and his boys began systematically breaking in to all the pizzerias and stealing everything that wasn’t nailed down. Party hats, posters, old pizza boxes, that sort of thing. And then they found this.”

Mike turned around and went over to the boarded-up parts and services room. After a few minutes with his prybar, he had that ghastly child-eating Freddy dismembered and the doorway clear. The room beyond was picked clean, but that wasn’t the first thing Ana saw.

Beneath the outer shell of sheetrock, the wall seemed to be reinforced with steel panels and sealed with another of those pneumatic doors, itself concealed behind a set of shelves. But the sheetrock had been knocked away and the steel panels cut through with a torch, leaving behind an overlarge hole running flush with the floor almost right up to the ceiling, wide enough for her and Mike to walk through together without touching.

“I can only assume old Uncle Chuck thought he’d found the legendary Fazbear gold, the way he went at that door. Cody said it took two hours to burn through,” said Mike, walking over to shine his light through the hole into the room beyond. It was a pretty good size, but it had also been worked over and was featureless now apart from those items that could not be removed—built-in shelves and counters, two narrow tables bolted to the floor, and something resembling an open-sided shower that might be a washing station for the animatronics. At the far end of this disappointingly utilitarian room, an extremely unsafe-looking metal stairwell dropped down into blackness. The air that blew up through this opening was dank and foul. “Let me remind you there is no basement on the plans for any of the Fazbear pizzerias.”

“What was down there?” Ana asked.

“What do you think?”

She didn’t want to say it. Funny how she could come this far, hear this much, and balk at something like this.

“The missing kids.”

He looked back at her, unsurprised, but said, “No. Or at least, Cody never admitted to it. Although he might well have lied about that. I’ve always thought it pretty plausible. He was in a lot of trouble, but not dead-kids trouble, not yet, and there was for damn sure a lot he wasn’t telling. No, Cody said the hidden room up here was all normal animatronic stuff and the basement was set up like, in his words, ‘a sex dungeon.’ Bare light bulbs, soundproofing panels, tables and racks at funny heights and funny angles, a bed, some toys, and lots and lots of, quote, medical stuff and machinery lying around, end quote. But none of that interested Uncle Chuck, who said throwing a sex dungeon into their attraction would look hokey and unbelievable, since no one else knew about it, and they couldn’t ‘discover’ it without incriminating themselves. So they left it there. But they did find something worth taking, apparently. Cody said they found a bunch of boxes of old home movies, some spare Freddy heads…and one animatronic.”

“Which one?”

“Cody said it was a rabbit.”
“Bonnie?” But even as she asked, Ana realized she wouldn’t be asking at all if she didn’t already disbelieve it. “No. Springtrap Bonnie.”

“Springtrap Bonnie,” Mike agreed. “Cody said it was tore up and rotting, with dark stains soaked into its back and legs where it had been lying.” He turned his flashlight into the room, probing the floor until it came to one of the steel tables, which did indeed look a bit like a medical table, the kind found in morgues. Shreds of yellow fabric stuck up from the surface in tufts, glued in place by some black substance better left unexplored. “He said it stank,” Mike mused, studying these ominous signs. “Specifically, he said he’d once shoveled out an old barn on his grandpa’s property and came across a whole coop full of dead chickens, forgotten years ago and left to shrivel up and mummify in the open air, and that was what it stank like. Death, he said. Old, dry death. And he said it moved when they went to pick it up.”

“Moved?”

“He said its eyes opened. He said it looked at him and then he said it saw him. And like the difference between yelling and screaming, that is a funny sort of distinction, isn’t it?”

Ana didn’t answer.

“Anyway, they loaded it up in the back of Uncle Chuck’s truck and took it to the site of the future Fazfright Terror Attraction. Cody went home to grab some sleep before his night shift on guard and Uncle Chuck and his boys stayed on to get some work done. When Cody returned that night, Uncle Chuck’s truck was still there, but Chuck and the boys were not. What was there was Springtrap Bonnie, stumbling around the site and trying to get into the office. At the time, Cody claimed he only survived because he had an audio clip he could play through any of the building’s speakers—well, he had all those tapes, but he quickly figured out that one sound in particular seemed to be attracting the animatronic, and that playing it through the further speakers would lure Springtrap Bonnie away. Want to guess what that sound was?”

Ana hummed some of the Toreador March.

“Nope.”

She thought, then hummed a little of the puppet’s music box tune, the song about someone’s grandfather’s clock, the one that was really about death.

“Nope, although those are both interesting guesses. No, it was Balloon Boy. Balloon Boy laughing.”

Ana blinked. “Why would anybody hear that laugh and want to get closer? For that matter,” she went on, more sensibly, “Why would anyone make a game out of leading Bonnie around through the speakers instead of just leaving if he really thought Bonnie was trying to get him?”

Mike shrugged. “In the beginning, he just thought it was a creepy animatronic and he wanted to keep it away from him. It took a while before he realized he hadn’t seen or spoken to Uncle Chuck and the boys since the night they broke into the Stockyard. And for what it’s worth, Cody has since recanted this statement. Now he says the ventilation system at the site wasn’t working very well and the fumes from all the painting and construction made him paranoid and prone to hallucinations. He eventually even admitted he may have set the fire that burned the Fazfright attraction to the ground, the fire in which the bodies of Uncle Chuck and his sons were found, although he never admitted to the killings themselves, and investigators eventually put the fire down to faulty wiring and the deaths to misadventure.”
“Misadventure?”

“The coroner said they’d been pulled apart. Cody Quinn, even hopped up on paint fumes, could not pull four men apart with his bare hands. Therefore, obviously, Uncle Chuck had been attempting to build an animatronic to go in his gruesome murderabilia display and it had malfunctioned in some grievous manner, no great loss. But one thing did survive the fire: forty seconds of film from one of the security cameras.”

Out came the tablet. Ana didn’t reach for it.

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“On a scale of…?”

“One to Nate.”

He thought it over. “I’d say probably a two, with no other context, but it ramps right up there the longer you think about it. I give it an easy ten out of ten.”

Ana took the tablet and pressed play.

The footage was in color, odd for a security camera, but so dark that at first, she couldn’t tell. The fire, the smoke, or something had thrown the whole thing through a thick filter of corrosion. She could see a generic sort of office, just a desk set in front of an interior window, now dark, and a doorway that opened into a narrow hall, also dark. The office itself was small, made much smaller by all the Fazbear themed clutter sprawled out over every possible space. Posters, drawings, bobbleheads, plushies, a box full of larger detritus, and slumped up against the wall in the hall, the sagging, eyeless figure of a knockoff Freddy costume. That was what Ana watched at first, thinking whatever horrible thing was coming had to start with him, so when it finally happened, it took her entirely by surprise. There were a lot of skips and flutters or whatever the technical term was for really, really bad film quality, so that one minute, the room was empty and the next, Springtrap Bonnie was sliding in.

