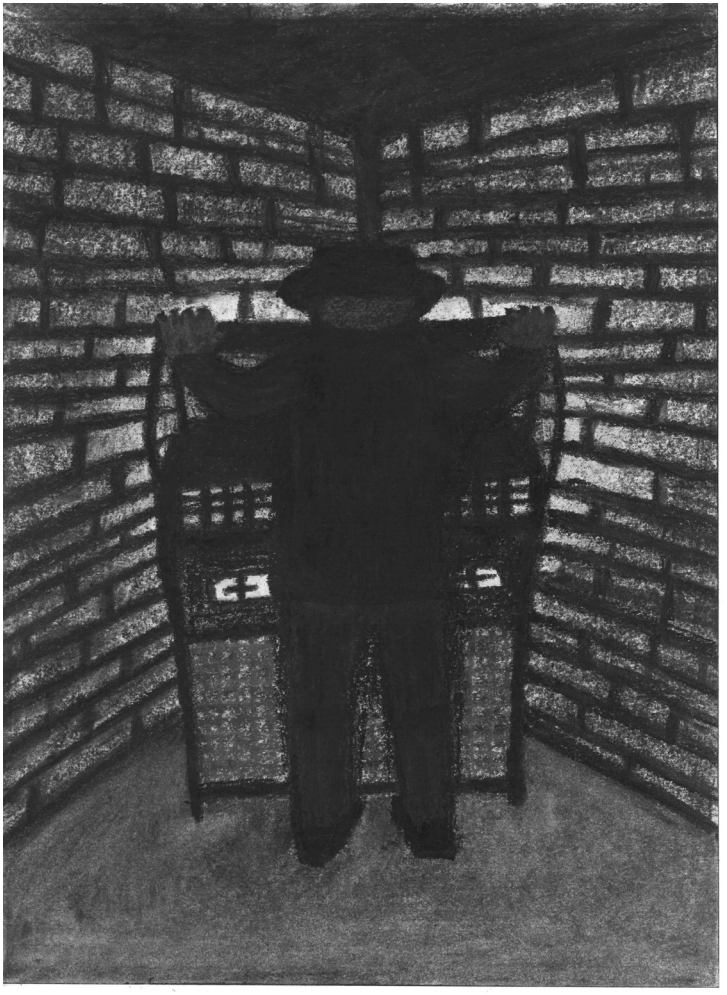
This book is dedicated to my parents, who let me leave and always welcome me home.

MALINKO

A NOVEL

BY RICK PAULAS

This book was written in homes, apartments, motels, and bars in Los Angeles and Oakland, California, towns along Route 66, and Brooklyn, New York between October, 2004 and July, 2024.



Prologue

THE WIND WHIPPED THROUGH the tunnel of brick on Main Street with a howling shriek like some terminal demon stuck deep enough into the ground that it tickled the outer edges of damnation itself. The wide storefront windows trembled as it ricocheted off to lift sand from the desert and fling abrasive puffs past two lanes of blacktop highway then against the clump of townsfolk who'd huddled within the shadowy overhangs to embrace for safety and comfort each other with lies about what came next.

Cresting over the distant hill as if its engine was powered by the cyclone itself came the twin amber lights of a white Chevy Bel-Air. They ordered the chaotic wisps of dust and sand into twin funnels of pale glow that blinked out as the headlights flicked off.

The car slowed and rocked into park, and the townsfolk stopped mumbling amongst themselves

to examine this new entrant into their midst.

The front door crept open with a loud creak and out stepped a tall, rail-thin man wearing a crumpled suit once white now dusted the color of light rust. He wore sunglasses that reflected back to them the dark shadows of Main Street commerce.

The tall man pressed his once-white fedora against his head to thwart the gusts threatening to snatch it away as he circled around to take in his new surroundings. He soon found the people and flashed them a bright smile as he slowly brought up a lone finger as if to indicate for them to wait, wait there, just one second longer is all. He began to whistle an old tune on his stroll to the car's rear, his motion a forceful gait as if the wind held no power against him and him alone, and he opened the trunk to withdraw a shiny suitcase that looked to contain within it some object of great density. The man slammed down the trunk's lid and stepped onto the sidewalk to become lit by red neon announcing **Cobb's**. He stepped past the townsfolk with a whistled tune still on his lips and then through the creaking saloon doors.

The hazy sun outside lit the green and white tiles of the barfloor for a moment before the door swung shut and plunged the interior back into fuzzy darkness. The man cleared dust from his shoulders with the back of his meaty hands as he took in the interior.

Cobb's held an L-shaped oaken bar that faced a mirror running the length of its wall. To his left was the joint's proper drinking parlor, its scattered tables half-full of congregants this early in the day

and a pool table where two gape-jawed men stood holding their cues. Past it all was a stage shrouded by a dark red curtain that seemed to have been moldering there for decades.

The bartender was a stout man with a full red beard and he squinted at the new man before turning around to flick on the squat transistor radio that sat on the back shelf before returning to his flock with a new wolf in their midst.

"*—knowing many things, and many strange tales,*" said a theatrical voice through the bar's tinny speakers. *"And many secrets hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped into the shad—*"

The radio signal fritzed out into a blanket of static.

"Goddamnit," the bartender muttered and pounded his balled-up sausage finger fist against the top of the bar hard enough to rattle the glasses. He turned back again to fiddle with the radio's metal rabbit ears that'd been placed on the second shelf row of brown whiskies but through the speakers found only wavelengths of hiss and crackle.

In the bar's darkened corner, where only a faint splash of neon red came through the front window to illuminate the dimness, there came new brightness as the long dormant upright jukebox was suddenly awakened. The bargoers all turned their attention like moths to the flame and found the tall man bent over in front, making his selection.

He pressed a few buttons and the jukebox's mechanical arm plucked a seven-inch from the stack nestled inside then set the vinyl on the

spindle. The needle dropped and the arm retreated. The thin fabric of the jukebox speakers vibrated with the sound of a haunting strum of an acoustic guitar then a harmonizing quartet that sounded like desert night wind before a crooner took center stage to sing of a town where lovers go to cry their troubles away.

The loud creak of opening bar doors interrupted the tale and the tall man found that now in the doorframe there stood the group of townsfolk, their clothes all coated in dust from the devlish winds outside. A chorus of stool legs scuffled in unison as the bar's patrons examined the stranger near the jukebox, inspected the hefty metal suitcase gripped in his hand.

He faced the crowd and lifted his suitcase easily onto the bartop with a chin jutting forward and a smile wide and unblinking. He leaned toward the bartender to silently inquire on a drink.

"What's your pleasure?" the bartender said with the dead eyes of a lifer. "Got beers, some liquors, and Betty's across the way's got some steaks if you're running on empty."

"A beer will do just fine," the man said.

The bartender blindly reached an arm behind as he kept his eyes on the stranger and his calloused hand found a cleaned mug with droplets of water still desperately clinging to its sides. He brought it to the tap and poured golden yellow ale until it spilled over the rim and from his apron pocket he retrieved a flat piece of metal that he used to scrape foam off the top, into the drain.

The new man reached into his jacket coat to

produce a wallet of blackened leather.

"How much?" he asked.

"Put it on me!" bellowed a drunk slumped on a stool at the bar's far end, barely lifting his head from folded arms.

The new man saw a smirk on the drunk's face as a viscous thread of drool fell from his lips and pooled on the bartop.

"Thank you, sir, but—" the man said.

"Strangers drink on me!" slurred the drunk. "But only strangers!"

"Well, who could say no to that?" said the man, tucking his wallet back in.

The drunk had already nestled back into the pit of his arms before the stranger's first sip.

Seated at a far table was a short man with wire-framed glasses and a gentle smile within five o'clock shadow whose only companions right now were a half-filled pint and a crumpled newspaper. He folded the paper between stories of Carmen Miranda's death and a horrific flood in nearby Needles and tucked it under his arm before standing and sidling up to the stranger.

"Don't take nothing personal from him," he nodded to the passed-out drunk, before introducing himself as Bruce Appelbaum.

"And that man's name is Leigh, our mayor, believe it or not," Appelbaum said. "And as such, he's in the business of hospitality. Leigh's whole job here, as far as it goes, is figuring a way to draw business back into town. To him that strategy begins and ends with buying strangers like yourselves a drink whenever they come passing

through." Applebaum took his own drink and angled a shoulder toward the stranger as if to confide. "And it's feeling like fewer and fewer drinks on our mayor's tab these days."

"Well, that's mighty funny, because that's just what I'm here about," the new man said. "Here for business."

Wrinkles appeared in his disheveled jacket as he rattled a thick finger against the top of his briefcase. It sounded like some dissident pounding on a church door.

"I come bearing the future."

The bartender let out a snort then looked to Applebaum for some camaraderie but found only a strange, new realization in his eyes, a quiver in his bottom lip.

"What do you mean by just that?" Applebaum asked.

The song on the jukebox faded. The needle dragged across the record then dropped off so a high-pitched buzz came through the speakers before it too was cut out. The arm replaced the black disc back into the archive and cycled its mechanical aim until it discovered the same record and deposited it again back onto the top of the turntable.

A hiss simmered through the bar and then again came the opening strums of the acoustic guitar, then again the harmonizing and the baritone voice singing of where you could buy a dream or two. But this rendition was far slower than the last, the singer's voice deeper, the plucked strings

of the guitar far drowsier than before.

The new man sharply tapped a long fingernail on the bar to the beat of the song. He smiled then hacked and cleared his throat into a napkin before pulling off his barstool to address the collected townsfolk.

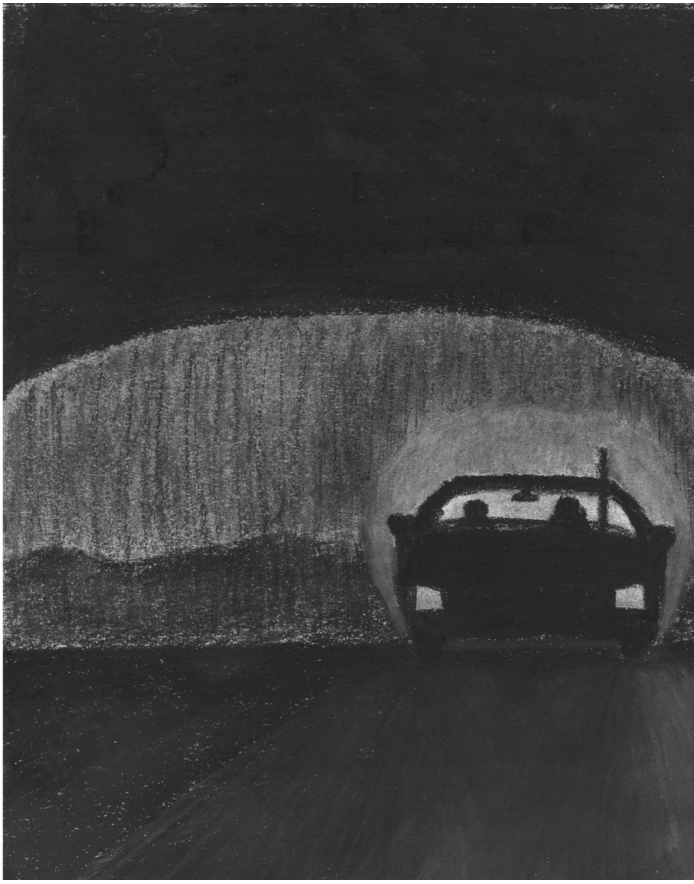
"Let me tell you all how I came to town," the new man declared. The bar was curious but yet to buy in. "Come on, come on over," he said.

The man removed his hat and set it on the bar and they squinted with something like confusion at the man's barren pink head. His skull was oddly shaped. Asymmetrical, angular. Thick in strange places. Its thin sheen of beaded sweat reflected the jukebox's neon red. Only then did he pull off his sunglasses to reveal eyes that were cast a dramatic hazel. They glared at the silent crowd like twin headlights of a speeding car barreling through darkness on a straightaway road.

The record ended. The jukebox returned the vinyl and cycled through before playing that same song yet again, this time even slower, its tempo nearly crawling out from the speakers.

The new man pulled the metal case toward him and spun its combination lock, clicking open the latch. And now there came a new source of illumination. A golden light from within.

The man spun the briefcase to a crowd now rapt and waiting for direction, and over the defeaning music from the jukebox he began to deliver his pitch.



Part I
The Drive

Chapter One

AT THIS HIGH RATE OF SPEED the empty Old Styles suspended in the air by force alone jostled madly as if they were chimes in a hurricane. They were tied to the back bumper with shoelaces and they hovered below the Just Married that'd been scrawled in temporary white marker on the blue Honda Civic's rear window. Red brakelights signaled ahead and the Civic slowed until the aluminum fleet lost flight and clattered against the asphalt of I-55 where they dragged for miles and miles until further down the road the laces snapped and the crushed empties began to blow free.

The passenger rested her head against the window and discretely opened her eyes with a secret stillness so as to not alert the driver as she watched the cans through the side mirror from her slouch against the door. After twenty-five more miles of

stop-and-go only a single can remained. It had been dented into a bizarre geometry, but still, it had hung on the longest. That had to count for something. Somewhere outside of Joliet the last shoelace gave way and the final can flung off into the night.

"That's amore," the passenger drowsily mouthed, watching the can recede behind them.

"What?" the driver asked, but she'd already closed her eyes to drift again away toward something like sleep. "Alrighty then," he said to himself, by now used to her thin separation between consciousness and otherwise on their long rides together.

The driver's name was Luke Stanza. Early-thirties, born and raised in Chicago, the city whose lights still faintly glowed white haze in the gloomy sky behind them. A stout man with short-cropped hair and a body made for beer league softball with a thickness in his brow that gave him a look of constant confusion. He took his eyes off the road ahead to check on his sleeping passenger.

Her name was Alicia Rodricks. His wife, at least by custom if not yet in the eyes of the law. Mid-thirties with crows feet emerging from the sides of her eyes, "from" too many cities to pin one down as official place of origin. Her head was pressed against the window so it flattened her natural golden locks until they looked as if they were melting. Within them was a lone streak of hot pink, a recent act of whimsy celebrating her freedom from the 9-to-5 lifestyle. At least until they found their footing on the country's other side.

Luke saw her cheeks dimple as she mouthed an incantation that suggested torturous sleep, and within her dreams there flashed chaotic imagery from her previous 48 hours of packing and partying in anticipatory celebration of her and Luke's new life together—frantically smashing clothes into boxes, organizing kitchen supplies, boxing up Luke's impossibly heavy collection of vinyl records and CDs and DVDs all to be hauled across the country via Amtrak in the next 14-21 days, sending out a desperate flurry of emails to her Los Angeles contacts asking for any tips on work they may have, flashes of the going-away slash "weddish" party they held at Weegee's, where she'd had too many cocktails for coherency while Luke maintained his own sober stoicism, snippets of the conversation she'd had with Lesley as they were out back sharing a secret cigarette while everyone was occupied with a shuffleboard tournament.

"No schedule, he's on no schedule, and a man needs a plan," Lesley had said. "No plan, trashcan."

She'd kept speaking that refrain throughout the night and it now rattled again in Alicia's dreams like chrome pinballs against solenoid bumpers.

"No plan, trashcan."

It was a point made previously. By Lesley, by others.

Luke had no plans for his future. No attempt at defining a career. No long-term goals. "Why latch your shining star onto a dingy drifter?" was the implied question.

But he did the best he could, she told herself, writing content at a monkey-reading level and

putting in hours at mailroom temp gigs and doing gopher work for buddies trying their hands in the start-up world.

But still.

"No plan, trashcan."

"No plan, trashcan."

"No plan, trashcan."

On the other hand Alicia had a definite schedule.

After graduation she'd put in eight years to the day at Turnstyle Marketing up on the 16th floor of the NBC Tower. Three promotions during that stretch and another was on the way whenever the market regained its momentum, they had promised her. Even so she made plenty enough to cover rent in the two-bedroom they shared along with any hotels and flights for when they cashed in her vacation days.

"No plan, trashcan."

"No plan, trashcan."

"No plan, trashcan."

A skipping record in her head.

"No plan, trash—"

A bump on the highway road rattled her skull against the glass and knocked the needle clear.

Her eyes fluttered open. She found Luke fumbling a glowing phone off his lap into the footwell as he spastically grabbed the wheel. He got a hold and leveled out.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Damn roads."

"Roads?" she nodded toward the fallen phone. "I can drive if you want to snap your photos."

"There's good moonlight," he explained. "I

was trying to get some cornfields in the shadows. Spooky, you know?"

"Did you get any?"

"No, we're going too fast," he said, "and it's kind of dark at night, it turns out."

"Nothing gets past you, champ," she said through a yawn. "How far have we gotten?"

But before he answered she turned and saw the metropolitan lights still glowing against distant clouds.

"Glad you're up," he said. "Was just about to ask you to play some music."

Alicia twisted in her buckle to snatch the backpack they'd tucked between a cooler and stacked suitcases in the rear seat. She pulled out a pouch to retrieve her phone. The pale glow reflected against her eyes.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Whatever you downloaded's fine."

He reached to the tape deck and pushed in their archaic converter cassette. It whirred in preparation.

"I didn't download anything," she said. "I thought you were going to."

She watched his jaw clamp down and begin to grind. One of his tells.

"And I thought you were going to," he gritted out.

"That's fine, that's fine," she said. "We can download stuff." She checked her phone, no bars. "Whenever it is we get internet. How about we see what's on?"