He didn’t move like the Bonnie she knew, not before he’d been damaged and not the way he moved now. He used his whole body to balance, unable, it seemed, to move one leg forward without dropping an arm and tilting his head. He slithered, a snake on two legs, grotesque in every lurching, clipped frame of film. Many of the videos she’d seen tonight had showed an animatronic in some degree of what she had already come privately to think of as the Zombie Walk, but none of them did it like Springtrap Bonnie. He didn’t even look like an animatronic in this moment; he looked like a corpse. How easy it was to see those wires and padding beneath the torn skin of his body and imagine withered tendons and bare bone. How easy it was to imagine those were human eyes bulging in the oversized sockets of the bunny head, especially when he turned and looked directly at the camera.

But the security office was empty. The chair where Cody should be sitting, sniffing fumes and pissing himself from fear, was empty. Springtrap Bonnie skulked halfway across the screen before the video skipped, making it seem as if he had teleported to the other side of the room. He stood there, weaving on his feet, then turned and teleported back almost to the doorway before stopping again. He looked down into the cardboard box, overflowing with more of Uncle Chuck’s salvaged Fazbear items. Among the dubious treasures, Ana could see Toy Bonnie’s guitar, Foxanne’s pink-capped pirate hook, and some paper plate dolls with streamer arms and legs that were probably meant to be Chica, Bonnie and Freddy.

Springtrap Bonnie bent, indifferently swatting heads aside to fish out what he wanted and hold it up
“No,” said Ana.

“Yup,” said Mike, and yup it surely was, because that was the puppet.

It dangled from Springtrap Bonnie’s fist like a dead thing, arms and legs as limp as black, rotted noodles and head lolling, white mask split so it stared hollowly in two directions. Springtrap Bonnie’s head cocked. It turned the puppet one way and then the other, looking into each of its eyes, then twisted its head around and prodded at the back of its ‘skull’. It found a catch invisible to Ana’s eye and opened a hinged panel, leaning out awkwardly to catch the sallow light of a bare bulb in the hall so it could peer inside the puppet’s head. The image skipped several times, although Springtrap Bonnie did not move much, making him seem to shiver or sneeze as he stood still.

“What’s it doing?” Ana asked.

“Search me.”

The video went to static and skipping bars of code. When it cleared, Springtrap Bonnie had finished whatever inspection it had been performing and seemed to be satisfied with the result. Hanging the puppet over the hook of its elbow, it drove its other hand back into the box, fished around and came up with a head.

A great, round head, capped with painted hair and a blue and red striped cap that used to have a propeller on top.

“Balloon Boy,” Ana heard herself say and just as she said it, as if he could hear her, Springtrap Bonnie suddenly spasmed, making it look as if he’d laughed.

The footage flickered again just as he took one step toward the door. One step. Then blackness. When the picture came back, Springtrap Bonnie, the puppet and the head of Balloon Boy were gone.

“Was this before the fire or after?” Ana asked, replaying the video one more time.

“Before, but not much before.”

“I don’t suppose they found the suit after the fire.”

“Nope.”

Ana watched the forty seconds play out and started the video a third time. “It is a suit, right? You said the springtraps had to be anchored to the wall to do their animatronic routines. In order to walk around…someone had to be in them.”

“That’s what I said all right.”

Ana watched Springtrap Bonnie creep/cut across the screen. She watched the holes in his skin especially. She saw wires and stuffing, tatters of cloth like tendons and dull gleams of metal like grey bones. It looked like a zombie wrapped in a mummy, twice as dead and infinitely damned. “Well, somebody upgraded this one, because there’s no one in this thing,” she said.

“Are you sure?”
She restarted the video, half-speed, full-screen. “Yeah,” she said, watching. “You can see clear through him in lots of places. There’s no one in there.”

“Yes and no. If you’d ever seen one of the animatronics up close, you’d maybe already have spotted this, but you’ll have to take my word for it—there is a lot more going on inside that suit than there ought to be. This stuff, all this stuff here…and here…? That’s the frame of the springtrap endoskeleton. But this…and this…and that…that should not be there at all. And this stuff here…what would you say that is?”

Ana shrugged. “Padding?”

“What color is padding, under most circumstances?”

“White,” she replied without thinking, then looked again at the video. “But it’s old and I’m sure there was oil or something leaking on it all these years.”

“Or something,” he agreed. “What color is that stuff? Oil colored? Even old oil? Hell, is it even old blood colored?”

Ana, frowning, had a good long look, and even through the damage of the video, she knew it was not.

“It’s purple,” said Mike when she had sat silent too long.

“No. But…no. Now you’re back to your ghost story.” She tried to give the tablet back, slapping it down on the skeletal shelves when he refused to take it. “The vengeful spirit of Erik Metzger possessing a wind-up rabbit, give me a goddamn break. I don’t believe in crap like that.”

“You don’t, huh?” he said mildly. “Well, let me tell you something. Right now, right this instant, you can buy a special egg tray with LED lights that allows you to scan the eggs in your refrigerator for freshness.”

Ana stared at him for several seconds before saying, “What?”

“Yup. You buy the tray and you put your eggs in it and then you download this app—”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Lady, let me finish,” said Mike, and he said it like he damn well meant it. After a short pause, he went on in his same easy-going manner, “You download this app and it will keep you informed, in real time, of the freshness of your eggs and notify you immediately if one of them starts to lose its eggy goodness.”

Ana folded her arms. “Okay.”

“It’s called the Egg Minder.”

Ana sighed.

“It costs fifty bucks.”

“Mr. Schmidt, I swear to God.”

“My point is this: Nobody on this green Earth, lady, needs a goddamn Egg Minder.” He leaned toward her. “But that doesn’t stop it from existing. You want to stand here and talk at me about how you don’t believe in ghosts and demons and all that crap just because human beings are
capable of doing evil without help, you go right ahead, but not believing in something that is right in front of your fucking face just because you don’t want to see it is just as childish and stupid as blaming the paranormal for all the everyday evil normal humans can do. Believing in something has got absolutely nothing to do with whether or not that thing exists, and I am telling you right here, right now, that thing—” He grabbed the tablet, started the video up again, and shoved Springtrap Bonnie in her face as he skitter-slid into the security office. “—exists. Who the hell do you think you are, that you think any of this shit needs your permission to be real?”

They stood together, face to face and close enough to kiss, if that were the intention, a very long time.

“So where is he?” Ana asked finally. “If he didn’t die in the fire, where did he go?”

“Wherever it is monsters go, I guess,” Mike said, tucking his tablet away. “But Faust doesn’t go chasing after him. He’s still a kid at heart and all kids know, you don’t go looking for monsters, you bring ‘em out to you. First thing he does is send one of his lawyers around to talk to Cody. I don’t know what was said, but I do know that when it was over, Cody Quinn’s charges are dropped to criminal mischief, sentence suspended, and he’s put on a bus out of town the day of his release with a check from Fazbear Entertainment in his hand. I was able to track him down, but even now, he won’t talk about that night, except to say the ventilation system was funky and he saw and did a lot of stuff he doesn’t remember. When I asked about Springtrap Bonnie, he hung up on me.” Mike shrugged. “He may really not remember, I don’t know. But if he’s forgotten, I have to wonder how hard he worked at it to forget.

“Anyway,” he said, moving away from the hole in the wall, “the fire opens the next and most baffling to date chapter on the Fazbear incident, because just when public enthusiasm for it ought to be at its lowest ebb, Faust gets the wild idea to open another Freddy Fazbear’s Pizzeria. Come on.”

“It’s getting late,” said Ana, which was silly because it had gotten late a long time ago. This was the longest night of her life, supernaturally so, like it had been fifty hours in the telling already and could easily last another fifty if that was what it took to get the story told, but she wasn’t tired.

“It’s almost over,” Mike called back to her. “I’ll take you back if that’s what you want, but it’s almost over. Don’t you want to see how it ends?”

“Did it end?”

He stopped walking. After a moment, he turned around and looked at her, shining his flashlight right in her face.

She didn’t flinch.

A minute passed, or two, or ten.

“No,” he said. “No, it didn’t end. But there are nights, not many, not anymore, that I still believe it can. Do you want to finish this or not?”

She honestly didn’t know anymore, but she went with him.
Chapter 24

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He waited until they were in the car and on the road before he took up the story again. “Faust broke ground on the last Fazbear’s, the one I call the Trap, on September 10th of 1999. It opened January 1st, 2000, and you, of all people, ought to know how impossible it is to throw up a place like that in that amount of time. Like Metzger, he had crews going around the clock, shuffling labor around, hiring and firing so fast, hardly anyone even knew what they were building.”

“Why do you call it the Trap?” Ana interrupted. “Weren’t they all traps, according to you?”

“To me, huh?” He snorted, then shrugged. “I guess it’s all a matter of perspective.”

“Faust’s perspective, you mean?”

“Do I?”

“You are if you’re saying he was the one setting the trap,” Ana said. “What was he trying to catch?”

Mike drove in silence one minute, two, three…and then pulled the car over to the shoulder so suddenly, Ana knocked her head on the window. Mike braked—the tires squealed a protest—and then just sat while the engine idled and time passed.

“Look,” he said at length. “I have been talking all night and if I’ve still got to spell this shit out, I guess there’s no point in going on. So I’m going to ask and I need you to answer me…What was going on at Fazbear’s? What’s the connection between all those missing kids and those fucking animatronics? I’ve got a bullshit theory, but I want you to tell me what it is.”

She wanted to tell him she didn’t know. Because she didn’t. Oh, she knew what he wanted her to say, but that…that was pure Hollywood horror movie. Not even Hollywood. That was straight-to-the-dollar-bin-DVD horror. That was a Syfy Original Picture. It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be real.

“I don’t believe it,” she said at last. “I can’t believe it.”

“I’m not asking you to believe it. I’m asking you to say it. So say it. Tell me what I believe, if that helps, but you say it out loud.”

She couldn’t. After everything she’d seen tonight…the one thing she kept seeing now was her pizzeria, her Freddy, her Chica and Foxy. Her Bonnie. They weren’t killers. They weren’t monsters. They just weren’t.

“Start at the beginning,” said Mike, lighting another cigarette. “Take it apart, one brick at a time. Start with the kid. Who was Fredrich Faust?”

“A robotics prodigy,” she answered and shook her head again. “And a dumb kid. All his life, a dumb kid.”

“Why did he build Freddy? What do you believe?”
“I believe the happiest day of his life was the day he went to Disneyland. I believe he wanted to make other kids happy.”

“Okay,” said Mike after a short pause. “Not what I was going for, but I’ll take it. Viktor Metzger. What do you believe?”

“I believe,” she said haltingly, “Viktor Metzger killed Billy Blaylock. I believe he killed a lot of people.”

“Me, too. Question is, why?”

“Because he was a sexual sadist and he thought he could get away with it,” she shot back, but could hear the desperation even in her own voice. “Why the hell does there have to be a bigger reason?”

“Same reason some people have to have an Egg Minder, I guess. Now answer the question.”

“He…God, I can’t even believe these words are coming out of my mouth, but…he wanted to build a robot that could think.”

“How?”

“With…I can’t believe—”

“Then don’t believe it, but tell me how.”

“I—”

“Say it, lady.”

“It’s not possible! It’s just not!”

“Say it!”

“With…with people!” Ana said, almost shouting it, and heard to her horror a shrill laugh bubble up at the end. “But don’t you see how crazy that is? Don’t you see how…it just can’t be true! Leaving aside the sheer lunacy of…of whatever you’re thinking, brains or souls or what the fuck ever, you’re telling me there were hundreds of missing people!”

“Dead people. We’ve gone awfully far together to start sugar-coating it now. Hundreds of dead people. Men. Women. Children.”

“But there’s only four animatronics! Eight!” she amended hurriedly. “With the ones from the Toybox.”

“Nine,” he corrected. “You’re forgetting Balloon Boy.”

“Nine, then. What kind of math is that? Hundreds of people to make nine animatronics?”

“Yeah, well, here’s where I could play the smart card and point out that without knowing exactly what process Metzger and Faust cooked up to bring those animatronics to life, we can’t assume that one dead kid equals one new animatronic. But I’m going to take one from your deck and play the sexual sadist card instead. Just because Metzger was killing some people and making them into animatronics doesn’t mean he didn’t also do it for fun. The real question here is, was he doing it alone?”
Ana shook her head, left to right, in silence.

“Who, then? Say the name.”

“I think… I think he was using Fredrich… but I think Erik was helping.”

“Interesting way to phrase that. So what are you thinking, exactly? The family that slays together…?” Mike prompted, watching her closely.

“Some of that, sure,” said Ana. “But I’m thinking…”

“Yeah?”

Okay, well, I’m still not saying I believe this, but if I did… I’m thinking maybe he just needed help. Maybe there’s some other element to this we’re not seeing, something more than just the giggles he got from killing people. Something he legit couldn’t do alone. And he used Fredrich because he could build the machines no one could, but also because he was just a kid… a kid whose father hated him. All Viktor had to do was tell him he was proud of him and take him to Disneyland and that kid would have jumped off the canyon bridge for him.”

“So far, so good. We have Viktor Metzger firmly cast in the role of the villain right up until 1968, when he drops off the face of the Earth, and Erik fills all the voids he left behind. Right after he burns his father’s doll collection, that is,” he added. “All but one. The one that goes on to live at the Toybox. The one Erik occasionally talks to in German.”

“I get it!”

“Then say it,” Mike countered. “Who was he? Who was the puppet, lady? Say the name.”

“Jesus,” Ana whispered, staring out the window at the enclosing dark.

“Not even close. Who was he?”