Alicia spun the radio dial to 101.1 FM. It used

to be her go-to station, but she now recalled that they'd switched formats some years ago and were playing the last bit of an old Matchbox 20 song. She pressed SCAN and a Sting song came on. She scanned further. She gave up fifteen minutes later.

"My CDs are around here somewhere," she reached under her seat.

"No, they aren't," Luke said, then a long pause as if he was weighing a decision, until finally. "I gave them away."

She sat up high in her seat and began to tap the slight pouch of flab at the bottom of her chin with the back of her hand. It was a rumored remedy to tighten the skin that'd begun to loosen and sag with age but had become her nervous tic.

"What does that mean?"

"I sold them for twenty bucks," he said defensively. "Maybe thirty." A stressful pause. "You hadn't used them since we started dating!"

Two years ago.

"That's not true," she said. "You never saw me when I was driving on my own."

"The case stayed in the same spot every time I checked."

"That was to prevent break-ins!"

"Oh, like they're gonna smash your car in for Depeche Mode's full catalog," he muttered.

After a time the silence between the two was filled in by a broadcast from a call-in sports radio show. Jim from New Lenox was complaining about Jerry Reinsdorf again.

"I'm sorry, Leash," Luke finally said.

Alicia reached under her seat and pulled out a

crumpled Dunkin' Donuts cup. She held it up.

"Good thing we saved all that storage space," she said.

"I said I'm sorry," he said.

Radio static roamed the dial.

She searched her door then the middle console then the glove box. Between the insurance card and owner's manual she found a stack of loose CDs. Some held original art while others wore Sharpie scrawls that named the mixes he'd made for her when they first started hanging out. Outdated tokens of affection, even back then.

She plucked one from the top called **Punk in Public** and tried it. The opening of a Rancid song played then stuttered and skipped until the CD player spit it out. She snatched it from the slot as she rolled down her window and then she cast it out. The disc's silver caught the highway LEDs for a moment before vanishing into the front row of corn.

"That's shit anyway," she said, then tried the next.

Counting Crows came on. Before the disc even had a chance to falter she pressed eject and carefully pinched it with the tips of her fingers as if she were holding a dead rat. She flung it from the window as well.

"Not on my fucking watch," she side-eyed Luke to make sure he was smiling at the bit.

A few more CDs met similar fates, each twinkling like dying fireworks as they hurled into the night.

She found one more. It was a blue disc.

From the car's shitty speakers there came the opening's tracks acoustic plucks and then the fuzzy loud guitar. Over the next nine songs the newlyweds stewed in their overlapping pockets of nostalgia as they watched the late night road spread out before them until the bassline of the album's final song hummed and and she leaned forward to eject the disc.

"This one's going to be just for me," she said and plucked out the blue disc from the console.

She opened the storage compartment between the driver and passenger seats and took out the portable CD player that she'd stashed in there however many years ago. She set the blue disc inside and placed the soft foam of the headphones over her ears then set her head against the window.

She fell asleep just as the closing bass notes came streaming through.

Chapter Two

ALICIA AWOKE to a rapid series of sharp knocks on the door but remained absolutely still in bed until the raps sounded a second time and Luke stirred awake. She heard him roll off the fold-out couch where he'd moved to sometime in the night when her frantic tosses and turns and her nightmare murmurs started to reach their usual fever pitch. He stumbled to his feet in a defensive pose of false confidence.

The lock disengaged as someone on the other side proclaimed "housekeeping!" Luke shouted back something high-pitched and non-verbalized and the housekeeper took the hint. He twisted the lock shut and wiped away the gooey remnants of sleep still cottoning his eyes then squinted at the fuzzy red digits of the clock set on the side table.

10:56

"Shit," he said on his stumbling path to pull open the curtains.

It took a moment for his dilating irises to dampen the sunlight but when they did he saw

the steady flow of metallic sheen on the nearby interstate and the cornfields beyond swaying in the speeding wake. In the further distance there was a two-story barn once colored a vibrant red but now a skeleton made of rust that shimmered in the radiant heat.

Alicia shuffled on the bed behind him. She had folded her pillow into a blindfold as one last act of defiance against the reality of new day.

"Time to get up, Leash," Luke said.

He playfully pounced on the bed with all fours and she groaned a soft "no." He pulled off her blanket with a magician's flourish but she kept the pillow flush against her face until he ducked down and burrowed the top of his head against the mattress to angle a peek then gently nudged the pillow off.

There she was.

Her hair was matted in a half-circle with the strand of hot pink stuck to sweat that'd collected against her forehead. To Luke, she looked like an Egyptian goddess. He dipped to kiss her forehead.

"You sure slept like shit again," he said.

"Just nerves about the move, I guess," she said "What time is it?"

"Four minutes until they close breakfast," he said. "Now, three."

Luke pulled his jeans from the crumpled floor pile and Alicia took his black sweatshirt from the chair and flung it over her shoulders.

They left their room and jogged down the hallway with Luke taking lead as he wove around carts filled with plastic trays of refuse and then

into the halogen-lit breakfast room. A staffer had just rolled her cart in to clean up another morning's worth of discards.

"Wait!" he shouted.

The cleaner dramatically exhaled and rolled her eyes with enough force Luke thought he'd heard an audible pop before she sat her hefty weight at a table and began to scroll through her phone.

"Not sure how much of it's still good," she muttered.

Her assessment was accurate. The sausages had smoldered long enough that they looked like dry cigars next to cardboard bacon and the gelatinous yellow block of waxy material labeled "Eggs." The newlyweds passed on these hot options and poured milk and cereal into styrofoam bowls then filled two styrofoam cups with shit coffee they deadened with powdered creamer. They snagged a few pieces of eerily shiny fruit for the road.

Luke approached the cleaner. She was tapping and swiping on her phone like some trained painter at her easel. He set his tray on her cart with a shrug as if to ask, "Is this right? Is this where you want it?" but she waved him away without looking up like he was a buzzing gnat.

Above her cart was a sign that read "Bloomington Holiday Inn: Proud Member of the Golden Road Family." A plastic holder below held a stack of brochures. Luke plucked one out.

"Route 66, huh?" he said.

The cleaner again shooed him away. Alicia slurped the last of her Raisin Bran as he read from the brochure.

"Two-thousand, four-hundred, and forty-eight glorious miles of American highway, stretching from Chicago, Illinois to Los Angeles, California," he said.

"And every mile dotted with such illustrious decadence as can only be found in the finest of corporate chains," she added, gesturing grandly to the Holiday Inn breakfast room.

He unfolded the pamphlet to reveal a montage of photographs. A row of Cadillacs painted with graffiti that had been stuck upright in the ground like dominos. A neon-lit motel with rooms fashioned into wigwams. A enormous round barn. A drive-in movie theater. A water slide shaped like a blue whale emptying into a murky lake. A totem pole stretching high into the cloudless blue sky.

"Whaddya say, Leash?" Luke tapped his finger on the photo insert of a steakhouse. "Wanna try your hand at a 72-ounce steak in Amarillo? It's free if you finish it in an hour."

She looked into her bowl and swirled the floating remnants of bran with her spoon.

"My idiot husband tried that years back," the cleaner said. "Had a few weeks between jobs, so we did the whole 66. Out to California then back again. Second honeymoon, in a way."

"This is our first," Alicia said.

"And you're staying here?" she raised an eyebrow. "Oh honey, y'all gotta do better than this. Holiday Inn ain't honeymoon material."

The cleaner shook her head and pushed her cart out into the hallway. She paused and looked back, rolling her eyes one last time before she was off.

"She's right, you know," Alicia said. "We need a better plan than just staying wherever we end up."

"Well, how about doing this then?" Luke said, holding up the brochure with the flourish of a coy salesman.

Alicia didn't nix the idea right away. Leaning over the table they began to think through some of the potential obstacles before quickly realizing there were none. Alicia didn't have a job to get to, not yet. Luke certainly didn't either. Their stuff wouldn't arrive in Los Angeles for weeks, and the temporary place they were settling in—an entire house to themselves in Venice, courtesy Alicia's Aunt Betty—wasn't going anywhere unless an earthquake sunk it into the Pacific.

"Okay," she nodded. "Let's do it."

"Let's do it," he nodded.

"Let's see Route 66."

"Let's fucking see Route 66!"

Alicia held up her forefinger and pinkie in the sign of devil's horns then stuck out her tongue. He mimicked it back and they bumped fists, the pact was officially made.

Luke folded and pocketed the brochure and Alicia threw her bowl and spoon in the trash. They got their stuff from upstairs and dropped the key off at the front desk. Back in the Civic heading southwest, Luke ignored signs for I-55 to stay on the two-lane frontage road that ran parallel to the highway.

Outside of Funks Grove, Alicia thumbed through her phone until she found what she was looking for then began to read aloud.

"In the 1970s, Route 66 was overtaken by the creation of I-55. The new highway's smoother pavement and higher speed made the old road a poor choice for travelers."

Alicia crunched some numbers as she watched highway signs flicker past.

"Traveling 300 miles from Chicago to St. Louis, going 70 miles an hour, it would take... well, something," she mumbled. "And going only 45, well, that would definitely take longer."

She leaned her head against the window with a sigh and in a minute she was asleep.

"Good work, Leash," Luke said softly.

He drove in silence save the constant hum of the road and occasional gusts whistling through the back window's thin crack.

Traffic sped past on the I-55 and then snaked further and further away until the semi-trucks were the size of small specks on the horizon. Route 66 became empty of cars ahead and in his rear view. He turned on the radio and set it to scan. For miles there was only static but when he turned the dial from FM to AM it hit a signal right away.

"Give yourself onto the Lord's lesson so that ye may..." An old and quivering voice.

He changed the station.

"Lest now let ye give into temptation, says the book, for in the glory," came another, and Luke allowed their words to fade into the background as he drove on.

Outside of Springfield he followed signs to make a quick stop at the statue of Honest Abe,

clean-shaven and wielded his axe in a threatening pose. Luke snapped a selfie and posted it online with a pithy quote while Alicia continued to sleep in the car. In the Illinois town of Auburn he passed over a stretch of hand-laid brick that claimed to be the lone remnant of the original pavement. Further on in Litchfield Luke slowed down and then angled into the parking lot of the Route 66 Museum.

He parked between a few RVs and wide-seat motorcycles then shook awake the still-slumbering Alicia. She let out three words of slurred incoherence before he told her where they were. She nodded to collect herself and they went inside.

In the corner of the museum's main room was a black Model A with "Route 66" plates. Glass cases held coffee mugs and keychains and stuffed animals that had all been branded with the iconic logo of the highway sign. Black-and-white photos hung on the walls of a kiosk as a record of how things used to be. Diners full of smiling customers. Bar patrons toasting from their stools. An old man standing in the dark shadows of a mechanic's garage.

The newlyweds sat down to watch an old film reel.

The town of Litchfield, the narrator intoned, started as a farming community before its close proximity to the road became fortuitous as a regular stop for passing tourists. A slideshow showed photos of smiling diners and squinting residents before fading to black. The film's narration soon took on a more defeated tone as it told of the

construction of the nearby highway.

"But Litchfield goes on," the narrator said. "Whatever's in the soil is special, and means that Litchfield is most definitely here to stay."

The credits rolled.

"That was uplifting," Luke said.

As they left they passed the museum proctors who were all deep into retirement age and wore forced and frozen smiles on their cracked faces. Alicia dropped a few dollar bills into the donation bucket on their way outside into sun setting on another day.

They came upon two young women were lying down in the road next to the emblazoned Route 66 emblem with their faces aimed up toward a selfie-stick. One was struggling to correctly frame the photo.

"Smart, very smart," Alicia loudly said. "Not like cars drive on the road or anything!"

The women glared then went back to posing.

"Can I drive?" Alicia said as they got to the car. "I'm bored."

"How about in a little bit?" Luke was already opening the driver's side.

He drove for another hour while she slumped in the passenger seat and missed the sky purple then blacken with the end of another day.

The distant lights of St. Louis appeared on the horizon. Luke passed a highway sign advertising some tourist trap of which the name seemed familiar. He turned off the road to search for it and roved back and forth along side streets but found no further signs of the attraction until he

finally gave up and pulled into the first motel he saw.

The Knight's Inn was a U-shaped structure with a suit of armor propped out front. Alicia slept on as Luke checked in and unloaded their bags into the first-floor room. He slammed shut the trunk which finally jostled her awake.

"Where are we?" Alicia said groggily.

"Where we're staying," Luke said. "Wherever this is."

Alicia checked her phone. They were in a town called Waterloo. A suburb of St. Louis well off Route 66.

"Take a wrong turn or something, champ?" she said.

She saw Luke's jaw tense.

"Looks like it," he said. "Can we just drop it?"

"Drop it? We went through the same thing last night, settling for whatever was near us. You said you'd make a plan."

"Well, you're no help," he muttered. "Sleeping as always."

"I wanted to drive," Alicia said. "That's why I asked. So I could do something instead of sleeping."

But he had already left the car to walk into the motel room. The door slammed shut behind him.

She sat in the passenger seat for a calming moment before she grabbed the portable CD player from the floor and opened her phone to find the location of the nearest bar.

Chapter Three

As she lip-synched to the music playing in her ears, puffs of wispy white drifted from Alicia's mouth. They slammed against the thick wooden door of a Waterloo dive bar called The Outsider and the trails dispersed into the night air. She pushed open the door that was heavier than she'd expected and walked into a dim glow augmented with a psychedelic aura cast from dust-covered Christmas lights that'd been strung throughout.

Inside there was a trio of middle-aged Sunday evening drinkers who were already a few deep into their cups. The one behind the bar was a wide and gray-haired man named Chet who wore red suspenders and had cheap reading glasses with a decade's worth of visible scratches resting on his swollen and ruddy cheeks. He halted the ongoing conversation with a raise of his hand and the

drinkers all spun in their stools to take in the new entrant. It was a stranger, they clocked, and then spun back to the bar where their shots and beers and gossip still lie.

"What'll it be?" Chet said, waddling over to examine the pink streak in her hair, the row of buttons on her jean jacket. "We don't have any of them IPAs, if that's your thing."

"IPAs are for people who hate the taste of beer," Alicia responded.

"That's what I've been saying!" shouted the thin man seated across from Chet whose name she'd learn was Harlowe. A narrow mustache traced the curve of his smirk as he tapped a closed fist into the bar's ancient wood. "IPAs stink!"

"Oh, y'all are just stuck in your ways," said the woman slumped next to Harlowe who'd soon introduce herself as Molly. Her frizzy auburn hair caught the bar lights in such a way to give her a brown-tinted halo. "Having IPAs on tap would bring a fresh crowd in, Chet, you do know that."

"Maybe I don't want a fresh crowd," Chet smiled. "Maybe I'm happy with the stale one I got."

Molly and Harlowe turned to each other and with the synchronized laughter of old friends guffawed heartily enough to drown out the Johnny Cash on the jukebox.

"That's the damn saddest thing I ever heard!" Molly shrieked. "You need new blood to come around. Or you're just sinking in quicksand."

"She's right. You've seen Tommy O'Malley's old joint haven't you?" Harlowe said, then filled Alicia in about the new microbrewery that'd just opened

up across town. "Rode past it the other day and it was jammed to the brim!"

"You're not cheating on me, are ya?" Chet asked.

He poured fresh shots to the regulars and lifted a questioning eyebrow to Alicia who nodded her consent and he poured her one as well.

"You know you're our only true love," Molly said. She raised her shot glass and downed it then tapped for a refill. Chet obliged.

"They've been trying to fill that spot for years," Chet said. "Hear how Tommy got his license? His dad's golfing buddies with Royce Richardson."

Molly and Harlowe let out low whistles.

"Wait, what's that mean?" Alicia interjected. "Who's this Royce Richardson?"

"Big shit around town," said Chet. "Family's been in Waterloo for years."

"And so, what's his deal?" Alicia asked.

"And so," Chet refilled her glass, "we'll tell you."

For the next hour and change the Sunday night drunks detailed the sprawling family tree of the Richardsons and how the clan manipulated the town's levers of power.

Want to open a business? Franklin Richardson in City Licensing oversees that. Looking to make a new addition to your home? Harry Richardson in the Planning Department examines those blueprints. Want a video poker machine? Greg Hines, whose wife is Wendy Hines (née Wendy Richardson), controls the Office of Legal Gaming Allocation around here.

"We don't get trouble in here because we've been grandfathered in. By my literal grandfather,

as a matter of fact," Chet winked. "This place goes back to the 30s, if you couldn't tell."

With a sweep of his bulbous arm he presented the joint. Corner cobwebs, termite scars on the bar's wood, a general filthiness about.

"Looks perfect to me," Alicia said.

"But enough about us," Harlowe leaned in. "What brings you to our little hamlet?"

"We're on a road trip," Alicia said. "Headed to Los Angeles, coming from Chicago."

Alicia watched the drinkers grimace.

"Oh, you're from that bunch of assholes," said Molly. She grinned but not without a hint of bile. "We've dealt with your city shit forever down here."

"I'm but a constituent," Alicia responded. "Anyway, don't you mean the shit of Springfield, you know, the actual capital? The place with the power?"

"No, we mean your literal shit," Chet said. "You all reversed the river so your shits didn't pollute your lake and instead dumped them into the river, which dumps into the Mississippi, which dumps it all down on us."