Ana shook her head, over and over and over, and finally said, “Viktor Metzger. It was Viktor Metzger.”

Mike smoked.

“But it wasn’t always, was it? It was someone else first. Viktor Metzger’s doll collection… they were all people he killed while he was, I don’t know, perfecting his technique. But when Erik… killed his father… he took whoever was in the puppet out and put his father in. He turned him into that… that thing. To keep him. And feed him. God,” said Ana in a whisper. “He kept him and he fed him.”

“Did he do it alone?”

“I don’t see how he could have. If we take it for granted that whatever the process is, it takes two people, Erik would have needed help to put his father into the puppet. So that would have to be Fredrich, right? Who else could it be? But if he was a willing accomplice by that time, why would he take an axe to the Toybox and kill all his creations? And if he wasn’t an accomplice, why would he kill Erik, but then keep right on playing the game?”

Mike hesitated, frowning. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I don’t have all the answers, lady. But someone kept his sick game going. For what it’s worth, I don’t think it was Faust, because by the end of the Stockyard’s run, Faust was doing everything in his power to bury the past and keep it
buried. Which he did fairly well, right up until Uncle Chuck rolled into town and started digging it all up.”

“Yeah, but how much danger could he still be in? All the other major players are dead! What good could possibly come of building another restaurant and starting it all over again?”

“None. But he didn’t build a restaurant, did he? He built a trap. Open that binder,” he said, giving it a nod as he pulled the car back out onto the road. “There’s not much left in it. Have a look at those billboards.”

Ana obeyed, sifting down through missing persons posters and photographs until she reached the bottom of the pile. The pictures were very bad quality, black and white reproductions of blurry photos taken through a moving car’s window. There were four billboards in total, each one featuring a different animatronic. **COME BACK TO PIRATE COVE**, said Foxy. **IT SURE WOULD BE GREAT TO SEE YOU**, said Chica. **I’M YOUR BEST BUDDY**, said Bonnie. Freddy stood alone, a full-scale image instead of a head-and-shoulders shot, with a block of text laying out the details for the grand opening.

**Freddy Fazbear’s Pizza is back!**

Opening

Real Soon!

Games! Music! Pizza! Prizes!

It Won’t Be the Same Without YOU!

Value Club Memberships Available!

Earn Double Prize Points Every Wednesday!

Mom and Dad, ask about Birthday and Party Reservations!

Employee Discounts and Great Benefits! **Come be a part of the Fazbear Family!**

Ana didn’t need the black line Mike had drawn down the side of the billboard to connect the first letters on each line: Forgive Me. But it was the last billboard that really chilled her. A group shot, with Freddy, Bonnie, Chica and Foxy in the background, and the new animatronics waving in the foreground, each one with a helpful label: Brewster Rooster, Tux the Cat, Peggy Pigtails, Swampy Gator, the twins, Tumble and Rumble, and Foxanne, under her new alias of Polly Pull-A-Part. Below this family-style portrait, a golden ribbon unspooled with the words *Come and Play! Come and Stay! Come be a part of our Family!*

“Jesus,” she breathed, but it was Freddyland she was thinking of. Freddyland and the dozens of potential animatronics waiting to be realized. How many, had Bonnie said? Eighty-two? Eighty-six? Eighty-something, anyway. And if he still wanted more, why, there was always Freddyworld…

“The week before opening, Faust ran a full-page ad in every newspaper for a hundred miles, showing off all the goods. The new pizzeria was in every way bigger and better than any Freddy’s that had come before it. The opening celebrations were scheduled to go on for five days. The first day, Faust rolls up in a limo and has Lil Miss Mammon cut the ribbon. Freddy Fazbear himself was right on the other side, throwing the doors open and saying come on in. I was there. I saw him. He
saw me.”

Ana waited and finally asked, “Did he remember you?”

“Yeah. I’d swear to it. He saw me. He didn’t say anything, but I’d swear he knew. But you know, it was like that even back at the Stockyard. Every night, I’d come in, knowing what it was going to be like, knowing they’d be coming for me, knowing what they’d do…but in the morning, there they’d be on stage, singing and telling jokes, and if our eyes met…I knew they remembered, but they never did anything about it.”

“What do you think that means?”

“Means? Who says it’s got to mean anything? You don’t believe it anyway,” he said curtly, his hands tightening on the wheel. “You make all the right noises, but you get mad in all the wrong places. You’re still that little girl who never got to go see Freddy and to you, he’s still that big loveable teddy bear who’d never hurt a flea to scratch it. Lady, fuck you. Seriously. I mean that, with respect. On behalf of three hundred and fifty-seven missing people and fifty fucking years of sheer fucking terror, fuck you.”

Ana said nothing, looked out the window.

Mike drove.

“Sorry,” he said at last.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not, though, and with God as my witness, I don’t know which one of us is more wrong. So…okay. The Trap. The doors opened and it was every bit as huge and amazing as promised. Just a five-day party, absolutely epic. Everyone who came got a raffle ticket to put in Freddy’s hat for the daily grand prize drawing. I don’t remember what all the prizes were, but I remember there was, like, a real Fender Flying V guitar, just like Bonnie’s, to give you an idea of the money that went into this. But the thing is—wait.”

He reached the turn off Old Quarry Road and took it. The moon, half full and high in the sky, outlined the building with silver against the night, properly ominous and predatory. God, would he try to take her inside? Her tools, her gear, her clothes…her day pack! Her day pack with her fucking name on the inside flap and of course he’d open it, of course he would! Did he already know? Is that why he’d called her? He’d made some bizarre connection between her and Aunt Easter, taking what was purely coincidence and making it part of some conspiracy he’d never believe she didn’t know anything about.

“The thing is,” Mike continued, easing up onto the parking lot and approaching the building from behind, like it was a sleeping dragon he was trying not to wake. “Three days into the celebrations, a second Freddy, a golden Freddy, shows up and starts going around with special golden tickets of his own. And he didn’t give them to just anyone. If there’s a clutch of bored teens occupying the bouncy house or faking lewd acts with the yetis, why, along comes Golden Freddy to smooth things over and offer them a golden ticket to a special midnight tour. Just what happened on that tour, I can’t tell you, because everyone who got one of those tickets is missing. And the next day, the Trap was boarded up.”

“With more missing kids?”

“Wild kids, mostly out-of-towners, with the standard history of drug use and promiscuity to make
it easy to blame the victim for his own disappearance. They were never tied to the restaurant. Not so much as a rumor of five more missing kids will you ever hear associated with this godforsaken place. As far as Mammon is concerned, the opening celebrations were a smashing success and his decision not to open after all was inexplicable. There were protests, if you can believe that.

Eventually, Faust gave a statement to the local press, apologizing to the families of anyone who had been affected by what he called ‘the tragedy’ and he was greatly saddened by the knowledge that he had inadvertently offended anyone with the new pizzeria, etc., etc., ‘These characters will always hold a special place in my heart, but the time has come to heal.’ Can you believe that? I mean, can you even? That motherfucker built a trap and baited it with people, and ‘the time has come to heal’? He sacrificed those kids to this fucking place and for what? Huh? Because they were loudmouth little punks for one day when they were—” He snatched at the black binder, at the last few papers in the back, and threw them down on her lap, one at a time. Photocopies from a yearbook. Faces circled with red ink. Smiles. Names. “—nineteen,” he spat. “Twenty-two. Fifteen. Seventeen. Twelve. Fucking twelve! You never gave lip to a grown-up or pushed a smaller kid out of a bouncy house when you were twelve?”

Ana picked up the pages and stacked them all together, tapping the edges to bring them into alignment.

Mike brought out his cigarettes with shaking hands and lit one. He smoked.

“What happened next?” Ana asked at last.

“Next? Nothing. Nothing ever happens to guys like that. Press conference is over, not a dry eye in the house. Faust ends with a huge check to go toward a memorial to Reardon’s victims. A family park. It’s over on Jewel Lake, if you’re curious. It has a bronze statue of a teddy bear wearing a top hat hugging some random kid. The bear’s nose is kept polished by all the little hands, and grown up ones, that rub it for good luck. That’s about the only satisfaction I get out of any of this, the fact that the real Freddy would fucking hate having his nose groped by all those strangers.”

“And Faust?”

Mike shook his head, still smoking. “Lives quietly and comfortably in the house that Fazbear built and probably sleeps like a baby every night on his bed of money and bones. His kid, Randy, flipped his fancy car a few years back and went to that big barrel in the sky, but he left a rotten little apple of his own that rolled on in a few years ago and never left. He’s been trying to get the kid declared incompetent so he can seize the family fortune, but good luck with that. The kid’s pushing eighty, but he’s allegedly sharp as a tack. Stil gets that parade every Fourth of July, too, although most days, he just sits at home and checks the real estate listings to see what’s going on the market and what he can shut down. You know it occurs to me only now that I could have probably told this story in just three short sentences: Fredrich Faust built this town. Then he killed it. And now he’s burying it.”

The kid’s pushing eighty…sent Abby and the boy out of state…flipped his fancy car a few years back…left a rotten little apple of his own…trying to get the kid declared incompetent…

“Holy shit, are you talking about that old guy in the glass house out on Canyon Road?” Ana demanded, pointing into the black desert where no lights and nothing could be seen. “That’s Fred Faust?!”

“You met him?”

“Hell, I was in his fucking house!” She leaned back against the car door, staring at him. “And you know it, don’t you? You have been following me!”
“Don’t get paranoid, lady.”

“Fuck you! Is that was this was about? This whole fucking night, stringing me along with a bunch of…of ghost stories and old videos!” She shoved the binder at him. There wasn’t room enough to throw it. It spilled a few papers over his lap and between the seats, but not many. “What are you, really? You’re not a reporter, what are you? A video editor? Special effects designer? Am I on camera right now? You got a YouTube channel out there where you pull this crap on all the new kids who come to town?”

There was nothing he could have said to convince her otherwise in that moment, no denial that would not have sounded like a lie, but he didn’t say anything. He laughed instead. And when he was done laughing, he gestured to the world at large with his cigarette and, still grinning, said, “And that’s how it keeps happening, lady. That’s how he got away with it for fifty fucking years. Because it’s so much easier not to believe it, even with the proof—” He scooped up a few pieces of paper that had fallen against him and tossed it back at her. “—literally staring you in the fucking face. Believe what you want to believe, lady. I don’t give a damn.”

They sat together in the car, staring at the building. There was nothing to hear but the wind and midnight wildlife out in the desert, nothing to look at but the building in front of her or the nightmare in paper on her lap.

Ana braced herself. “So…are we going in?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Mike hunched over, still gripping the wheel tight and keeping the engine running, ready to haul ass at a moment’s notice. His eyes moved to each window in turn and, heaven help her, he found one to point at. “There’s a light on.”

Ana looked, her heart sinking and saw a thin stripe of pale grey shining between the boards covering the front doors, somewhere where the black-out plastic had come loose, broadcasting to the world the fact that she’d left a lantern on in the dining room.

“You see it?” Mike pressed.

“No.”

“Right there.”

“It’s moonlight,” she said. “Moonlight on the glass.”

“It’s a light,” he insisted. And turned in his chair to look at her. “That place is not empty,” he told her grimly. “I don’t know when Faust moved the animatronics in or where they were hiding before then, if they were back at the Stockyard and just managed to avoid Uncle Chuck or if Faust had them in storage somewhere, but he never took them out of here. He locked this place up with them inside and maybe he thinks they’ll die eventually, but they’re not human. They don’t die. They rot, but they don’t die. Look.”

Leaning over, he hooked open the glove-box and brought out another sheaf of papers. “I wasn’t going to show these to you,” he said, even as he pushed them at her. “I can’t prove anything by them, not even what I’ve been calling proof all along, which wouldn’t mean shit in a courthouse anyway. But look at these. These are all the missing people in Mammon from the day the Trap closed. Forty-seven. Twenty-two of those missing people have friends who swore to me, directly to
my face, that their friends had plans to break into this building. And yeah, okay, I’m not going to lie to you, for the most part, these are not rowdy kids looking for a place to smoke weed and screw. These guys—"

Ana shifted a paper and found herself looking into the smiling, yearbook photo of a guy she knew, a guy she’d last seen lying on the floor in the unfinished hall of Mason Kellar’s mother’s house.

“—some of them are seriously bad news,” Mike was saying. “But that is why we have laws and cops and jails. We do not feed our fucking junkies and dealers and underage pornographers to fucking robot bunnies when they get out of line. And you,” he concluded, leaning back to give her a cold stare over the hot cherry of his cigarette.

Ana shuffled the papers together and handed them back, lifting her chin. “What about me?”

“What indeed? What do you want with an animatronic repairman, huh? Why did you come back to Mammon?” He took one long, slow drag off his cigarette, making his eyes glow red with the spark, and said, “Where is Marion Blaylock?”

“I came back to Mammon to clean out my aunt’s house, fix it up and hopefully sell it for enough money to settle down somewhere so far away from here, no one’s ever heard of it,” Ana replied. “It’s taking longer than I thought it would, mostly because my aunt’s house is only being held up by the mountains of hoarder-bait she apparently collected after David disappeared and she went, as you put it, quietly, cheerfully crazy. You want to know where I think she is?” Ana rolled down her window and stuck her arm out, pointing out over the parking lot and into the reeking breeze. “I think she took a swan dive into the quarry. David and I spent some of the best days of my life there. Then David was gone and I was gone and I guess her brother was gone and her hateful fucking whore of a sister left her here with everything that was gone, in a town that thinks going crazy is quiet and cheerful.”

Mike’s left eye ticced. Otherwise, he did not react.

“You expect me to believe that.”