"Those decisions, I'm afraid, predate my time," Alicia said.

"Don't be dim, darling," Harlowe said with a dismissive finger flick. "You're still reaping the benefits."

A simmering silence gave way to the opening chords of Tom Petty's American Girl. Chet turned to her with a bashful smile.

"Making the trip out on your own then?" he asked. "Or did I hear a we?"

"Me and the new hubby," Alicia said.

"And where, pray tell, is the lucky man tonight?" Chet asked.

"He doesn't drink," she said. "Not anymore."

Alicia stared at the condensation on her bottle and the drunken trio took the cue to begin searching their own beers to let her answer hang in the air a moment waiting for what else she might say.

"It comes with certain advantages though," Alicia said, holding up her bottle. "Everyone needs some alone time, and what better place than over drinks with a bunch of townie strangers who hate city folks like myself."

They all hear-hear'd then clinked bottles and downed what was left.

A Blues game broadcast blared to life from the small TV in the bar's top corner and the trio of locals all locked in. Alicia pushed her empty across the table and stood from the stool with a slight new wobble in her step. She thanked them for their hospitality and they all ended in hugs with Molly adding a "fuck Chicago."

"For that you owe me a cigarette," grinned Alicia. Molly handed her a Pall Mall and a lighter.

Touching the flame to the cigarette's tip Alicia said goodbye to all three then left through the bar's heavy wooden door as she exhaled a solid trail of white smoke into the night.

Chapter Four

THE ANTENNA PICKED UP RANCHERA MUSIC then the radio scanned ahead and landed on a call from a salt-of-the-earth local with a gripe about government overreach. It hopped frequencies to a stammering student announcer trying to describe a free throw to the listeners at home before the channel shifted again, then again, over and over as they drove west.

They rolled past flatland towns with names like Eureka and Allenton then over a hill and came to someplace called St. Clair. Papered onto the side of a barn was an ad for the Meramec Caverns and they followed the arrows and paid a $20 bill to watch colored bulbs dance colored light on limestone stalactites, to hear tales of a dead man who'd claimed to be the outlaw Jesse James. Luke snapped selfies in front of murals dedicated to Amelia Earhart and Harry S. Truman then

posted them with hashtags. They saw a miniature Stonehenge and he posted a hashtagged photo from there as well. Further west through Arlington then up a hill into Lebanon. Past an outdoor exhibit in the guise of an old Texaco station, its shiny twin pumps both long bone dry.

Alicia slept against the window as the golden road hung on I-44 like a drifting remora patiently waiting for shrapnel morsels. They pulled off to pitch their tent at a campsite called Happy Trails and they brushed their teeth and spit white foam into the fire where it hissed as it birthed out a plume of gray smoke. They crawled into their own insulated cocoons and heard coyotes howling in the darkness.

The next morning the Civic steadily climbed into Springfield. Alicia twisted the radio to a song with an acoustic guitar and haunting background quartet then the tuner scanned to a country-pop song then kept going. Four lanes winnowed to two as they left the city.

They pulled into Carthage for gas and she bought a guidebook. Alicia read him the tale of the bandit Belle Starr, shot to death two days before turning forty-one. The radio picked up a sonata on 89.9FM and by the end they'd decided that a $59.99 roadside motel would do. Two fireflies snuck inside and from their bed they watched flickering dances of enticement. Or was it panic from being trapped?

They made it to Kansas the next day. First stop was a soda fountain in Baxter Springs where they sat on red-topped stools and sipped cream sodas.

A plaque nearby memorialized Confederates who'd disguised themselves as Union to massacre an enemy squadron. They crossed into Oklahoma and lost radio signal even as the flatness of the great west opened before them. Luke posed in front of a vintage Texaco cramped like an elves' workshop and Alicia waited for him to relax before snapping a photo that would be good enough to post.

They drove on and felt a hum that Luke mistook for engine trouble until a glimpse in the rear view revealed a fleet of motorcycles in paired rows raging over the hill. Their throttles rattled the mirrors they passed. Alicia peered at one of the backseat passengers who gripped onto the driver's stomach for life, whose mouth betrayed her fear.

The roads joined at a dual overpass that sailed over I-44 and Route 66 and the Civic merged with semis barreling west at speeds well above the posted limits until the roads diverged again and they found themselves back on the drowsy 66 proper.

In Claremore they stopped at the Will Rogers Memorial and in a wood-paneled room listened to a radio address from 1931 where Rogers spoke about a more equal form of distribution. They drove to Catoosa and stopped for a photo in the blue whale slide then drove on. They slept in a town called Stroud under the red neon of the Skyliner Motel.

Their next day began with flimsy croissants and more styrofoam cups of shit coffee. Luke selfie'd at old Texacos in Chandler and Warwick. Outside El Reno they saw billboards urging a stay

in "Tucumcari Tonight," a mere 350 miles away. Alicia counted the trucks passing on the distant interstate as she rested her head against the cool passenger window.

They came upon a crossroads in an unnamed town where a quartet of dogs sat perfectly aligned with the cardinal directions. They approached and the dogs dispersed each along their own routes to disappear behind vacant buildings and within the alleyways overgrown with weeds and tall grasses. After they left the dogs again emerged and took up their original positions in the middle of the road to soak in the noontime rays until eventually the next car came.

They drove on. Clinton. Elk City. Sayre. Erick. Into Texas. In McLean they stopped at a museum dedicated to barbed wire but were turned away by a handwritten *Closed*.

Further west a stainless steel obelisk poked over the horizon and it soon resolved into an enormous Christian cross. Past Amarillo they saw the famed buried Cadillacs, their tail fins sticking skyward and coated in layered graffiti. Alicia watched Luke wait for a young mom to finish teaching her daughter how to spray paint before snapping a photo as the evening sun cast a regal violet on the edges of gathering storm clouds.

They drove on.

They reached a desolate town that claimed to be the midway point of Route 66 and later slept in the Blue Swallow. The next day they spent hours among the miniatures of Tinkertown then passed the evening with a stroll around Albuquerque

before crashing at a campground in Bernalillo. Alicia held the lantern aloft as Luke assembled the tent and then she started the fire. They warmed hot dogs and toasted buns as she took swigs from a flask and he drank from a freshwater tap. They fell asleep to the sound of wolves crying in the night.

To Sky City and the Uranium Cafe then a bathroom break in Gallup before crossing into Arizona. Alicia tried to phone a motel outside of the Petrified Forest but the call wouldn't connect so they pulled to the side of the road and pitched their tent again. They woke to the surreal vistas of the Painted Desert.

West to Holbrook and motel rooms designed like wigwams. West to Winslow and tourists lingering on a street corner where that Eagles song played on repeat. West to where a meteor sunk into the ground some 50,000 years ago. West to a diner in Twin Arrows that was dilapidated and torn and altogether forgotten. West to Flagstaff and another night in a Holiday Inn. West, further west.

They drove on.

A 1,000-foot cone of black basalt. "The gateway to the Grand Canyon," Alicia read off her phone. "The last Route 66 town to be bypassed." Low-rise brick buildings came into view on the horizon. A cafe, a post office, a haberdashery. Luke slowed and they saw stores still inhabited if only just barely.

They drove on.

Alicia saw distant buttes and an old metal shipping container that'd been converted into a place

of worship. Another container held a giant white sheet with black paint scrawl warning about the dangers of opioids. In Seligman they took photos from inside a hokey fake Wild West jail cell.

The sun set over the desert and the headlights on the distant interstate whizzed by like fireworks. Alicia rolled down her window and wind swirled her hair into a puff of gold that obscured the lone pink wisp. They sloped into Hualapai then through Valentine and Hackberry and a circuitous canyon route into Kingman's city lights.

At a diner that night they decided to make it for California. They paid their bill and sped toward Needles. Only 62 miles away.

Alicia closed her eyes. Her heart raced. She tried to calm it by listening to the rhythm of the wheels as they caught the lines scored into the concrete slabs. The AM band was humming with fuzz when the first raindrops struck the windshield.

Bright lights pierced the rear windshield and Luke's eyes dilated. He flipped the rearview's knob to deaden the beams then tried to look again. The lights were now twice the size, bearing down quickly.

He swore under his breath and the truck was now close enough that only its grill filled the mirror. Luke rolled down his window and lifted an arm in the rain to signal that the truck could pass but instead it stayed close. Revved its engine.

Luke swerved right onto the rumble strips. Alicia popped up in her seat. The car's wheels kicked dust and she screamed before he righted the way back onto the road. Up ahead the red tail

lights from the truck grew faint then disappeared entirely over the next hill.

"What happened?" Alicia wiped sleep from her eyes.

Then the sky opened and down poured heavy rain.

Luke's vision was completely obscured as if they were being tossed in a river rapid. He slowed the Civic to a stop under a thin bridge that gave protection enough.

Alicia offered to drive to Needles, saying that she could still make out the road through the rain, that he could trust her to complete the trip, but he just whiteknuckled the wheel. They watched the Civic's front hazards flash like smoldering embers against the wall of water flowing off the other side of the overpass. An hour later there came another offer to drive.

The digital readout in the car announced midnight and the scanning radio dial suddenly caught a signal.

It was silence at first, then muffled breathing in the distance, closer and closer until it made the car's speakers thrum. The breathing soon gave way to the whimpering quiver of someone crying before there again came another silence.

Alicia turned to Luke and he looked back as a voice came over the radio.

"I am the preacher," it hissed. "And I know the darkness that lies in all of our hearts."

Chapter Five

A DRUM BOOMED AN OMINOUS BEAT that quickened in pace until it felt like a death spiral heartbeat. Brass horns began to blare in the distance and they approached closer until they were right on you like a brakeless semi. They dissipated to the noise of violins, a clarinet, and a lone flute before the rest of the orchestra came in.

The music softened and the sound of a female announcer's crisp soprano took center stage.

"It is time for another midnight tale of The Confessional," said the elegant voice over the bed of music. "Tonight's episode is brought to you by Judy's Boutique, the best in comfort and style west of the Mississippi. Right there on Main Street. Just come on by."

The drums rattled, the horns boomed.

"And now, tonight's tale," the announcer read. "Sister, Can You Spare A Dime?"

Another dramatic drum roll and the orchestra

faded out. Into this emptiness came the voice of the raspy man from before.

"I am the preacher, and I know the darkness that lies in all of our hearts," he said once more.

A sound effect came across the radio dial. An approaching car sputtering along a winding road.

"Driving home late at night in her white Prius, under the bright lights of the emptied-out city, is one Simone Davis. Our star this evening," the preacher announced. "Mother of two, wife of a kind-hearted computer programmer named Frank, she's known as the young sparkplug in her family. Simone works as a nurse at the downtown hospital, and on this particular evening, she was heading back home after a late shift when the traffic signal ahead switched from green to yellow, then finally to red."

The sound of the car braking, its engine rattling to a stop.

"But this wasn't a normal trip back to her cookie-cutter home in the comfort of the suburbs," the preacher said, the car idling in the background. "This trip would be one she'd surely never forget."

A sharp tapping on the glass. The audible gasp of a woman.

"There was a man, out there, tapping on her window," the preacher narrated. "Old, disheveled, beaming a toothless grin and holding a sign. She could see that it read 'Hungry.' He tried to speak to her through the glass."

A voice too muffled to make out.

"Then came Simone's first mistake," the preacher said.

Over the airwaves came the amplified squeaking of a window being rolled down. A gust of wind blew in from outside.

"Hello, miss," called an old man through the whipping wind. "Don't mean to trouble you, especially on a night like this."

"It... it... it..." Simone said, her stutter revealing a tremendous fear, one that felt true and real to anyone listening in to that night's show. "It's... alright."

"As you can see," the old man said. "I only have this dime to my name. I was wondering if you might find it in your heart to spare some change so I can get something to eat."

The sound of the idling car continued.

"And here," the preacher said, "was Simone's second mistake."

"Well, I su-su-suppose," the terrified woman said. "I may ha—

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The radio fritzed out. The play disappeared behind the clicks of the Civic's hazard lights still projecting blinking red against the sheet of rainwater that came over the edge of the overpass.

"That was strange," Luke said.

Alicia's response was all in her eyes. Wide and quivering.

They sat in silence until she reached forward to the dial and twisted right then left, right then left, trying to tune the show back in.

"There was something to her voice," she muttered.

"Something that made it sound... different."

Luke squinted through the windshield and flicked on the wipers. They swept away the collected moisture and the newlyweds saw that the rain had by now let up to just a light sprinkle.

He put the car into drive.

"Well," he said. "Westward we go."

Alicia ignored him as her fingers still desperately twisted the dial in a fruitless search.

The car inched forward onto the shiny wetness of Route 66 and they drove on.

After a few miles bright moonlight pierced the gray and lit the car in a halo before the roaming storm clouds again obscured it and cast darkness on the two empty lanes.

Luke looked at the dashboard. It was ten past midnight.

"We can still make it to Needles," he said.

Alicia ignored him and continued turning the dial.

"It's late," he said, "but we can sti—

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"—in her rear view mirror, the old man smiled his toothless grin as he waved the crisp, new dollar bill he now grasped in his hand," the preacher hissed.

Over the radio came the sound of a car driving off at high speed.

"Simone was proud of herself," the preacher said. "Her good deed was done for the week, she thought. Home was only another thirty minutes

away, then a full night's rest until her next shift tomorrow."

Wind howled as Simone sped down the road until, again, the car slowed down.

"But those damn traffic lights kept getting in her way," the preacher narrated. "Simone just missed out on a green. Poor Simone."

Another tapping finger on glass.

"Simone looked out her window, and this time, she saw an old woman," the preacher said. "She wore a bandana and rested on a walker as she held a sign. It read 'In Need.' Still in a giving mood, Simone rolled down her window once more."

A loud creaking rattle.

"Hello there," the old woman croaked. "Don't mean to trouble you, but as you can see, I only have this dime here to my name."

"He-he-here," Simone said, quivering in strange fear.

The rustle of a bill being passed.

"Oh thank you," the old woman said.

Suddenly, another tapping. From somewhere else.

"Ah, another sound—whoever could that be?" the preacher asked rhetorically. "Simone looked to her right and there was another man, knocking on her passenger window. He was young with a pierced nose, and he held a sign that read 'Anything Helps.'"

"Hello!" a new voice shouted through the window. "Don't mean to trouble but, as you can see—"

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"No!" Alicia whined as the signal cut out.

She sat up to fiddle the knob.

Luke gripped the wheel and stared ahead as the headlights shone into pools of rain that gathered in the blacktop.

"Can we just focus on getting to Needles, Leash?" Luke said.

"You worry about driving," she said. "Not much I can do as a passenger."

"You could find us a place to stay," he said.

Alicia huffed as she took out her phone and thumbed it to glowing life. She scrolled for a moment before showing Luke her screen.

"No signal," she said.

She returned to the dial—only buzzing static.

The skies opened again. This new downpour sounded like a freight train and the windshield quickly blurred beyond use. Luke turned on the wipers full bore but even that frantic swishing wasn't enough.

He clicked on his hazards again and cautiously pulled over to the side.

On their left, a mile or so into the desert, a bolt of lightning came from the sky and struck a yucca tree. Its white flowers went up in a flaming wisp and even from that distance the newlyweds could see that one of its green arms had split and fallen into the sand.

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Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

"The sound was driving Simone mad," the

preacher's voice boomed. "It was all around her now. Simone was surrounded. Surrounded by beggars, all wanting their share."

Taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap—

*

"What's that?" Luke said squinting ahead, ignoring Alicia's frustration at the signal once again blinking out.

Past the wipers through the pulsing rain there was a glowing aura of emerald green.

Alicia kept turning the dial as Luke shifted into drive and slowly rolled forward into surroundings that were only faintly visible as the glow expanded into a cloud bathing the night in neon green.

They approached a desolate intersection. A lone traffic light dangled and cast carnivalesque flashes of roving yellow into the mist.

"Where are we?" Luke said, but Alicia still focused on the dial.

To their right he made out the dark silhouette of a gas station. A sign above it read **Luther's** and its tin roof and twin pumps were lit in the hazy green, and to their left they found the light's origin.

It came from another sign that'd been posted on top of a squat brick building. It read:



Its VACANCY notice was lit.

Luke spoke.

"Guess we found our room for the ni—"

The radio suddenly returned at full volume and from every speaker there came a blood-curdling scream. It tickled the insides of the newlyweds' ears and brought forth an odd vision of faint purple.

Luke reached to turn down the volume but Alicia caught his hand in her grip and her nails dug a row of curved divots that'd purple into bruises overnight. The scream on the radio grew wet and then dissolved into a full-throated gargle before it became nothing at all.

Silence.

Then, the light patter of movement caught on the microphone, and the emergence of a soft orchestral motif.

"So concludes another midnight tale of The Confessional," spoke the elegant woman announcer. "Join us once again tomorrow night, every night at midnight, here on—"

Luke finally shook off Alicia's grasp and turned off the radio.

They sat in stillness except for deep throbbing pulses in their temples and the squeak of wiper blades whirring back and forth across the windshield, the motel sign beyond painting their faces in neon green.



Part II
The Motel

Chapter Six

THE WIPERS SQUEAKED ACROSS THE WINDSHIELD and did little to clear the glass as by now the pouring rain had sputtered to mere drizzle. Luke twisted them off and there was one final whir as they reset to their original position. A few lingering raindrops landed on the clean slate and each refracted the motel sign's green.