Ana pulled her phone out and brought up the job site and the bookmarked listing. She showed it to him.

He looked at it, then at her, obviously conflicted but trying to hide it. “You came out in the middle of the night with a man you didn’t know for no reason, just, what? Idle curiosity? Nothing to do on a Friday?”

“No. I came because you said the magic words. Freddy Fazbear. And you’re right about me. He’ll always be the teddy bear I never got to play with. I came because…I don’t know.” She looked away, out the window at the building. “I thought…in some stupid way, it would help me understand what happened to my cousin. To my aunt. Maybe…to me.”

“Did it?”
She shook her head, but she wasn’t saying no and she thought he knew it. After a few false starts, she said, “There’s things I believe about your story. And things…I’m sorry, but I just don’t.”

He shrugged, finished his cigarette, and tossed it out into the lot. “Guess that’s it, then. I’ve got no more to tell you and you’re done listening anyway, but this much I’m going to say, because if I don’t, I don’t want it on my conscience. If you ever go in that place—” He pointed at the building and looked at her. “—you’re going to die. Those things are not your friends, no matter how many times you may have heard them sing about it. They will kill you. They will eat you. That big teddy bear you love so much will let you rot inside him while he walks around asking an empty building for hugs. That’s your Freddy Fazbear. He’s a fucking monster.”

Ana tried to look like she heard him, she really did, but it was a bad effort and she could see it in his face.

“Whatsoever,” he said, shaking his head as he put the car in reverse and turned it around. “I said what I had to say. It’s all on you now. I’ll take you back to the motel.”
Ana did not intend to stay over at the Sugartree Motel. It was late enough, past two in the morning, and she had already paid for it and all, but it really was a sleazy room and she didn’t think she’d rest easy, between the things she’d seen tonight and the things she could imagine invisibly staining the molecules of that bed. However, somewhere along that awkward, silent drive back from Old Quarry Road, Ana became aware of a wicked need to pee and, once aware, it exponentially grew with every passing mile.

When he brought her to the motel, she about flew out of the car and did not care at all that Mike followed her into the room. She could hear him moving around while she was locked in the bathroom and somehow she just knew he was not simply collecting his jacket.

Sure enough, when she left the bathroom, he was gone, but his black binder was open at the foot of one of the beds. A piece of paper torn from the cheap pad printed with the motel’s stationary had been set on top of the pile, on which Mike had left his phone number, email address, and a don’t-say-I-didn’t-warn-you in the flimsy disguise of If you ever find out what happened to your cousin or your aunt, please let me know.

She picked up the binder, intending to dump the whole thing in the tiny motel trash can, but not all the papers were secured. At least a dozen of them went flying, caught by the air conditioner’s current and blown in all directions. And she could have left them like that, sure she could have, but that would mean the housekeeper having to pick them up and she just couldn’t imagine that happening without at least an idle glance of curiosity, and what if one of those papers was Maria Osgoode’s autopsy photo?

So she stopped to pick them up and if she looked at them again as she did so, it was only to be sure of what she had and not because she was reading the damned things. When she sat down on the bed with the binder and began to leaf through it, it was only to figure out where to put the papers back in their proper order. Why she did that for something she was planning to throw away, she did not ask herself at all. In any event, she kept stumbling on things she hadn’t seen yet—newspaper articles that heavily insinuated the senior Faust’s acquisition of property around Mammon had not been entirely on the up and up, gossip columns gleefully documenting the Metzger family’s scandals, a brochure for Freddyland, and oh, so many school photos, most of them with nothing but a name and the date the smiling face on the front had gone missing.

Even then, she might have left after an hour or so, but towards the middle of the stack, she came across the police report for a certain runaway girl, the one that had led an officer out to the Metzger home to ask questions. The report itself held only a few more details than those Mike Schmidt had read, but one of those details was the address.

Her address.

Although she was already sitting down, Ana felt her legs go rubbery and cold. All at once, the attic in which the officer had so vividly recalled finding Victor Metzger’s doll collection became the attic where she and David had built blanket-forts and read comics; the window where the officer had first seen a face staring down at him had been her tower window, the porthole of her pirate ship, or the burning eye of a dragon at need; the bed that had ‘seen some use’ became the brass
headboard she used to pretend were prison bars when they were playing Count of Monte Cristo. One of the trees in the yard was the tree that Erik had tied his father’s puppet-body to while he burned his father’s dolls. And the room in the basement…the secret stair behind the clock…

*Your aunt fucked the devil himself.*

Ana could feel it happening, that itch in her brain that was memory wanting to come back, like two hands straining to clap together. The man in purple in Mike Schmidt’s photos…the man in purple who was sometimes there at the periphery of a very young Ana Stark’s awareness…Erik Metzger.

No. It was a mistake. It had to be and never mind the fact that there were no other homes on Old Quarry Road. It was a mistake and even if it wasn’t, so fucking what? She didn’t doubt Metzger had existed. However farfetched all that other stuff might be, the man himself had been flesh and bone. Did he kill people? Sure. As Mike had said, it might not be evidence in the legal sense of the word, but it was good enough for Ana. Did he kill people at the house where Ana was now living, sleeping? Maybe. But even if the yard was full of bones—it wasn’t, surely—that meant nothing but that her aunt had once lived in a house with a history. Every house had a history. And Erik Metzger was dead anyway.

She did not believe in ghosts.

But she sat there, reading back through the entire binder, page by page by page, and when she finally did leave, she took it with her. She did not want it. Just touching it made her feel somehow furtive and unclean, but leaving it in the trash was no longer an option. There wasn’t a trash can or dumpster in the whole of Mammon where she felt safe throwing this thing away. She had to get rid of it, not just leave for someone to find, read, see her address screaming out from the hundreds of victims’ whispers making up the binder’s pages. Burn it. Bury it. Throw it in the quarry.

She was astonished to see lights come on at Gallifrey’s just as she drove by and the bulky silhouette that was either Tiny Tim or Lucy going to open the doors for the early-morning crowd, who would soon be stopping in for coffee and a quick breakfast before heading off on the commute to work in Washington or St. George or Hurricane. That meant it was five a.m. She’d gone out for a burger at nine o’clock and stayed gone eight hours.

So what? No one was waiting up for her.

Bonnie was.

No, he wasn’t. No, he goddamn well was not. He was an animatronic, a harmless fucking mechanical toy with a harmless fucking computer program that told him to wander around and look for people to sing at, but he was not waiting up for her. He was not worried about her. If he seemed glad to see her when she got there, it was only because he was made, and it didn’t mean a goddamn fucking thing. He only flirted with her because she flirted with him and his adaptive programming meant the more she did it, the more he thought that was what he was supposed to do. He felt nothing. He thought nothing. He was not alive and he for damn sure wasn’t dead, so fuck Mike Schmidt and his fucking ghost story.

She wasn’t really going back there, was she?