Luke put on his left blinker even though the roads were clear in every direction and rolled the Civic into the motel's driveway.

There was a brick building on their left with a pointy shingled rooftop and a sign that read **RECEPTION**. Attached to its roof was a metal overhang that was flat except for the tall, sharp antenna that loomed above. Luke pulled into the rectangle of dry concrete underneath.

The car's headlights lit the interior parking lot

and the L-shaped motel structure beyond. A dark green metal gate surrounded a swimming pool that had been set in the middle of the lot.

Luke and Alicia peered toward the darkened reception building. Its closed blinds cast horizontal bands of faint light onto the sidewalk out front.

"Seems like it's not abandoned at least, champ," Alicia massaged Luke's shoulder.

He nodded and grimaced and sucked in a deep breath of stabilization as he opened the door. A popcorn patter of light drops tapped the metal overhang as he crossed toward the office.

The front window held notices that had been taped inside. An ad for a vintage clothing store was alongside one for an ice cream parlor. He tried to pull open the door but the lock held it sturdily shut, then he saw the small handwritten sign.

CLOSED!

Below the word was a squiggly arrow aimed to the right. Luke followed it to a wooden dropbox where from a screw there dangled a key with a plastic tag labeled Room 11. Next to it was a notice for "$40/night" and a stack of empty envelopes cradled in a slot.

Luke blindly took bills from his wallet and folded them inside. He swiped his tongue across the bile-flavored adhesive then found the mail slot knee-high in the door and pushed the stuffed envelope through.

As he stood back up he found a slight part in the window blinds. He pressed his forehead against the cool glass.

Within the gray he made out the black

silhouette of a stand-up desk with a ledger. The far wall held other detritus—ceramic mice, model cars, yo-yos, an action figure. But then the blinds suddenly rustled and the view closed shut.

Luke flinched back. He held his breath, his face flushed. He tried to listen past his pounding pulse pounding for someone beyond the glass.

"Hello?" he called meekly.

"All set?" Alicia shouted from the car.

No other movement inside.

He returned to the driver's seat and rolled the Civic forward into the parking lot. They passed a row of rooms to their left and to their right the pool, its surface reflecting dimpled moonlight dimpled as light rain still fell.

The car's headlights caught the back of a dark red Jeep with its roof latched on, the only other car in the lot, and then a flash of silver reflecting the tin numbering 12 on the door ahead. They parked next to the Jeep and saw a flicker of light from within the room's blinds before they too were slammed shut against inquiries.

Luke stepped from the Civic and Alicia slung an arm through the strap of her purse. A distant train whistle blew. He looked south across the flat desert to where truck headlights sped on the interstate, and then hoisted three bags over his shoulder and followed Alicia inside.

The room was the standard 15 by 25 feet and boxed in with faux wood paneling. A small window on the back wall cast light onto dark green carpeting. There were two single beds with starchy comforters and in between sat a nightstand with

a lamp and an analog clock whose second hand faintly ticked away. Across from the beds was a set of drawers and a wooden cabinet of archaic design that stood chest-high.

Alicia set her purse on a bed and stepped through a door in the rear, into what she figured correctly was the bathroom. She flicked the parallel switches for the orange light and the overhead fan then closed the door behind her.

With a grimace on his face Luke set the bags down on the carpet and with his phone snapped a few photos of the room's vintage decor. But when he went to post one online he discovered that there was no service and, more pressingly, that his phone's battery was down to 19 percent.

He pulled out his white cord from his pocket and searched the wall for an outlet. Nothing on the walls, nothing behind the nightstand. Behind the bed was only pale flatness. He pulled the chest of drawers away from the wall—also empty—and pressed in the cabinet's magnetic lock to pop open the door.

Inside, an old radio filled the space. It was carved from cedar with rounded edges and behind a fabric screen with a fleur-de-lis pattern there was a wide speaker. He turned a knob to click it on and a big band performance streamed into the room. He tried to tune in a new signal but the dial wouldn't budge.

"What's that?" Alicia called through the bathroom door. Luke didn't answer.

The music played on as Luke lifted the heavy cabinet off the carpeting to see what was behind.

He dipped his hand into the crack and his fingers found a cord. With his phone's white light he saw that the cord ran from a hole bored into the cabinet's back directly into a small pinhole that'd been punctured into the wall. No outlet there.

The big band music was drowned by the flush of the toilet. Alicia walked from the bathroom with the door pulled tightly behind her.

"Gonna wanna give it a few," she sat down and took out her own phone.

"Where's the outlet?" she asked.

Luke shook his head then went into the bathroom to conduct his own pre-sleep affairs.

When he returned, he bolted the front door lock and turned off the lights. He lay on what had wordlessly been decided as his bed then got under the scratchy blanket and closed his eyes.

"Goodnight, Leash," he said.

Alicia mumbled something back.

He gave it a moment, but then:

"What is it?" he said.

"I just can't believe we're in another dingy motel," she said. "This is what happens when there's no plan."

Luke sat up and turned on the nightstand lamp.

"I'm sorry, are you saying I should have predicted the rain?"

"Just another data point," Alicia stared at the off-white ceiling. "No plan, same as ever. A no-plan man."

"That's unfair."

Alicia sat up and turned to him.

"I know some of tonight is out of your control,

but I've been doing my best to go along with the haphazard nature of this trip," she said. "We need plans. Without plans, we're left to settle for shit like this. No plan, trash can."

"What's that now?" Luke said. "No plan, trash can?"

"Just something I read online," she said. Then, quickly: "I love you. Goodnight."

She reached into her purse and took out her CD player. She placed the headphones over her ears and pressed play before she lay her head back and placed another pillow on top of her face.

After a quiet minute Luke realized that music was still softly playing from the old radio. He stood with a loud theatrical sigh that he knew she couldn't hear anyway and walked across the carpeting. He clicked off the old radio.

Chapter Seven

ALICIA WAS ON AN OPEN HIGHWAY driving toward a drop into nothingness.

She slammed her foot on the gas but despite her gathering speed the drop on the horizon never grew closer it stayed there far in the distance like some desert mirage no matter how hard she pressed on the pedal.

Then there came a great crash of thunder.

She leaned forward and looked up through the windshield but found only clear cloudless sky. She leaned back in her seat and ahead she found that the drop was now approaching quickly, faster than she had expected, sooner than she had prepared for, and she now realized what a terrible idea this all had been and stomped her foot hard on the brakes, but they didn't respond.

The drop-off rushed toward her.

Another thunderous boom rattled the car.

Some part of her mind realized that the sound came from the motel room's front door that she realized now was actually there.

Through blurry eyes she allowed the dark contours of the room to form and saw Luke wake with a start and jump off the bed. He knocked his knee against the wall heater as he made his way to the door and rubbed his knee with a new hobble as another knock boomed from outside.

He bent forward to the peephole. Two silhouettes backlit by the sun.

"Morning, partners!" spoke a cheery voice from the other side. "We run this place!"

"Don't get up, hun," Luke muttered over his shoulder and cracked the door the width of the chain lock.

The sun outside made him squint and the aching blur reminded him of hangovers past. He blinked and the shadows resolved into a man and a woman both in their mid-60s. She was short with a pale face and a mushroom bob of brown hair, he was tall with gray hair cropped short and a shave fresh enough that a red-dotted piece of torn toilet paper still clung to his neck. They both smiled brightly.

"Welcome to the Malinko Motel!" they shouted in rehearsed unison. "We're lucky to have you!"

Alicia stirred on the bed behind him. She rolled vampirically away from the infiltrating sunlight before crawling begrudgingly out of bed and making her way to the door.

The owners introduced themselves as Sam and Mrs. Waterson.

"Didn't catch your name," Alicia offered a hand to the woman.

"Her name is Christine," Sam said through deepening dimples on his cheek. "We don't greet every one of our guests, but y'all overpaid last night when you came in. Didn't want you to think you'd been cheated."

He produced a ten-dollar bill and handed it to Luke. Alicia snatched it away.

"He owes me," she winked to Christine and palmed the bill.

"Well, be that as it may," Sam said, "as part of your admission, you're entitled to a full breakfast. Homemade, courtesy of our own lovely cook."

He presented a blushing Christine who made a slight curtsy.

"Come by whenever you're done putting yourselves together," Sam said. "It'll be ready when you get there."

Without waiting for a reply the couple spun away in eerie synchronization and started back across the lot to the office.

"Thanks," Luke muttered to their wake, shutting the door. "Cute couple."

"If you say so," Alicia said.

Luke closed the distance between them in an instant and pressed his bare stomach against hers, bringing her into his arms. He reached forward and gave her a light kiss on the side of her neck.

"Maybe they've just figured out the right way to coexist," he whispered.

"You think so?" and she returned his short kiss with a squeeze of his hips. "What do you say,

champ? Wanna grab some down-home cooking before we hit the road?"

"Would like absolutely nothing more," he said.

They washed up and packed their bags, locking the room behind them as they departed. In the middle of the lot, the still waters of the gated pool were covered in a pulsating layer of debris from last night's rain. A bell twinkled above their heads as they entered the reception office.

"Welcome, welcome," Sam cheerily said, his tall frame materializing in a back doorway. "But first things first."

He gestured to the guest ledger resting on a wooden podium. A pen hung from a red string on its side.

"Better mark our territory," Luke said to Alicia's eyeroll. He wrote down their names and listed their places of origin as "Los Angeles, soon," before pulling out his phone to snap another quick photo. Alicia rolled her eyes even harder.

Sam began his modest tour of the office with their "great big wall of crap" as he'd put it. Thin shelves held knick-knacks from the historic Route 66 on which the motel sat. Branded thimbles and shot glasses, keychains and toy cars, action figures still preserved in their original casing.

Set in the office corner was a waist-high radio more ornate than the one in their room. It was curved at the top, its speaker screen filigreed with intricate woodwork like a miniature cathedral. Sam noticed Luke's eyes widen as he took it in.

"Still works too," Sam said, beaming with pride.

He clicked on a knob and an amber light shone across its channel numbers. He twisted the volume and the sound of a big band waltz blasted through the room.

"That's incredible," Luke said, reaching to twist the tuner, but before he got to it, Sam grabbed his wrist.

"Took me a few years to refurbish it," Sam said. "Still not ready to let others play with it, I'm afraid."

Luke pulled back his hand and Sam twisted back the knob. The music cut, the light across the band went dark.

"And here," Sam said, moving ahead with his tour, pointing to a frame on the wall, "is us."

It was an old black-and-white photo taken in a bar. The ensemble, maybe 45 people in all, were perched on stools or crouched in front. A few sat cross-legged on the ground. The ladies wore ankle-length dresses and high heels, the men were in leather jackets or flannels with greased pompadours atop their heads.

Near the middle were figures who could only have been Sam and Christine, but back then in their twenties. He wore thick Buddy Holly frames and she had her long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Alicia leaned over Luke's shoulder and peered at the assembly. Her attention landed on a short woman hunched in front. She was older than the rest, with dark, black hair that hung down the sides of her head so it obscured her ears and made her prominent nose seem to project even further.

She sat unsmiling and glared into the camera lens.

Alicia tapped on the glass.

"This one sure is a looker," she said.

Sam smiled.

"One of Malinko's most respected residents," he said.

"Looks like an amazing time," Luke said.

"It sure is," Sam said, continuing the tour.

When their host turned his back Luke subtly snapped a shot of the old photo with his phone, a final act before the phone shut off, its battery drained.

They followed Sam further into the office past a waist-high wooden partition that separated the coarse carpeting from a blue-and-white tiled floor. It opened into another room with a wide window that looked into the flat desert landscape.

"And here is our breakfast room," Sam said over his shoulder.

Inside were a half-dozen round tables empty save one in the corner, occupied by a man-and-woman pair who were huddled over their plates.

"Your fellow guests," Sam introduced with a wave.

He led the newlyweds to a table on the opposite end and they sat across from each other and looked into the expanse of rolling hills covered in sand and dotted with cacti. In the distance they could see the highway with its tons of metal and rubber breezing by.

Alicia reached across the table and grabbed Luke's hand. With her eyes she suggestively aimed

toward the other couple.

"What's up?" she mouthed. Luke looked past her shoulder.

They were in their late forties or so, near a vague middle age. She had tanned skin and sunglasses nested in her bangs. Hair fell past her shoulders and draped over a tight black t-shirt and jeans that were speckled with dirt. He wore a red-and-white flannel and had a thin face with a carefully-cropped blond beard. His jaw muscles flexed as he chewed.

They were bent over the table examining a large piece of paper with utmost attentiveness—at least until the man raised his head and caught Luke peeking their way. Luke averted his eyes and awkwardly pretended to scan the room but when he cycled back there was the man still looking at him, now smiling back.

"How y'all doing?" the man said with a surfer drawl to his voice. "I'm Jeff, and this is Kelsey."

Luke and Alicia waved and introduced themselves. The woman gave a curt smile before returning back to their paper. It appeared to be some sort of map.

"We got something special for y'all," Sam said as he re-entered with Christine carrying a lidded tray at his side.

Christine set down the tray and popped off the metal lid. Under it were two plates, each holding a slice of pale white bread that cradled an avocado that'd been cut in half. Skin, pit and all. Christine stood back to admire her spread.

"We read a thing or two about what you

millennials like to brunch on," Sam winked.

"Oh," Alicia said, putting it together. "It's avocado toast?"

"Lovely," Luke said. "One of our favorites."

That was good enough for the Watersons, who exited into the reception's front room as they elbowed praise to each other's ribs for their job well done.

"Had that on our first day here," Jeff shouted from the other table. "Then Kelsey here told 'em we were off gluten. Only eggs and veggies ever since. But we found our own way to accentuate."

He reached into the jacket he'd hung on the back of his chair and from the pocket retrieved a miniature bottle of sriracha.

"Mind if I—" Luke started, but before he'd finished Jeff had tossed the small plastic bottle through the air.

Luke caught it and squeezed a bit on their plates before throwing it back.

"You're a lifesaver," Luke said.

"Always got to pack the essentials," Jeff said. "So, what brings you two way out here?"

"Road trip honeymoon," Luke said through a mouth of bread.

"Of sorts," Alicia said, flashing her ringless hand over her shoulder. "A honeymoon of sorts. We haven't done the deed yet."

"The legal deed," Luke said. "The paperwork with the state. That deed. We've done the other deed."

A smile pulled tight around Jeff's chiseled chin.

"Wouldn't pry," he said, "but thanks for the

clarification."

"We were heading to L.A,.and got caught in the rainstorm last night," Alicia said.

"Nasty one," Jeff said.

"We're coming from there ourselves," the woman, Kelsey, spoke up with a sort of resignation as she folded up the map and tucked it into her purse. "We're on a kind of vacation."

"Taking a pause between what's past and what's next," Jeff added. "A lot to explore out here if you have the time."

A few minutes of shouting across the room and the couples finally decided to move their tables together and spent the rest of breakfast trading tales and tips of the road. Now and then Christine poked in her head to check on them and with nothing to do she glumly returned back to reception. After some time, the couples finished and walked back into the office and spoke casual niceties with the Watersons before exiting into the desert warmth, the entrance bell chiming overhead.

They parted ways at the parking lot pool with wishes of good luck and nice meeting you, Jeff and Kelsey headed for a hike, Luke and Alicia back to pack up the car. On the way out, Luke dropped the keys off at reception and promised Christine they'd leave a review on TripAdvisor. He steering the Civic out of the lot, and a left turn put them back onto Route 66, heading west.

They drove past the derelict, forgotten structures of Malinko's Main Street. A broken and torn old diner that looked as if a tornado had blown

through. A bar that was nothing but the faint outlines of a room with broken glass on the ground. Shops that'd long moved on from whatever wares or services they'd once offered.

Walking on the crumpled and neglected sidewalk ahead were two figures. Jeff and Kelsey.

She held up their opened map and he pointed to a location on it. Luke honked as they drove past and they all waved good tidings but soon enough the older couple were in the rear view.

"Imagine staying here longer than a night," Luke said.

"I could do it," Alicia said, looking ahead at the road as she reached over to brush the back of his neck. "Hiking every day, nights at the pool under the stars, I could do it."

She looked out her window and saw long weeds that'd sprouted between the sidewalk slabs and storefronts whose only product now were loose wires dangling from broken ceilings. Beyond Main Street proper and up the slight hill that formed the northern edge of the once-town were rows of houses, once uniform structures of brick and wood, now in various stages of decay. Except for one structure at the edge of town, with fresh paint and a row of pink plastic flamingos lined in the yard.

"It doesn't seem so bad," she said, "despite the breakfasts."

Toward the western edge of Malinko the street split and diverted around a teardrop-shaped island of dirt. The road out front was tattooed with the dark lines of skid marks, and beyond, in the

center of land, there were the fallen timbers of an old church. Past the collapsed structure, Route 66 rejoined itself to become its proper two-lane straightaway once again.

The Civic exited the town under a sign thanking all of the motorists for stopping into Malinko, and to come again soon. The sun appeared through the bullet holes that'd pierced the metal.

Their car made it another twenty miles before the engine began to sputter and black smoke billowed from under the hood so thick that it obscured the horizon beyond.

Chapter Eight

ALREADY A LAYER OF SWEAT had moistened his forehead by the time Luke had reached the Civic's hood, and when he lifted it up in the hot desert heat, from it spewed a massive black plume like some demon's belch. He gasped instinctually and with the inhale sucked in enough smoke that he was soon on his knees against the hot asphalt, seized by a coughing fit. Alicia opened her door but remained seated as she examined the state of her new husband.

"I'm no mechanic," Luke sputtered out.

"No shit," Alicia called from the passenger window.

"But my expert opinion is," he got out breathlessly as his coughing calmed, "is that this doesn't seem good."

"No signal." Alicia held her phone limply. "Unless some Good Samaritan suddenly comes

through," she said, "we better start walking."

She made calculations of the distance from the car through the desert to the interstate where the traffic sped past effortlessly. Metal metal and chrome wheels reflected disco-ball flashes of sunlight back to them through waves of radiating heat.

"Seems kind of far, Leash," Luke said. "And very dry, and very desert-ey."

"It sure does seem that way," she said. "Got another plan, champ?"

"Wasn't there a phone booth back there?" he thumbed behind them. "Couldn't have been more than a mile."

"You're betting it still works?"

"I like our chances staying on this road more than walking through that desert," he said, grabbing his phone from the car charger. "I mean, this is Route 66. Someone's got to come by sooner or later."

She gave up and shut the door behind her.

They walked the first quarter-mile back toward the booth still holding hands but then their grips grew slippery with sweat and they released and let them dangle separately on their lonesomes. Mirages appeared on the blacktop and disappeared as they approached, and after some time an indistinct shape lingered long enough until they found it was the phone booth proper. They quickened their paces and were almost jogging by the time they got to it.

Through broken glass they found a graffiti'd interior with a pile of fast food wrappers collected by the wind and stuffed in the corner. A scent

suggested that it had taken on a recent role as a vagrant's toilet. The newlyweds examined each other quietly as if making competing, silent dares.

Luke gave in and pushed open the door, which was little more than a frame. Sand crystals crunched in its rusted hinge. He reached for the receiver hung in its metal cradle.

A dial tone.

He sighed in relief—but, searching his pockets for change, he found them empty. Alicia rifled through her purse and came up with nothing but a dime.

"You're shitting me," she said.

"That's fine, that's fine," Luke said. "People have made it through these kinds of situations before."

"And how exactly did they do that?" she said.

"What about calling collect," Luke said, "isn't that a thing?"

Alicia nodded. "Yeah, try that."

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Okay."

"Alrighty."

A pause.

"So, go ahead, then," she said.

"Okay," Luke said. His finger hovered over the dialing pad's matrix of numbers. "And how exactly does one call collect?"

"I thought you knew!"

"I *thought* I did!"

Alicia closed her eyes to keep composure.

"Don't we just, like," he said, "call someone and ask them to take the charges?"

"But we don't know who to call," she responded.

"There's got to be a directory around here," he said.

They scanned the booth's cramped space and found only a syringe nestled in the thick layer of grime coating the floor.

"Why do you think there's 'got to be' one here, exactly?" Alicia asked.

Luke ignored her.

"Call information," she said.

"Information!" Luke said. "Of course!"

His finger hesitated over the numerals.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay," Alicia said. "So do it."

"Ready when you are," Luke said. "Just tell me how."

"Well," Alicia said, "shit."

He hung up. They stepped back out and scanned Route 66 in both directions. Only open road.

Suddenly, a high-pitched ringing filled the booth.

Alicia screamed. Luke screamed back.

The phone rang again, then a third time. Luke picked up.

"Luther's," croaked a gruff voice. "Where's the pickup?"

"Excuse me," Luke said haltingly, tilting the phone so Alicia could hear too. "Who is this?"

"Luther," the voice said. "As I had said. Where is the pick up?"

"I don't think we called you?" Luke said.

"You don't need a tow?"

"Wait, yes," Luke said. "We do need a tow."

"Where. Is. The. Pick. Up."

Luke explained the shapes he was seeing in the desert as best he could but Luther cut him off.

"There in thirty," Luther said, then dial tone.

The newlyweds looked at each other confusedly then slowly began their walk back to the car, holding hands for a few steps before their palms again grew slick with sweat.

On the way Alicia began to comment on the unique luck of how a tow truck operator happened to call that particular phone booth at just that particular moment when a tow was, in fact, precisely what they needed. But being beaten too down by the heat to examine it any further she let that line of thinking settle and dissipate. Fifteen minutes later, they were back in the Civic with its doors spread wide open due of the heat baking inside.

They heard a rumble from the east and turned to a series of dirt puffs, then a tow truck cresting a faraway hill.

It had a body of faded blue and its headlights were greased like cataracted eyes. Its grill was four horizontal bars bent in odd contortions and its bumper weighted like a battering ram with the chrome siding of a copperhead snake. As it sped closer they saw speckled rust around its wheel wells and lettering scrawled atop its hood: **Luther's**.

It rolled to a stop twenty feet away. The newlyweds saw only the driver's vague shape behind glass that had fogged up completely with condensation from within.

Luke waved his arm, the truck remained idle.

"Okay, buddy," Luke said, mostly to Alicia.

"Let's go, we're hot out here."

He waved again. The truck remained still.

"Do you have to check our plates or something?" he said, then yelled out. "We're clean! I've been sober for years!"

The dark shadow inside tilted slightly. Alicia stood from the Civic's passenger side and began to stomp her way toward the truck.

"Are you gonna come tow us or fucking what!" she yelled.

The truck shuddered to life and sped forward, past the Civic entirely and down the highway.

"What did you do, Leash?" Luke asked.

Her stuttering answer was choked off by the high-pitched screech of tires as they burned to a stop. The truck shifted gears in a dramatic lurch backwards then began barreling back toward them in reverse.

"Shit!" Luke yelled, diving out of the way. Alicia meanwhile took a careful, simple step out into the road to avoid a potential collision. Another loud screech from the tires and the truck halted as its rear end softly bumped with the grace of a kiss against the front bumper of the Civic. The engine rumbled, then quit.

Luke looked up to the truck's door with bits of sand coating his face. It shrieked open and onto the road stepped a man near seven feet tall with skinny legs and thin, dirty arms.

He wore filthy overalls with the same **Luther's** scrawled on his breast, and glasses with a weighty frame and thick lenses that magnified his brown eyes. A combover swept across his skull left to

right, and his stone expression softened as he approached.

"Whatcha doing down there, pal?" he waved. "Didn't think I'd stop in time?"

Luke stood, dusted off his face.

"Something like that."

"I just like to get in nice and tight for the tow," the man said. "I'm Luther, by the way."

"Your hood gave it away," Alicia said.

Luther smiled brightly with teeth of pure white that shone in contrast to the rest of his mechanic's soot.

"How are you, miss," he mimed doffing an invisible hat. "Let's have a look, then."

He ambled to the Civic's hood where lingering trails of smoke still wafted. Luther lifted it up and dissipated the plumes with a wave of his hand and a moment later he set the lid back down again.

"Take a day or more to fix her," Luther said. "Got to bring her back to the shop."

"How much will it cost?" Alicia asked.

"Does it matter?" Luther said. "Don't see much in the way of competition out here."

He set an open hand above his brow to shield his eyes from the sun and examined the vacant road with a long, loud whistle and held the tune as he swung the full 180 degrees. He dropped his hand and held a serious glare at the newlyweds for a brief moment before he let out a snort-laugh.

"I'm just joshing with you," Luther said. "I'll give you a fine price, cost of the part and a bit for the labor is all. We don't backstab around here like you city folk. We ain't that same rat race."

The newlyweds wordlessly agreed, then Luke nodded at the mechanic. In a heartbeat Luther gripped the winch on the back of his truck and pulled out several feet of slack from the tow chain. He jumped in the air and with shocking flexibility for his size landed on the ground in the form of a perfect push-up. From this position he attached the chain's metal hook to the Civic's underside and just as quickly popped back up to his feet.

"Stick her in neutral and hop into the truck," Luther said.

They did as they were told and the three piled into the truck's bench. Luther pressed a few buttons on his dash to winch the tow chain, shifted into drive, and spun around in a wide U-turn that crushed the brittlebush at the road's edge before they headed back east.

Luther switched on the radio and through the truck's speakers came a few brief notes of a fluttering guitar. He turned to the newlyweds with a giant smile, his alabaster teeth blinding.

"The Mills Brothers," he said, nodding to them as if he'd won a trivia question.

A crooning voice came through the speakers. Luther faced the road again and through the windshield's reflection they saw his smile fade, his face become blank and vacant. He removed a small peppermint candy from his front pocket and tossed it into his mouth. A half-mile later, they passed the phone booth.

"Can't believe that worked," Alicia softly said.

Luther exhaled loudly at the interruption to

his music and Alicia smelled a strong waft of peppermint through the cabin. His hand reached to the radio dial and turned the volume up to its maximum.

The newlyweds sat still and silent as Luther lip-synced to the radio all the way back to Malinko.

Chapter Nine

THE OUTLINES OF THE DEAD TOWN came into view as they passed the bullet-riddled sign welcoming them back.

Luther steered the tow truck around the teardropped split in Route 66 with the collapsed church and those tire marks burned out front, and the newlyweds ricocheted around like pinballs in the cabin as they re-entered Main Street proper. They drove past brick structures that once held stores and beyond was the ridge with rows of former homes that'd decayed into skeletal frames.

Alicia spotted again the lonesome house that appeared intact if not well-kempt, its patch of desert front yard occupied by four car frames all rusting in the sunshine, a row of pink plastic flamingos shined smooth as if recently waxed.

Alicia followed Luther's eyes as he examined the house from behind the wheel.

"How long you been here?" she asked.

He let out a high-pitched laugh that echoed through the cabin. Luke winced. Luther's knuckles cracked and began to whiten on the wheel.

"Longer than you'd think," he finally said. "Longer than you'd guess."

They drove into the block of shadow cast by the straight line of shop rooftops. Luther nodded toward one.

"Used to be our hardware store," Luther said. "Owned by Howell Pearth. Good guy. Strong constitution."

Alicia sat up in her seat with new interest.

"What about that one?" she pointed to a building with its metal door still bolted shut, a meaningless defense as all of its windows had long been smashed out.

"That was Martha's. Was our hairdresser's shop," Luther said. "Few years back, some of them antiquers crept in from L.A. to scavenge some of her old chair-hairdryer thingies, to take them back to the city to sell."

"Tried?" Luke asked.

Luther turned to them with a new sort of grin.

"That's right," he said. "But wouldn't let them."

"Who wouldn't let them?" Alicia asked.

"Town wouldn't," Luther left it at that.

Alicia followed Luther's squint to another former store on the main drag. Its entrance was a nondescript wall with a horizontal window and narrow door, openings that had expanded erosively over time. Fallen bricks and rebar were piled on the sidewalk outside. Above its awning were

rusted iron bolts which held bits of broken glass tubes that once flowed with neon gas.

"Our old neighborhood hang," Luther said. "Whole town used to get together at Cobb's. Still have a lot of foggy memories from in there, in here."

He tapped a grease-blackened finger against his temple.

They passed by the rest of the storefronts in silence then through the town's eastern intersection and past the motel, its green neon not yet lit. Luther blew through the hanging stoplight's blinking yellow then swung left into the driveway of his shop, its garage door already open.

He made a wide three-point turn to back the Civic into the garage then set the truck in park. and got out without a noise except the slam of his door behind his exiting gait. The newlyweds left one at a time through the passenger side.

Standing at his shop entrance, Luther pushed thick glasses back up the bridge of his sweaty nose and his eyes were once again exaggerated in the magnified lenses. He led Alicia and Luke into the dank smell of the garage and passed through bands of hovering dust to the cord of a hanging bulb. Halogen white flicked on and made stark shadows of the wrenches and hammers and saws that hung from pegs on the wall, reaching everywhere except the yawning dark of the sunken well to allow ingress to cars' undersides.

"Let's get the paperwork done first," he huffed, pushing through a swinging door into the office and flipping a switch. Soft light shone on a long

standing bench covered in scattered papers, loose rubber bands, pens with caps gnawed off. He rested on a stool and pulled open a metal drawer that screeched like a banshee. He retrieved a piece of paper and handed it to Luke.

"Come back tomorrow," Luther said, stuffing the newly autographed page back into the shrieking drawer without looking.

He spun on the stool and twisted the dial of the small transistor radio at the end of the bench. Big band music wafted through the cramped space. Luther closed his eyes.

The newlyweds stood for another half-minute before Alicia tugged Luke's arm and nodded toward Luther, his eyes still shut, his breathing slowed to a rhythm of deep meditation. They left the garage and grabbed their necessities from the car then crossed the intersection under the flashing yellow and the wind whipping down Route 66 back into reception at the Malinko Motel.

Sam stood waiting at the podium with a welcoming smile.

"We heard about your car troubles," he said with a histrionic frown. "Sorry to say, we're booked up for the evening. Have a family reunion coming and they rented out the whole place."

The newlyweds stood for a beat. Alicia was first to notice Sam's telling nostril flare, and soon he reached out to give Luke's bicep a loose slap which though friendly was startlingly hard.

"I'm just joshing," Sam guffawed. "We got plenty of space for you two. Same room okay?"

"That's fine," Alicia said. "But we noticed our

room didn't have any power outlets?"

"That's how it is all throughout," Sam said. "Too many desert rats stealing our electricity. The bills add up."

Luke performed the official check-in process again as Alicia ducked into the back room to say hello to Christine, who answered with a curt nod and pursed lips. The front door's bell dinged as they left and they passed the still-grimy water of the fenced-in pool on their way back to Room 11. It had been cleaned and prepped for their arrival.

Luke dropped their bags on the floor, then himself on his old bed.

"Get up," Alicia called from the threshold. "Let's go do something. I don't want to stay in this room one second longer than I have to."

Luke stood with a groan then hugged her close and pulled her inside, the door shutting behind her.

"I have an idea for how to pass the time," he said.

They shared a soft kiss but then there came a light tapping on the door. Alicia pulled away from Luke and opened it. On the other side were Jeff and Kelsey, their breakfast companions.

"We'd thought you'd left," Kelsey asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What she means is," Jeff cut in, "Hey, hello, how are you?"

"We had car trouble," Alicia said.

Jeff and Kelsey gave each other a look.

"We were just about to hike through town," Jeff said. "If you want to join us, you're more than

welcome."

Luke and Alicia's eyes met. Smiling, Luke turned to the couple and said they'd be right with them, then closed the door and stole one more quick kiss. They met outside at the pool where Jeff and Kelsey were examining backpacks that looked military grade.

"How long of a hike are we exactly thinking here?" Alicia said, nodding at the gear.

"It's just for safety," Kelsey said. "Desert landscape and all. Can never have too much water."

"If you're gonna do it, do it right," Jeff smiled and his dimples deepened, looking like black holes dug deep in the earth.

The older couple zipped their bags and the four walked through the parking lot, passing reception. Across the still street came the faint sound of whirring tools echoing from inside Luther's garage. The group turned left onto the sidewalk of Malinko's Main Street.

They stepped around rusted metal that'd seemingly been exposed to the elements for decades and passed a building whose entire interior was nothing but mounds of dirt. Further inside there had been placed a half-circle of assorted styles of chairs all facing a pile of broken beer bottles. The next storefront had been buried by a ceiling cave-in, and the one after that was that old neighborhood haunt Luther had called Cobb's.

Jeff, Kelsey, and Alicia continued on, but Luke lagged long enough that they were eventually forced to turn around.

"Mind if we pop in?" Luke meekly asked.

Before any answer came he'd already stepped over a mound of loose bricks and pried open the jammed metal door, just far enough to fit through. Kelsey gave Jeff a nod and he set his pack down and followed behind.

Their shoes crunched on shards of glass that kaleidoscopically reflected sunlight streaming in through the broken ceiling. A long wooden bar ran the room's length, and towards the back was an expansive flat dancefloor in front of a stage that rose maybe three feet off the ground. In the corner was an old jukebox, its glass front broken through.

"Name of this place was Cobb's," Jeff said. "Owned first by Stu Cobb, then Frank Cobb, and finally Al Cobb, the last of the Cobbs before it all shut down."

"You know a lot about this town's history," Luke said, examining a sign on the wall too tattered to make out.

"A little hobby of ours," Jeff said. "Of mine, at least."

He took his sunglasses from his face and hung them from a buttonhole in his flannel.

"Accidentally, anyway," Jeff said. "Spend enough time anywhere and you get to learning about it, I suppose."

Luke took out his phone and snapped a photo. The sprinkled shards of mirror on the floor caught the auto-flash. More out of instinct than anything Luke's thumbs scrolled over to Instagram to upload the photo, forgetting that signal in town was non-existent.

"Hey, good shot," Jeff said over Luke's shoulder.

"What's your handle?"

"Uh, don't make fun of this," Luke said. He hesitated. "It's Travelbae87. That's b-a-e, then eighty-seven. It's a joke."

"That's cool, that's cool, I'm on there too," Jeff said. "Sonic Youth, one word, then the number four, then life. L-I-F-E. And that's not a joke."

Outside the old bar Alicia and Kelsey stood in the awning's shadow after silently agreeing to sit out the boys' exploration. Kelsey reached into her backpack and removed a pack of cigarettes, and she lit one before offering the pack to Alicia, who held up a single finger to signal a pause. She peeked into the pried-open door to make sure the boys were out of view, then snatched one.

"How long are you staying here?" Alicia asked as Kelsey lit her smoke.

"Another hour or so," Kelsey said.

"No, I mean how long have you been *here*," Alicia said, gesturing around. "How long can someone stay in a place like this?"

"Longer than you'd think," Kelsey replied.