“Of course I am,” she muttered to herself savagely, her fists clenching on the steering wheel. “I left the lights on. Not to mention all my shit. And why the hell wouldn’t I?”

She didn’t answer herself, but her eye had a way of dropping to the black binder on the passenger seat beside her.
“I’ve been there dozens of times. I’ve slept there. I have yet to wake up dead and stuffed in a
fucking animatronic. That’s all horseshit and you know it.”

She didn’t argue…but she didn’t want to go to Freddy’s either.

“Freddy’s,” she sneered at herself. “Look at you, getting all girly and stupid over fucking Freddy’s
when you should be freaking yourself out over going home. That’s where people fucking died!
And that’s all horseshit too,” she decided. “If he was keeping kids in the fucking basement,
wouldn’t there be a lock on the goddamn door? This is nothing but small town gossip grist.
Metzger slept around, that’s all. Kids have always disappeared out of this shithole. It doesn’t need a
fucking supervillian to explain it.”

…three hundred and fifty-seven missing people…

“Yeah, whatever, but it was a long time ago. It was a long time ago and it’s nothing to do with me
now!” she snapped. “Even if those kids are dead, then whoever killed them is long gone and it
wasn’t Freddy! For fuck’s sake, are you even listening to yourself? You know Freddy! He’s the
one who thinks you swear too much and won’t let you toke up in the building. Do you honestly see
him killing people? Or Bonnie? Chica?! Little Miss Safety Song, killing and eating people. As if.”

I don’t have to let you leave. Freddy had said that to her the first night she’d broke in. Leave now. I
don’t have to let you leave. Except, seriously, who knew what he’d really said that night and what
she’d just imagined? She’d been tripping balls on those little pink pills.

And Nate Donahue? Did he imagine it?

Ana drove.

“That was Mulholland,” she said finally. “The Toybox. Who knows what the fuck was happening
over there? Metzger was running a goddamn sex club out of those party rooms. And the
animatronics were programmed for it. Maybe…Maybe they just thought Nate was a customer.
Their software was buggy and they couldn’t take no for an answer. He doesn’t have to be lying
about what happened, he’s just wrong about why.”

Right now, right this instant, you can buy a special egg tray with LED lights…

“Fuck you, Mike Schmidt,” said Ana crossly. “No one needs a goddamn battery-operated spaghetti
twirler either, but just because my aunt’s basement is full of them doesn’t mean she killed people.”

She went to Freddy’s and although she was fine, she absolutely did not believe Mike Schmidt’s
wild story and she was one hundred percent fine, she drove right around the side of the building to
‘her’ parking space in front of the side door and not the loading dock, where she was out of sight of
the road. She parked, got out of the truck, stood staring at the Freddy Lives graffiti painted over the
bricks for almost a minute, then pulled the loosened boards away from the broken door and
crawled in on her hands and knees.

She’d cleaned this hallway more than once. She’d swept it out. She’d mopped it. And still, she
managed to overlook a shard of plastic sharp enough to puncture her hand. She hissed in a breath,
swore it out, and leaned halfway out the door so she could catch enough of the dawn to see what
had bitten her.

A tooth. Not a real one. One of Tux’s.

She touched it, there in her hand, then pulled it out. She bled. Not a lot. It hurt. Not enough. She
moved away from the door and let the heavy plastic settle back in place, shutting out the morning.
Here in Freddy’s, it was always night.

“Oi.”

She looked up and saw Foxy leaning against the wall well back in the corridor. When he knew he’d been seen, he switched on his eyes. Light—sallow yellow and pale white—filled in the features of his face and shoulders, but the lines of his broken body grew less distinct after that. A monster, half-sketch and then abandoned by an artist who couldn’t decide whether he was drawing something silly or scary.

“ Heard yer t-t-truck,” he said.

“Were you waiting up for me?”

He snorted through his speaker. “Waiting up-p-p, aye. Ain’t had a wink-k-k o’ sleep in all me life. For ye?” He shrugged, using the gesture to push himself off the wall. He headed toward her, all his mechanical parts whining, wheezing and clanking. “Why not? Who else is here t-t-to see? Up with ye, luv.”

He offered his hook.

And God help her, her first thought was his remembered growl, *You wiggle like a worm and I’ll hook you like one…Ye wouldn’t be the first I’ve gutted, sorry or no…*

She reached up her hand and touched his hook, tracing its cool curve down to the worn leather cap and then up again, all the way to the point. Sharp. She pressed her fingertip to it, watching her skin dimple in the light of Foxy’s eyes. Pressed harder, listening to the steady pull and puff of his cooling system. Pressed until she felt the sting and saw blood swell and drop.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m all right?” she asked, watching that narrow red ribbon wind itself around his steel.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t need to, do I? I c-c-can see ye ain’t.”

The blood had painted itself out and no more would fall unless she cut herself deeper. She considered it, then took his hook in her hand and let him pull her to her feet.

He studied her, his eyes shifting from her face to her hand—still holding his hook—and back to her face again. His right ear twitched. “Ye want-t-t to get drunk?” he asked bluntly.

“Yeah. So much, you have no idea.”

“Right.” He turned, gesturing with his good hand down the dark hall to Pirate’s Cove, but keeping her on his arm. “Let’s get ye d-dr-drunk, luv.”

The door at the end of the hall banged open and Bonnie lurched through.

“You’re b-b-back! IT’S TIME TO ROCK!” he called, staggering toward her. He made it halfway and fell over.

Bit a kid’s arm off, thought Ana, watching his face grind against the floor. Bit it off and ate it. That had been Blue, not Bonnie, but still the thought was with her and probably always would be.
Fuck Mike Schmidt anyway.

Ana went over to him as he struggled to rise, setting her foot against his and bracing her knee against his side so he had the leverage to push himself up. He rocked back, shooting an oddly shame-faced glance at her and another, hot with some other emotion, at watching Foxy, then slung an arm around her shoulders and braced himself on the wall with his free hand. Servos ground and something squealed in shuddering bursts inside him and for a second, she felt all his weight bearing down on her. Then he took it back, found his balance, and was up.

“You okay, my man?” Ana asked, still pushing against him, thigh to thigh, in case he needed the support.

“All good-d-d in the h-h-hood, b-b-baby girl,” he assured her. “Where-re-re—WHERE’S MY GUITAR?”

“I don’t know.” Ana looked around, but of course, it wasn’t here. “You didn’t leave it on the stage?”

“Were you?”

“What?” Still thinking about the guitar, Ana looked at Bonnie.

“Where were-r-re-re-r—” Bonnie’s ears slapped flat and came up again. “—were you? You left w-w-without s-saying-ing g-g-g—GUBERNACALIC PROPERTIES OF THE MEDULLA.”

“What?” she said, startled.

“What?” he said back at her, looking just as surprised.

“Why in the hell would I say that?” She had to laugh, although the sound of it was a bit shrill to her ears. “What does that even mean?”

His ears lowered. “I d-d-don’t know.”