"Sounds vague."

"Meant to be."

A long pause. They both dragged heat as a gust of wind roared down the street.

"Don't mean to be stand-offish," Kelsey said, waving her hand as if to dismiss herself. "I'm just not used to speaking to anyone except Jeff. Sometimes those creepy old motel owners."

"They seem nice enough," Alicia said.

"Anyway, a trip like this makes you a bit attached at the hip."

"I hear that," Alicia said, taking another drag. "How long have you been together?"

"Well, it's not exactly like that," Kelsey said. "We're more partners than lovers."

"Is that meant to be vague too?" Alicia said.

Kelsey dragged again then used her forefinger to slide her sunglasses down her nose so only the top halves of her brown eyes could be seen.

"The two of us," she said, aiming into the former bar. "We both lost someone very dear to us."

Kelsey's hand reached to her neck where a gold necklace hung. Her fingers rubbed its smoothness.

"My sister was Jeff's fiancé," she said. "She went missing years ago. We're still trying to figure out what happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Alicia said.

"Why," Kelsey said, her hand dropping from the necklace. "You sure didn't do it." A pause, she leaned forward. "Or *did* you?"

"Yeah, it's our extremely long con," Alicia said. "I just more mean, we can just let you two do your own thing."

More wind came barreling down the tunnel of the street, enough they had to shift angles in order to guard their smokes.

"Oh, no," Kelsey shouted over the roar. "It's nice to have new company out here."

The sound of crunching glass came from inside the old bar. Alicia took one last deep drag and exhaled with force then frantically waved the smoke away. She deposited the butt onto the sidewalk and ground it with her foot, and in the same practiced motion, pulled a stick of gum from her

pocket. She unwrapped it and chewed with an intensity that made Kelsey smile.

"Gotta keep some secrets," Alicia winked.

"More than a few sometimes," Kelsey said.

The door of what once was Cobb's creaked open. Jeff stepped out with Luke close behind.

"Not much left in there," Luke said, squinting into sunlight.

"Yeah, no shit," Kelsey said.

She began to walk west and the rest of them followed.

They passed an apparition of an old restaurant, the shadow of what once was a grocery store, more spaces that were so dilapidated and buried it was impossible to tell what wares their walls once held.

A soft rumble came from behind them. They turned around and over the distant hill there came a blocky shape that as it approached revealed itself to hold the contours of a white minivan.

"Oh, shit," Jeff said with what seemed like an uncharacteristic giddiness. "C'mon—we got a show to put on!

Chapter Ten

THE NEWLYWED COUPLE FOLLOWED Jeff's lead through a broken storefront nearby. Inside were shattered display cases and empty shelves and hangers that'd been snapped in half and left broken on the floor.

"What exactly are we doing?" Luke asked.

"You'll see," Kelsey responded glumly, taking off her backpack and turning to Alicia. "Men get joy from the simplest of things."

Jeff dropped his own pack and high-stepped through the debris, disappearing into what was once a back room. He returned with a mannequin under each arm that he set upright on the floor, then hustled back for another pair to complete a battered quartet.

"Give them something to wear!" Jeff commanded.

He unbuttoned his flannel shirt and placed

it around the shoulders of the mannequin he'd claimed as his own then ran into a corner to search through a pile of refuse, returning with a dusty ballcap that he set atop the head. He lifted the dressed figure and placed it in what was once the store's front display window.

Luke and Alicia scrambled for tattered clothes themselves. He found sunglasses and a belt, she got a jacket and scarf, and they fitted them on their own mannequins. Kelsey meanwhile simply snatched another cigarette from her backpack pouch.

Jeff ran to the front and peeked furtively out the front door.

"Hurry," he whisper-called.

Kelsey calmly lit another cigarette, took a stone-faced drag, then jammed it between the open fingers of her mannequin's hand.

"Ready," she said.

The faint rumbling sound of the approaching engine echoed against the walls.

"Showtime," Jeff said.

He walked beside his mannequin and lifted its arm so it appeared to be waving then he himself froze in place beside it. The others took the cue. Luke bent down as if making an inverted touchdown call and Alicia dipped her head forward in a slight bow. Kelsey simply draped an arm over her mannequin's shoulder and stared straight ahead.

The minivan crept into view. Inside was a family of four. Dad at the wheel, Mom in the passenger seat dealing with an unwieldy map, son wearing headphones, daughter scrolling relentlessly

through her phone. The minivan slowed until it came to a stop with a slight lurch forward.

"What's going on?" Alicia whispered, her head bowed too low to see the action.

Inside, dad lifted his sunglasses and squinted at this odd display. Luke saw his lips move and the rest of the family stopped what they were doing to turn toward the storefront as well.

"On three," Jeff hissed.

"On three what?" Alicia said.

"One," Jeff said, "two."

"Three!" Kelsey yelled, and lunged forward through the empty window frame, screaming and screeching with her tongue lapping her lips like some soul-thirsty demon.

Jeff began to shout as well, raising his arms in a flailing motion that knocked his mannequin to the floor as he advanced toward the van. Alicia and Luke followed, but before they got to the broken sidewalk outside, the minivan had leapt forward and took off. Smoke billowed from its tires as it sped west out of town.

The four walked out into the dissipating exhaust. The van was already a tiny spot on the horizon.

"That was amazing!" Luke said, still feeling the adrenaline. "How many times have you done that?"

"Just once or twice," Jeff said.

"First time was a disaster," Kelsey said. "Jeff tripped, and these two young girls just laughed at him and snapped photos."

She tried to stifle a chuckle, a snorting motion that triggered Alicia and Luke into a burst of laughter themselves.

"It was like high school all over again," Jeff said, shaking his head.

That instigated another eruption of laughter that seemed like it'd go on forever but only lasted a few seconds or so before it ultimately faded out with a new gust of howling wind.

Kelsey walked back into the store to grab her cigarette, still smoldering between the mannequin's fingers, and took another drag as she strapped on her backpack again. Jeff did the same.

"Shall we continue our tour?" Kelsey said.

They crossed the road to a relatively intact two-story brick building with a flat roof. Jeff gathered them near its cornerstone of white marble into which lettering had been carved:

Malinko, 1926

Luke snapped another quick photo.

"This was the first new building that went up after Route 66 came in," Jeff said. "Before that, the town was just a grouping of homes, but it was this,"—he swept his arm as if to present the two lanes of asphalt—"that justified the expense."

"What were people doing out here before then?" Alicia said.

Jeff smiled.

"Just so happens to be our next stop," he said.

He led them across the street where between the husks of buildings they found a small alleyway filled with broken concrete chunks and sinuous strands of weeds. They climbed carefully over uneven slabs that were once stairs up the

ridge where there was a dirt trail running along the hillside just north of town. It was dotted with skeletal homes long empty save Luther's house at the end with its pink flamingos displayed proudly out front.

They followed a path that continued to steepen as it ascended the hill, and as they climbed a gust of desert air became a whirlwind that picked up sand and pinged tiny crystals against their skin. Jeff grabbed Kelsey's hand and urged them all into a protective carveout in the rock. As they waited out the dust devil, Jeff began telling the history of the Malinko mine.

It concerned a man named Tomislav Malinko. He was a Croat miner who'd come out to California, like so many others, on the promise of golden flecks in the streams. One night in a Calico bar, he heard a tip about this area and found his way out here in the middle of nowhere. He carved at the land until he exposed a glint.

Jeff continued.

Early one morning, Tomislav was descending the ladder deep into his mine when he was betrayed. Another miner he'd hired had, the moonlit night before, climbed down a few rungs to saw off the ladder below. Tomislav fell and died in the hole, and the back-stabbing miner shared news of the tragic accident over drinks before announcing that he was taking the claim as his own. But, before he was off to make his fortune, he declared that the settlement would retain the name of its original founder as tribute.

By the end of Jeff's tale the dust outside had

settled, the wind calmed to a whisper. The four stepped from the rocky overhang and looked from their elevated perspective at the landscape.

Below, Route 66 cut through the slight valley with Main Street's brick structures flanking either side. The sky to the west grew purple and the dropping sun's luminescence highlighted faraway power lines that swayed from spindly towers. Closer by stood the abandoned church in the middle of the pavement teardrop, and just then the green neon of the Malinko Motel sign flicked on with the luring invitation of a bug zapper.

Kelsey reached into her backpack and took out a pair of binoculars. She aimed south, well past the town.

"Anything?" Jeff quietly asked.

"Not yet," Kelsey said.

Alicia and Luke followed their gaze to a cone-like protrusion far in the flat. Its curved edges were dotted with bright green cacti that clung to its sides. Suddenly from within there glowed a light. Soft, faint.

"Now," Kelsey said, and handed the binoculars over to Jeff.

"What's that, a mountain?" Luke squinted toward the cone.

"Not a mountain," Kelsey said, checking her watch. "A meteor crater."

"No way," Luke said.

Luke snapped a few blurry photos from his phone as Kelsey dragged her cigarette. Her jaw was set, nostrils flaring, as she quietly examined the cone, its luminescence brightening the evening

sky like a distant football stadium two towns away. After awhile, with darkness having fallen around them, it was finally time to head back.

Jeff and Kelsey used flashlights to lead them down the steep embankment back to Main, turning them off once they reached the safety of the motel sign's emerald glow. They passed reception and walked through the lot back into their rooms.

Jeff soon returned with a knock on the door and an opened bottle of whiskey. He invited the newlyweds to join them by the fire pit next to the pool, where Kelsey was already stacking logs under the watchful eye of Sam Waterson, who leaned over the fence and offered unsolicited advice with a smile.

"Like a log cabin," he said. "Make it look like a log cabin."

"I know, I know," Kelsey huffed, cigarette dangling from her lips.

She rolled a newspaper and lit its end then stuck it into the pyre's base, where it caught. The flame glowed hot. Splinters of wood sparked into the cooling night.

"I'm man enough to know when I'm not needed anymore," Sam said, with a joking lilt. "Off to bed for me."

He wished them all a good night, with a reminder not to neglect breakfast the next morning.

"The most important meal of the day, if not the night," he said.

Sharp footfalls crunched on the asphalt on his way back to the office where the bell overhead dinged as he entered.

Sam closed the door behind him and twisted shut the blinds. He peeked through a slight partition, looking out toward the fire. Christine approached from behind and stood silently at his side.

The Watersons stared toward the faint laughter coming from the two couples at the pool.

The older man took pulls from the whiskey and draped his lanky arm around the younger man's shoulders. The younger woman pointed to the older woman's necklace, its gold reflecting the flames, then the older woman presented it as a display in her open hands as she detailed its importance.

It was in the shape of an ouroboros, the Watersons by then had learned. It was, as the woman had told them seven days ago, an old family keepsake. Christine would later consult their files to confirm exactly what further significance this held.

Over the next hours, the Watersons watched the four shadows in front of the fire until, the whiskey finally finished, they staggered back toward their separate rooms. For when the guests were finally in bed for the night, it was time for them to go to work.

Chapter Eleven

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Alicia stirred to something approaching consciousness under the coarse bedsheets.

Thud. Thud.

She blinked open her eyes and found moonlight slicing through the back window's parted blinds that cast lines of shadow black across her face. Beyond, the expansive desert and the faraway headlights on the highway.

Noises came from the bathroom—clicks, rattles, scrapes against the tile.

Alicia slowed her breath. Her heart throbbed in her ears. She turned to examine Luke, sleeping peacefully as ever on his own bed.

She pulled back her blanket to set bare feet on carpet and began to silently walk into the bathroom. In the darkness there was the silhouette of a man.

She opened her mouth to scream—until she saw it was only a vertical, clumped crease in the vinyl shower curtain. She gripped it and pulled it aside to make sure.

No one was in there, nothing out of order.

She collected her breath and went to the toilet, dropped her shorts around her ankles, sat down. No point in wasting an opportunity, she thought.

As she was about to let go, a faint sound echoed from the shower. From there, beyond the wall. From Jeff and Kelsey's room.

She stood and leaned towards it. It was a voice, indecipherable but high-pitched. Whiny. She thought it sounded like crying but no, not quite.

Alicia stepped onto the bathtub's cool porcelain and placed an ear up against the tile. There came another sound, this one from outside the room.

Deep. The rumble of a car engine.

She stepped gingerly from the tub then tiptoed through the bedroom past the slumbering Luke, and softly pried open the front blinds. She looked through the slit and was suddenly blinded by a flash of deep red.

The rear red lights of Jeff and Kelsey's Jeep as it pulled away.

It sped past the pool and under the overhang outside reception before turning onto Route 66 and out of sight.

Alicia, still bleary-eyed, walked back to her bed and fell into deep sleep.

Sometime later—however long, she wasn't sure—new brightness awakened her. It came through the gap she'd crinkled in the front blinds.

She staggered to the window and found it still dark outside, but with a fierce glowing orange light coming from the window of the reception office.

She slipped on her shoes and cracked the front door. A rush of cool air forced itself into the room.

"What are you doing?" Luke mumbled from under his pillows.

"Gonna snoop," she said. "Wanna come?"

A moment of hesitation.

"Sure," he said, groggily. "Yeah, absolutely."

They each put on another layer of clothes and walked into the frigid night. The first thing Luke noticed was how Jeff and Kelsey's red Jeep was gone.

"They left," he whispered.

"I already know that," Alicia said. "Catch up."

They hugged the brick wall as they set off to reception until they ran out of real estate and stepped into the parking lot where they were exposed to moonlight. Faint music became audible as they approached the office door.

Alicia peered through a crack in the blinds.

Christine was sitting on a wooden chair holding metal knitting needles that were bringing into existence a light blue quilt that was draped over her legs. The music was coming from the waist-high radio next to her, broadcasting the sound of a big band orchestra.

The tune faded away and was replaced by deep, heaving breaths. Christine abruptly lifted the needlework from her lap and with a strict precision set it nearby on a table.

"It's on," she spoke toward the back.

Out hustled Sam, who wiped his brow and left a streak of black grease mixed with sweat. He took a seat next to Christine and they both stared into the radio's horizontal band of orange light.

"I am the preacher," hissed a voice from the radio. "And I know the darkness that lies in all of our hearts."

Drums boomed, horns blared. Next came a full orchestra through the speakers.

Christine reached into a nearby drawer and pulled out two silver devices which reflected the overhead lights. They were shaped like curled horns. She handed one to Sam and they placed the thin sides into their ears, then aimed the wider ends toward the radio.

"It is time for another midnight tale from The Confessional," spoke a female voice from the radio. "Tonight's episode is being brought to you by Betty's Diner, the squeaky-cleanest food you'll find on Route 66, right there on Main Street. Make sure to bring an empty stomach."

Horns blared as the advertisement ended.

"And now, tonight's tale by the preacher," the female announcer read. "Vote or Die."

Alicia and Luke crouched outside and listened to the show.

That night's heroine was in her late 20s. She'd been planning to go to law school when she received a letter telling her she'd been drafted to serve in a mining camp on the recently-colonized planet of Mars. The country had been sending people there to keep it protected from claims by

other nations, and while it was dangerous work, all survivors received the full honorific title of Mars Warrior when they landed back on Earth.

"Please," the heroine stuttered, a resounding fear in her voice. "I didn't do anyth—"

"Precisely the point," hissed the preacher. "A decade ago, when you were 18, you didn't do anything at all."

Luke and Alicia stole a glance through the blinds. The Watersons grinned at each other with fully exposed teeth, cheeks taut and high. To someone else it may look as though they were in anguish. They leaned in to kiss and their listening horns softly clinked as they did.

"Let us now go to when you made your mistake," the preacher said over the radio. "College."

The rest of the play revolved around three bubbly young girls who spoke about who they were planning to vote for.

"But what did you do instead?" the preacher asked, then in a different pitch. "What did you do? Go ahead, read it."

"I'm... I'm... I'm going to write in 'Whiskey,'" the woman barely got through her sobs.

Alicia turned to Luke and rolled her eyes.

"Laying it on kind of thick," Alicia said.

"I did that once, but with beer," Luke whispered back.

"And because you sat out that vote, the most important election of your lifetime," the preacher hissed, "Article 31.78 passed—which led to you, right in this moment, to being picked by the interplanetary draft. Uh oh..."

A loud sound effect of a grinding machine.

"And unfortunately," the preacher said. "Someone forgot to give your equipment the proper safety inspection."

Christine and Sam turned toward the light of the radio. Their grins expanded and tightened as a new clanking whir grew to an incredible volume. The play's heroine screamed and along with the buzzing it blended into one single cacophony until the noise reached a blaring crescendo.

Through the blinds the newlyweds watched the Watersons bow their heads towards the radio in a benediction of sorts, then began to subtly vibrate in their chairs.

Alicia's own head began to feel light. Her eyesight went cloudy as a new purple aura washed over her vision. And then she felt a sense of new strength, of ecstasy.

She turned to Luke. His eyes were drowsy with that same pleasure.

The announcer returned to close out the night's show, and before the Watersons stirred again in their chairs, Alicia and Luke grabbed each other's arms and staggered under the clear moonlight back to the safety of their room, away from the radio play.

Chapter Twelve

LUKE WOKE FIRST and pulled his arm out from under Alicia's neck.

He rolled off the single bed that they'd fallen into together during the night and staggered off to the bathroom to take a piss. He walked back out with a trail of tiny droplets darkening his shorts to her fully awake and already sitting up, her back nestled on the pillows.