Ana clapped her hand to her eyes and gave them a rub, still smiling. Goober-whatever the fuck. Poor Bonnie, him and his crossed wires.

Damn Mike Schmidt and his black binder. He almost had her going there.

“Where w-w-were—”

“I went out for dinner,” Ana told him and sighed, shrugging out from underneath his arm and giving him a pat to the chest as she headed for the door to the dining room. “With a guy I’d never met. Don’t tell me what a bad plan that is, because I already knew. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not-t-t?” Bonnie asked promptly. “What—WHAT DO YOU CALL A BEAR WITH NO TEETH?—What g-g-guy? You’ve b-b-been g-g-gone all night. Where were y-y-you?”

“Oh Jesus, Bon, can we not do this? Please?”

She could hear his joints rattling behind her as he twitched and then, not unexpectedly, he said, “What-t-t happened? What’s wrong? Something-ing-ing’s wrong.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not-t-t.”
“Okay, I’m not, but I should be. It’s all so stupid. Go get your bottle handy, Captain,” Ana called to Foxy as she reached for the door, since he hadn’t gone back to the Cove yet. “I’ll be right with you.”

“With you? What-t-t?” Bonnie pivoted with difficulty to look back at Foxy, who was already walking away, then limped after Ana that much faster. “What happened-d-d? Ana, t-t-talk to me!”

“So, okay, where do I start?” she said, keeping it light, already editing her night to leave ghosts and murdered kids on the cutting room, ha, floor. “How about the fact that five minutes after I meet this guy, he wants me to get a motel room? And pay for it myself so, get this, his wife doesn’t find the receipt? I have, bar none, the worst night of my fucking life and then he takes off and the best part is, that dinner I was promised? Never materializes. I’m starving. Hi, Chica,” she said, pushing open the kitchen door. “Have you been in here all night?”

“LET’S EAT!” Chica said happily, shuffling forward with Ana’s day pack still clutched in her arms. Her elbow hit the coffee maker, which still had half a cup’s worth of that morning’s breakfast in the carafe, which did not sound like a lot until it was all over the floor in a starburst of broken glass.

“Don’t move,” said Ana, so naturally the next thing she heard was the crunch as Chica’s giant chicken foot landed square on the brewer and broke that, too.

“How about some delicious pizza?” asked Chica. Her eyes turned down, a twin spotlight over the wreckage. “You should eat healthy snacks, too, like carrots and leafy vegetables.”

“It’s okay,” Ana sighed. “I’ll clean it up. Can I get my—”

Chica eagerly thrust out Ana’s pack, tipping it forward so that the flap fell open and everything, absolutely goddamn everything, fell out onto the floor. Her emergency clothes including an extra pair of underwear—the hot pink ones with the black skull and crossbones over the cooter—about three bucks in change, a handful of tampons and a couple of condoms, her soaps and little travel-sized shampoos, an assortment of papers and pens, some of which even worked, pill bottles and random empty wrappers, and of course, the open package of crackers she’d wanted in the first place, which bounced even further open and exploded crackers over the whole mess.

Chica took a step forward.

“Leave it,” said Ana sharply. “Just…Just stop. God damn it.” Grabbing her day pack out of Chica’s hands, she dropped to her knees and started picking it all up again, but had only managed two handfuls before it was suddenly, unreasoningly, primevally too much. Without warning, she was on her feet and whipping the bag and the few items she’d managed to restore to it across the room, where it hit the oven’s hooded vent with a magnificent hollow bang. The urge to keep going, to grab whatever could be grabbed and huck it ‘till it hurt, briefly turned her whole world red, but she had nothing else that could make that soul-satisfying sound and the urge faded.

God, she was tired. She was just so tired. And hungry, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

“Are you okay?” Chica asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m done,” Ana swept her hand across the floor, only to let the crumbs and condoms she’d managed to scoop up with this action slip through her fingers. She brushed her hands off on her thighs and got up. She collected her pack, her clothes, and whatever else was close at hand,
then just stood and stared at the rest of it.

What a mess. She was supposed to be cleaning this shit up and she’d just made a bigger mess. She was supposed to have the gym done. She was supposed to get started on the dining room in the morning. The store room was supposed to be full of lumber, shingles and roofing tar.

Supposed to be…

She was supposed to be home, working on that roof, those walls.

What was she doing here?

“Ana?” Bonnie shuffled closer, reaching out his hand.

“Don’t touch me! Just…don’t touch me. Don’t.” She looked at him, knowing she did not see hurt on that plastic face or confusion in those camera eyes, but seeing it anyway. She laughed, then said, “I can’t do this right now. I’m too sober.”

“What happened-d-d?” Bonnie insisted. “Who was th-th-that g-g-guy? That g-g-guy you m-m-met? What-t-t did-d-d he do t-t-to you?”

“Nothing. I’m fine. I just…I can’t.” She smiled at Chica, smiled at Bonnie, turned around and smiled at Freddy, too, since he had appeared to block off the dining room doorway. “I can’t. Not tonight. I just can’t. And you know what? I don’t fucking have to. I’m going home.” She looked at the cupboard, then went over and yanked the door open, snatching out vitamin bottles and dropping them again, making just a bigger mess and so much noise as she fought to make her shaking hands obey her long enough to get the fucking bottles in her pack and all the while, she was smiling. “I’m getting drunk. I’m getting high. When I pass out, I’m going to do it in a real bed and puke in a real toilet. If I wake up in the morning, I’m going to have a hot shower and a decent breakfast.”


“What’s wrong-ong?” he wanted to know. “An-n-na, d-d-don’t go. P-P-P—PLEASE AND THANKS—Please d-d-don’t go. What hap-p-pened? St-St—STAY AND PLAY—and t-t-talk-k-k to me, b-b-baby girl. What hap-p-pend? What-t-t did-d-d he d-d-do to you? What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer him. The last of her voice was gone and the rest of her shouting was all on the inside as she got her bag of weed and the closest three bottles of booze to her hand without looking at their labels. She fumbled her pack’s flaps closed and the buckles buckled and put it on her shoulder.

Freddy moved wordlessly out of her way as she marched out the door, then moved again to stop Bonnie following her. She walked fast, shuttling her ears to the sound of Bonnie brokenly trying to call her back, louder and louder, as Freddy told him to open his eyes and Chica invited him to sing a song. She kept going. She left her materials, her tools, her clothes—all of it. She might come back for it later or she might not. She’d bought it all once and she could buy it all again. Just like with wiring, sometimes it was easier just to start over from scratch than to figure out precisely where it was broken and splice in a patch. She did not believe in ghosts and Freddy never killed anyone and her aunt had done nothing worse than buy a house with a history and all the black binders in the world made no difference at all, but at the end of the day, it was not her circus and not her monkeys, so fuck it all.
Ana went home.

End of *Everything Is All Right* Part Two: Mike Schmidt and the Long Night
Continued in Part Three: Children of Mammon

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