They spoke confused and groggy words about the previous night of half-dreams as they picked up their scattered clothes from the carpet and stuffed them into their bags.

They could only hope that good news was forthcoming about their car.

They opened the front door into the bright of

the new morning. Jeff and Kelsey's Jeep was still gone, but the door to their room was now cracked open. The newlyweds heard a light commotion coming from inside.

Luke gently knocked and it whipped open to reveal Sam. The room behind him was a horrific mess.

The bedsheet was torn and scattered on the carpet, the bedside table knocked over, the lamp cracked in half on the ground below a deep dent against the wall. There was a confetti of plastic and leftover junk food strewn on the floor, and the smell of a repellent cocktail of vomit and shit permeated throughout.

"Oh hey, you two," Sam said cheerfully.

"Hey," Luke said, craning his neck to peer around Sam's profile, into the room.

"What happened?" Alicia asked.

"Damn kids leave rooms like this all the time," Sam said. "They come out here from the city to party, party, party and never clean up after themselves. They think it's all included in the bill. They think that anything goes!"

"They didn't exactly seem like the partying type," Alicia said.

"And weren't exactly kids," said Luke.

"Kids are kids," Sam shrugged.

Behind him deeper in the room they heard a splash of wetness on tile. Christine emerge from the bathroom using a red handkerchief to wipe her brow, then leaned against the doorframe to catch her breath. She huffed in fresh air and smiled faintly at the pair in the doorway, then

turned back in.

"Had themselves an accident in there," Sam said, shaking his head with a wince. "Drugs will do that to a body. Seen it plenty of times before."

Alicia now made her own move to step in past Sam but as she did he shifted his weight to block her as well. She retreated.

"Have any idea where they went off to?" Alicia asked.

"Nope," Sam said. "Car was gone when we woke up. We came in here and saw what they'd done and realized why."

"Well, shit," Luke said.

"They still owe us money for the last week," Sam said.

"That sucks," Alicia said.

She raised up on her toes in an attempt to peer over Sam's shoulder and he rose along with her as if the two were partners in a dance.

"It happens," Sam said.

Their heels both hit the ground.

"Oh," Sam said. "Luther came by. Said he's still waiting on a part from the city, but that it should be here tonight. He'll just need one more day."

A smirk developed on his lips as he watched something approaching disappointment wash over their faces.

"Oh it's not that bad here, is it?" he asked, and then, "Another night's stay I imagine?"

They nodded silently and soon bid the Watersons farewell, returning to their own room to shower and get ready between musings about what actually had happened next door.

If Jeff and Kelsey had showed any signs of hard drug use, they certainly missed them.

An hour later they were again in the back room of the office, being presented with two more pieces of "avocado toasts." Luke kicked himself for forgetting to fib about their dietary restrictions. They choked down their meals and said goodbye on their way to suit up for a morning dip in the pool.

As they floated in the lukewarm water, the newlyweds kept running through the strange, abrupt departure by their neighbors.

"It's so weird for them to leave without saying goodbye," Alicia said, arms dangling over the poolside as she looked toward Jeff and Kelsey's old room.

"You can never tell what people have going on," Luke said floating behind her, face-up, eyes closed to avoid being blinded by the midday sun. "Especially people who'd spend weeks in this shithole on purpose."

High noon approached and they grabbed more snacks from reception and washed off the pool's weak chlorine in their room's shower. Once the sun passed its zenith they set out to roam the dead, empty town once again.

They passed by the old place Luther had named Cobb's bar, then entered the dilapidated store nearby. They were inspecting broken tile and strips of metal from what once must have been diner booths when they heard the rumble of an approaching car.

Alicia rolled her eyes as Luke stood at the window, still as a mannequin. She laughed at him

when the couple in the car didn't notice him at all, just simply kept driving west.

They tried to retrace their steps up the hill to the old mine but took a wrong turn and instead found themselves in a piece of desert overlooking the town that'd been partitioned off by a rusted wrought-iron fence. Inside were a number of tombstones, scattered with no organization, all names and dates weathered away to smooth marble. As darkness fell, they scurried back down toward the motel, its sign again lighting the evening in a green haze.

They walked back into reception just for something to do. Sam was reading a newspaper while Christine continued to knit her quilt.

"Been looking for you two," Sam called as the front door bell chimed. "Luther said your car will all ready for you first thing tomorrow morning. First thing."

"Thank god," Luke muttered.

"That's great to hear," Alicia said over him.

Sam returned to his newspaper. They saw he wore blue rubber gloves and that the paper he held was a brittle yellow that rustled like starched fabric. He noticed their silent curiosity.

"An old Malinko Journal," Sam said, a hint of pride on his face. "We have a bunch in the back. Our archive goes as far back as 1933."

"Awesome," Luke said. "Can we take a look?"

Sam carefully re-folded the paper along its crease and gently set it down the table.

"Would be an absolute delight," he said, standing from his chair. "Follow me."

Sam walked into a back room and flipped a switch. Bright halogens flickered and then snapped on.

It was a small, cramped room with a desk and a chair. Along the far end was a tall set of thin wooden drawers.

"Our town's entire history is all right here," Sam said, nodding toward the drawers.

He pulled one open to its full extent and inside were twin stacks of newspapers headlined **Malinko Journal**.

The top one had a black-and-white photo of a young man with a priest's collar. He stood in the middle of the road, a church towering behind him. The priest had one hand in his back pocket as he waved the other at the camera.

The bold headline read, **Malinko's Newest Place of Worship**

"That was our priest, Reverend Bloom," Sam said, gloved finger hovering above the paper. "One of the main forces here in town."

"Mind if I?" Luke asked, looming closer.

Sam turned back to the desk and opened a different drawer. He took out a box of gloves and the newlyweds each donned a pair. Luke took on the forward rifling role while Alicia maintained a distance over his shoulder.

There was a story about a fight at the county commissioner's over the new interstate. Another front pager covered a car crash that left two tourists dead. Another previewed a new store specializing in crystals that was opening up on Main Street.

"How long y'all been out here?" Alicia asked Sam.

"Bought the place as a retirement place," Sam said. "Been in the city for years, working ourselves to the bone for nothing much to show for it, and finally we wanted a place all our own. Christine came up with the idea of trying our luck on Route 66, and here we are."

"Where were you before?" Alicia pressed.

"San Francisco," Sam said.

"Too many homeless!" Christine shouted from the other room.

They returned to the newspapers. Mysterious lights in the sky, a murder in the next town over, another municipal fight over the proposed highway.

"Ever get bored out here?" Alicia said.

"Why would we get bored?" Christine said, suddenly in the room with them.

She spoke in a monotone one could easily mistake for sternness.

"We have our guests, we have our hobbies. We have our roles, we have our duties," Christine said. "We know where we fit in, and where our place is. And our place is here."

A silence simmered. Sam broke into a loud guffaw.

"Sorry, we're just a little on edge after this morning," Sam said. "After what those damned kids did. Treating our property like their own personal dump. But, like my lovely wife said, it's good to have hobbies. I have my history project, she has her quilts."

Christine lifted her hands and showed off her latest design. A yellow-and-blue cross-stitch with a bird hovering over the curved sign that welcomed folks to Malinko. This interpretation was noticably free of any bullet holes.

"It's beautiful," Alicia said.

"We do have our roles," Christine nodded in agreement. "We do have our duties."

"It's important to have duties, to have plans," Sam said, then winked to Alicia. "You know what they say—no plan, trash can."

Alicia felt a cold fear spread outward from the middle of her spine.

She breathed deeply and was suddenly extremely aware of her facial expressions. She forced a smile back and Luke saw the protuberance of her forehead as her ears pulled back. He'd seen her like this before, the last instance being at a friend't birthday party when said friend's ex happened to stroll in through that same bar's entrance expected.

"And we have our music, too," Christine said, nodding to the reception room where the radio was broadcasting a soft instrumental tune. "And at night, we have our stories. It's nice to have our stories."

Christine folded up her quilt and the conversation by then had lost momentum. The newlyweds excused themselves. They still had a long drive ahead of them tomorrow, Luke explained. They had to get some rest.

"A whole new life awaits you both," Christine said. "Godspeed."

The bell above the reception door chimed as they left and crossed the lot back into their room. They entered and Alicia quickly strode to the room's radio to turn it full blast, until all sound was drowned by the broadcast's big band horns.

"Leash, what's wr—" was all Luke got out.

She put a finger to his lips then whispered in his ear.

"Our room is bugged."

Chapter Thirteen

"I CAN'T FUCKING BELIEVE YOU!" Luke shouted. "What the fuck are you trying to say?"

"Something has to change!" Alicia shouted back. "I can't keep doing this. I can't."

Luke tightly griped his hands as he paced the room with increasing anger. Alicia walked to the bed and plopped down in exhaustion before she clasped her hands to her face and began to sob again. He felt nothing as he watched her tears.

"You have to have a plan, or this isn't going to work out," she trailed off, her voice barely audible, but just enough. "I can't keep doing this."

"Goddamnit!" he shouted.

He spun around and stormed into the bathroom. Alicia heard the door slam then his balled-fist strike the wall.

"Stop it!" Alicia screamed. "Stop it!"

A few minutes of simmering silence later and she heard the door creak back open, then his footsteps across the room's carpeting before she felt his body sink into the bed next to her. She tried but failed to stifle her sobs. After a few deep breaths he finally spoke.

"What do you want from me?" he said.

"I don't know," she looked at the clock.

It was one minute to midnight.

"I just—" she started. "I need some space to think."

She rose from the bed and walked outside, letting the door slam in her wake.

Luke huffed for a moment then stood and walked to the drawer. He unlatched the hutch. The curved grill of the old radio inside caught the lamplight in such a way that it looked like the fender of a car bearing down from behind.

He flipped the switch and the room flooded with orchestral music that soon faded into silence to be replaced by heavy breathing in the distance that grew near, then closer and more frantic, until—

"I am the preacher," the voice on the radio hissed. "And I know the darkness that lies in all of our hearts."

Luke walked back into the bathroom and shut the door. He sat on the tub's cool edge of the bathtub and waited.

Outside, Alicia paced the pavement while keeping an eye on the reception office across the lot.

Through open blinds, Alicia watched Christine rock in her chair and call to the back room, where out waltzed Sam wearing a fresh grin on his face and a pointed raise in his eyebrow. He made a low whistling sound that cascaded through the window, then waved his hand and blew on his fingers as if they'd just been singed by a stove. She shook her head with a smirk that Alicia read as "men always find pleasures in the simplest of things." He took his seat next to Christine and they plugged in their tin ear horns and aimed at the radio.

The Watersons would be busy with their show for the next while. It was time for the newlyweds to get moving.

They'd hatched their plan over scraps of paper that they'd traded back and forth under a blanket while pretending to fool around.

With a few short notes Alicia laid out why she believed their room was bugged, and if that was the case, how they might be under all sorts of different surveillance. Microphones, hidden cameras, electronic tripwires on the doors to let their watchers know if they were coming or going. They quickly settled on snooping around during the only time when they knew the Watersons would be occupied. The idea of a fake fight came natural.

Alicia slunk from the parking lot to the property edge, out where paving met desert. She crept around the back of the building and found a single narrow band of light shining from their own room's back window. She approached slowly, mindful of her footfalls on the rocks, until she was close enough to hear the radio play.

"Ye- ye- yes, I'm the manager," a whimpering voice said over the broadcast. "Ca-can I help you?"

Alicia raised on her tiptoes and peered inside the window. She could hear the soft patter of Luke's feet anxiously tapping on the bathroom tile. She ducked back down and crept to the next window over, leading into the rear of Jeff and Kelsey's old room. It was still cracked open.

She bent and found a stone in the scrub then dropped it for an even sharper one that she used to carve a rip through the window's screen, then tore open a gap large enough for her hand and reached inside to catch a corner and push it from its frame. She heard it faintly rattle against the carpeting inside, and slowly and painfully, with the crease of the bottom ledge digging painfully into her stomach, she worked her small frame through the opening.

"Here we go," she muttered, and pulled herself through.

Her outstretched hands caught her fall and slowly stood up in the surrounding gray.

She found a room similar in layout to theirs next door, this one now fully refreshed, clean and organized for the next guest.

She scampered between the twin beds and opened the nightstand drawer. Nothing. She crawled across the room to the cabinet, where inside there was an old radio similar to the one in their room. She blindly ran her fingers over its contours but found only polished smoothness.

She crept into the bathroom and on her phone flashlight's third sweep across the tiles she found

a soft reflective glint near the back wall. She tilted her head until it was flush against the bathtub's cool side, but still, she couldn't see. She stretched a hand behind the toilet and finally felt metal then snatched it back.

It was Kelsey's gold necklace, the ouroboros, its latch snapped in half. Under her phone flashlight she saw there was a streak of dried blood splashed across it.

A loud and terrified scream vibrated through the wall.

Alicia felt a woozy wave hit her then heard a watery kerplunk as the necklace plunged into the toilet.

"Shit," she muttered, coming back to her senses.

Then came three pounding knocks on the bathroom wall.

It was the signal they'd worked out so Luke could tell her when the radio show was nearly over, when the Watersons would be back at their presumed posts of surveillance.

Alicia dipped her hand into the toilet water and straightened out her fingers to plunge deeper into the smooth hole, and at the very edge of her fingertips, she felt it. Carefully, she rolled it up the porcelain using her other hand to collect it, then stuffed it in her pocket.

She bolted from the bathroom and climbed back through the screenless rear window, falling forward again onto her hands, this time onto desert sand where small rocks scraped her palms as she brought her feet down slowly behind her. She stood and stared at the moon as she waited for the

strange dizziness from presumably her handstand to dissipate.

"This concludes another midnight tale from The Confessional," said the female narrator.

But then, Alicia realized that she wasn't hearing the broadcast from their room, but from somewhere else behind her.

From a different room in the motel row.

She turned and found another open window with a faint trail of soft, golden light casting on the desert floor. She hugged the wall and kept her footsteps soft, crouching on approach, then slowly rising to peek inside.

Within the glow sat a lone slumped figure in a chair that faced the radio. He breathed heavily and slowly as gentle spastic motions quivered through his forearms and twinkled his fingers.

The broadcast played the soft sounds of the orchestra, and the figure shuffled in the chair as if waking from a dream. He stood, showing off his entire tall frame, and lurched forward to switch off the radio, then stretched his arms above his head with a soft exhale. He flipped on the room's lights and in their harsh glow she saw the face of Luther the mechanic.

From the dresser top he retrieved a set of thick-rimmed glasses that he set on his nose, then pulled out a small piece of candy from the front pocket of his overalls. He unwrapped it and tossed it into his gaping mouth then all at once spun to face the window.

Alicia ducked down, but knew he must have seen her.

She took in a deep breath and watched the band of amber light became enveloped by dark shadow as Luther peered through the window above her.

She leaned her back against the wall and tucked her feet in to keep every inch of her body from his sightline but still she heard him looming above, where the moonlight turned Luther's hot breath into white puffs that sputtered through the thin crack in the window out into the cool desert air. The smell of peppermint wafted by her nose.

She clasped her hand over her mouth to keep mist from escaping into his field of vision. And then she heard more movement above her, and the black shadow consuming the room's light disappeared as Luther retreated back into the room.

Alicia twisted her body and slowly stood upright to peek inside.

Luther was there, glaring right back.

She blanched in anticipation, but he didn't move. He simply grinned.

But then his face dropped into a blank nothingness. Then, once more, a bright new smile flashed across face before it again sagged into a stoic pose.

He was examining his own reflection in the window, Alicia realized.

Luther brought a hand to his forehead and pulled his face taut—it looked shiny and thin like a burn victim. He used his fingertips to examine the skin near the top of his ear, then pinched a flap and lifted it further. His hair came undone and he twisted his head to expose new flesh under his wig.

Alicia saw a large gash on Luther's scalp. It was coagulated but somehow fresh.

He placed a finger on the wound. Testing it, wincing as he did, and then set the wig back into its proper position to cover his disfigurement. He walked back toward the bed.

Luther bent over and when he stood again within his hand he carried a steel pipe covered in a dark red that gave the spikes running up and down its length a rusty hue. He brought it to the lamp for inspection and upon discovery unwound a long strand of hair with bits of gory viscera clinging to its side. He let it fall to the carpet.

He reached to his belt and Alicia heard a jangling noise as he withdrew a keychain. He examined them, one by one.

Alicia hustled back to their room's rear window.

Luke was now sitting on the bed, staring at the front door, as if urging her to come back. She softly knocked on the glass to get his attention and it took him a moment to figure where the sound came from, but when he did, he saw her face and his smile brightened into a glow.

"What are you doing?" he said, a wooziness to his delivery, strange bliss behind his eyes.

"You have to get out of there now," she said. "Luther is coming."

"What does that mean?" Luke said, new seriousness in his voice.

She reached into her pocket and held up Kelsey's bloody necklace.

"We're in big trouble," she said.

They both heard a loud jangle coming from outside the front door. The sound of a key turning in the lock.

"What do I do, Leash?" Luke hissed through the back window, but when he turned, she was gone.

Gravel crunched in her wake. Then came the sound of the front door lock disengaging.

Luke scanned the room for other options. The back window was too small, the bathroom door too skinny to guard against whatever was coming, the space under the bed too obvious.

The knob turned and the door cracked open. Luke ran to it and kicked it shut and he could hear a hefty weight crumple onto the concrete outside. He pressed a shoulder against the door and twisted the deadbolt but the metal spun loosely, the bolt itself already removed.

He spun and set his back to the door and lifted a foot against the dresser for leverage. Just as he got into position he felt a violent shudder behind. His foot slipped and lost friction and fell to the carpeting. The door began to inch forward into the room.

Luke felt thick, greasy fingers pawing his shoulder, ripping his t-shirt.

"What the fuck?" he tried.

Only grunts and whispers through the slit.

Luke mentally counted to something near three and sprinted to the bathroom to at least give him some time—but two steps later, he was falling forward in the air as a muscular hand gripped his ankle.

Luke reached for something, anything. His hands found the open hutch where the radio was still playing a soft instrumental waltz and he

angled himself enough to kick off the grasp then reach along the radio's smooth sides to yank off its top, splintering wood as he tore a cord and silenced the music.

He spun and found the bulky figure face-down on the floor, its hand gripping a spiked pipe that tore trails into the carpet as it tried to rise. The figure set an empty hand on the ground and with unnerving speed leapt up into a crouch.

Luke found his own reflected face in Luther's thick glasses, and behind them, blank and wide eyes.

"Hey, asshole!" Alicia screamed behind him.

Luther turned to the noise—and when he did, Luke brought the piece of radio up over his head and slammed its sharp edge down against the giant mass in front of him, feeling a concussive impact in his hands then a squelchy crunch as shards of antique wood and white flecks of skull sprinkled onto the carpet.

The mechanic heaved one more desperate breath, then was still.

Alicia ran through the door, catching her breath.

"Leash, what the fuck!" Luke said, then more quietly. "Did I just kill this guy?"

"We have to go," Alicia said. "Now."

Chapter Fourteen

LUKE LOOKED DOWN AT HIS HAND that still held chunks of radio. On one corner hung a piece of gristle like chicken flesh that he soon realized was Luther's torn scalp. He let it fall with a thump muffled by the carpeting.

"Did I just kill him?" he said. "Did I just kill him, Leash?"

"He was going to kill you," she said. "Kill us. Just like he killed them."

"What does that mean?" Luke said.

She held up her fist.

Kelsey's golden ouroboros, spattered with blood, spinning in her grip.

"What are you showing me?"

"Kelsey and Jeff!" Alicia said. "He killed Kelsey and Jeff!"

His eyes scanned the room and finally returned to Luther's body.

The side of his face was smashed against the carpet in a grotesque pose. A corner of white paper poked out from his back packet. Luke pulled it out. An envelope.

Inside were the keys to their car and a note.

"All fixed!" it read.

"What did I just do, Leash?" Luke exhaled. "What the fuck did I do?"

A rustle outside. They walked to the open door and across the lot saw the blinds to the reception office flatten violently.

"Let's go," Alicia said.

She took Luke's hand and led him from Luther's body then from the parking lot lights into the darkness behind the building. They slipped into the shadows as they heard the metallic groan of the office door then a flurry of sprinting footsteps, shockingly fast, crossing the lot.

Alicia and Luke waited for the sounds to die down then tiptoed through the bramblebush behind the motel.

"They killed *her*, at least," Alicia whispered, mostly to herself, doing calculations in her head. "I think."

Luke twisted her around so she had to face him.

"What do you mean, think?"

She put a finger to her lips. Luke let the loud thuds in his temples calm until he was able to hear the desert again.

Faint voices. Nearby. From the back window of their room.

Sam and Christine.

The newlyweds crept up to listen.

"Got 'em good," Sam said, matter-of-factly. "Skull fracture, maybe brain damage. Might have a shot if we get him back to the shop right quick."

"Where d'ya suppose they ran off to?" Christine said.

"Into town, like all the others," Sam said. "We've been through this kind of thing before, mama."

"True enough, true enough," Christine said. "Well, let's grab him while he's still warm."

The newlyweds heard a shuffling, then the room's light blinked off, the door slammed shut. Alicia took Luke's hand again and they crept through the stony desert until they reached the building's corner, where they peeked their heads around the side.

The two elderly hoteliers were gingerly lifting Luther's hefty body with ease, as if it was an inflatable pool raft, carrying it across the parking lot's entire length and back into reception without any evident strain. Sam took Luther's full weight over his shoulder as Christine opened the door, and the bell chimed overhead as they entered.

"What the fuck is going on, Leash."

Alicia reached into her back pocket and took out Luther's envelope with the car keys.

"Let's go, Luke," she said. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

They heard only the trickling pool filter as they crossed the lot, but as they approached the exit to the complex near reception Sam's voice came through the thin office windows. Alicia felt Luke slow his steps and when she turned around she saw that he'd stopped at a slit in the blinds.

She widened her eyes and shook her head then nodded across the street to Luther's garage. He held up a finger with a look of confused anger on his face then pressed his head against the window.

Sam was in his recliner with a phone resting on his shoulder.

"Got him good," Sam spoke into the receiver. "Gonna be bringing him in hot, so be ready."

Christine's silhouette emerged from the back room. She flicked on the light and Luke saw that somehow her short, meek frame was carrying Luther with only a single arm.

"Let's go," Alicia hissed.

But Luke didn't hear. His full attention was on Christine.

This spindly woman with the bulky limp body cradled under her elbow set a hand against the metal drawers that contained the town's old newspaper archive. With practiced ease she shifted the drawers from their base, revealing a trapdoor.

"He's on the way," Sam spoke into the phone then hung up.

Christine lifted Luther in one easy motion and dropped him down into the newly opened space.

Luke leaned to get a better view and his forehead thudded against the glass.

"Shit," he whispered.

A massive boom came from the office as the front window was blown out, raining sprinkles of broken glass on top of his head.

"Shit!" he screamed, ducking into a crouch.

Alicia had already crossed the intersection and he sprinted to her. Behind him there erupted

another twinkling explosion as another office window was shot out.

Luke caught up to Alicia and they ducked behind the garage's twin gas pumps, out of the office's line of sight.

"Hope it was worth it," she said.

"Now's not the time," he spat back.

She lifted her eyes just over the pump's top curve and saw silhouettes in the office window, then a series of muzzle flashes. Tinny pings in stereo ricocheted off the metal of the pumps and the garage door behind them.

They found that the garage door was open at the bottom, a crack just wide enough for them to crawl through. They counted to an awkward three then bolted across the gap as another barrage of gunshots boomed through the vacant night. They went down on their bellies and slid underneath the door, and there was the Civic, immobile in the dark.

They hopped in, Luke in the driver's seat. Alicia tossed him the keys and he sparked the ignition. For a moment, the engine sputtered—but after what felt like forever, but it finally caught and purred to life. Big band music came blasting from the radio.

"You ready?" he asked.

She responded with a glare, Luke slammed the gas.

The car shot through the tall garage door, ripping it from its frame. It fell with a deafening crunch as it smashed into the pumps and fumes of gasoline blew through the Civic.

The bullets continued to ricochet off the pumps and for a moment Luke was sure that one would spark and their story would end here in the middle of nowhere, California—but then, the Civic peeled out onto the pavement of Route 66 and they were off.

They sped under the flashing yellow spotlight and the green haze of the motel's neon, then past the old and dead storefronts of Malinko into the shadows from the overhung balconies that obscured the pale of the full moon.

He let his foot off the gas and listened to hear if the gunshots had stopped, and when he discovered that they were no longer sounding, he let his foot slide off the gas some more and the car lurched into a slow crawl.

"What are you doing?" Alicia said. "Go! Go!"

He turned to her.

"Did I kill that guy, Leash?"

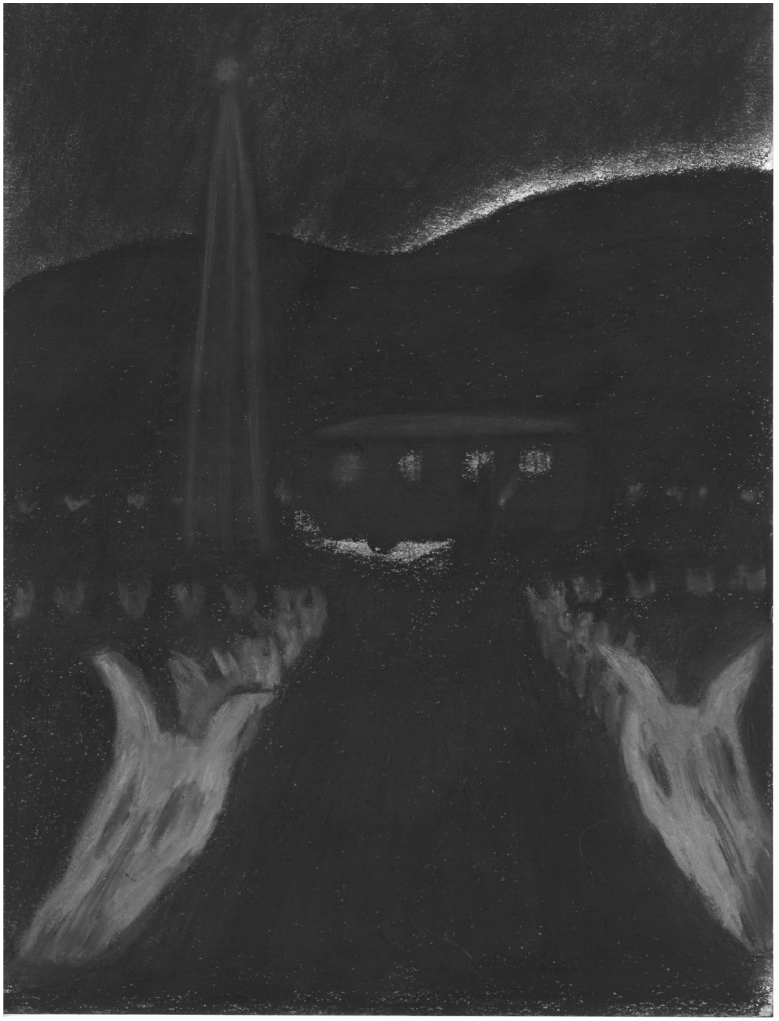
Alicia rolled her eyes, then looked ahead and screamed.

In the headlights of the Civic there in the middle of the road stood Christine wearing a strange look on her face. Peaceful and resolute.

She lifted her hands and smashed closed fists against the hood of the car, leaving two massive dents, as if she thought she could physically stop their passage with her own brute force alone. Alicia stretched her leg and stomped onto Luke's foot. The Civic shot forward.

Christine's body suddenly disappeared from the headlights and they heard a disgusting crunch under the front wheels.

The car rose then fell, then rose again with another ghastly loud splintering, before rubber once more met Route 66 pavement and they shot forward, past the teardrop traffic pattern at the edge of town, and off into the western night.



Part III
The Search

Chapter Fifteen

WELL PAST MIDNIGHT THEY SPED DOWN THE BLACKTOP OF SIXTY-SIX as it wound like a rippling sidewinder sliding across smooth desert sand. It was clear of any traffic on all sides no matter how fierce they kept their roving surveillance.

The road angled slightly right and in the gap between the hills there appeared glowing reds that hovered in pairs like devils eyes. The rear lights of trucks passing by on Interstate-40. Luke gunned it and Alicia once again spun to see if they were being trailed but found only a gray moonlit haze.

Ahead there came a cloud of bright white filtered in dusty air. A billboard.

Generations of advertisements hung in a tattered patchwork. A lot "priced to move" in Seligman. A roadside attraction in Winona. Remnants of a legal advisory to the citizenry

of Amarillo about a class action lawsuit regarding asbestos. Below the billboard sat the skeletal remains of an old wooden shack, and beyond that, the highway.

They reached the on-ramp and merged into the rapid pace of night semis adorned with glistening wheel spikes and front cabins that looked painted a yawning black. After a mile the car's right side shivered with a seismic tremble.

"What's wrong?" Alicia asked.

"I thin—" Luke began, and the car's back window exploded, sending shards of glass twinkling into the hatchback.

They ducked in their seats and waited for a second gunshot—nothing came.

In its place there was only a sickening, repetitive thud from the back. Luke began to slow.

"What are you doing!" Alicia asked, hands outstretched against the dashboard to help her brace against the deceleration.

"We have a flat," Luke said, and the car suddenly jerked again.

Alicia consulted the side mirror and watched their rear tire, now separated from the frame, bounce and roll behind them.

"Good news—we don't have a flat anymore," she said.

The car's momentum was soon lost as they heard the screech of sparking metal dragging against the concrete. Luke twisted the wheel toward the highway shoulder and slammed on the brakes. Trucks continued whizzing by, each rattling the parked car with waves of wind.

Luke unbuckled and pushed open the door, Alicia grabbed his forearm. She didn't have to ask, he didn't have to answer. He nodded solemnly then escaped out and crept around back.

The wheel was gone, the rear underside shredded. The bumper hung from one side like a fretful frown, a freckled clump of bullet holes along its sides. Luke turned on his phone's light to examine the axle. It looked intact.

He walked to Alicia's window, she rolled it down.

"One of those bullets must have dislodged the wheel," Luke said. "Gnarled but I think we just need a tire."

"So, what do we do?"

Luke looked up and in the distance saw hazy light from an outpost ahead.

"Don't have much choice, babe," he said.

Alicia twisted Kelsey's ouroboros necklace in her hand as she thought about the options then laced the gold around her own neck, opened the door, and followed him outside. They headed toward the light.

They went about a mile on the highway's shoulder in silence except the white noise hiss of gravel crunching under their feet. Whenever a new semi approached they detoured onto the chunks of crab grass that'd sprouted through the sand and waited for it to pass.

"Leash..." Luke began once or twice during these interludes, each time his voice overtaken by another truck shockwave and the thought drifted away.

They came upon a massive 18-pump gas station and hiked up the slight slope into its bright halogens. The pumps were empty save a white Chevrolet with a nozzle in the tank. Leaning against the trunk was a tall, thin man in a dirt-covered suit and reflective sunglasses. He smirked as they approached.

"If you don't mind my saying, you two seem a little worse for wear," the man said, his voice carrying with perfect clarity through the resonant hum of the passing traffic.

"Had a little accident," Luke said. "Tire issue."

"Hope it wasn't anything too serious," the man said. "Can be treacherous on these roads."

"Could've been worse," Luke said, then felt Alicia's hand squeeze his own, fiercely. He saw her eyes wide with vague fear and urgency. "All we need is a spare."

"Red inside will get you fitted just right," the man said, then opened his mouth in the seeming pantomime of a smile exposing two rows of smooth teeth so white they nearly made the newlyweds squint.

The nozzle clicked. The Chevy rocked as the man lifted himself off the trunk.

"Good luck to you both," the man said, then climbed into his Chevy, slammed the door, and peeled off heading west.

"What was that about?" Luke asked Alicia, massaging the outside of his hand.

"I don't know," she said. "Just didn't like his vibe."

The newlyweds walked through whirring

automatic doors into glare. Luke went to the register and behind it found a tanned, tattooed man with mastiff cheeks that drooped past his mouth He was slumped at the desk watching videos on his phone. The front of his shirt read *Red* in cursive stitching.

"What's up?" he said without looking up.

Luke detailed their troubles and Red let out a weary grunt. He said he'd be a few minutes in back and disappeared behind a door.

The newlyweds passed time ambling through the aisles, grabbing jerky and granola with no particular goal other than general sustenance. They tossed them all into the plastic basket that hung from Luke's elbow. Alicia got to a rack of old CDs and spun it, plucking out one that she'd remembered from high school and setting it near the register.

Through the back door they heard the sound of iron rattling on concrete then Red hissing "shit." The door flung open. "Gonna be another few," he said. The door shut again.

They walked through the whoosh of the automatic entrance back outside, and sat side by side at a metal table in a landscape of stones that held squat tins filled to their brims with cigarette butts. Luke leaned over the table.

"Leash, do you think he's dead?" he said. "Do you think *she's* dead?"

The question hung in the air.

"Leash?"

"Here's what I think," Alicia said, taking his hand. "Maybe they don't want cops messing with

whatever creepy shit they had going on."

Luke nodded.

"And maybe he survived, and maybe she did, but that's something we can't know without other information," she said. "It's a black hole. They attacked us, we defended ourselves, the rest of it happened. So, what do we do, what do we do, what do we do…"

Alicia's hand crept to Kelsey's necklace. Her fingers circled the ravenous snake.

"We put this behind us, that's what we do," she said, then nodded with new intent. "If police pull us over for the bullet holes, we tell them kids took potshots when we went through a town a while back, but we forget the name."

"And if they come next month asking about the murders of a mechanic and the owner of a small motel in a Route 66 town called Malinko?" Luke asked.

"We'll have to cross that when we get there," she said, hands falling from the necklace. "In the meantime, we go to Los Angeles, get settled. We get jobs, then our own place, then go to the beach. A lot." She reached over to rub the back of his neck. "We buy overpriced cocktails and spot celebrities at grocery stores."

"What else?" he urged, opening his arms and pulling her close.

"We save money for a small, single-story house," she whispered. "We paint one wall a deep scarlet red, convert the garage into a home office, and host parties in our backyard under Christmas lights. We get a dog, too."

"Maybe two," he said.

"Two sounds about right," she agreed.

He smiled and squeezed her and they fell into each other's breath. They let their arms cascade down, each still holding the other's hands, but after a while, they finally released.

The sun's first rays came over the eastern hills. They heard the wheeze of the gas station's doors and saw Red coming out.

"Need a hand," he said, and Luke stepped from the table with a departing kiss on Alicia's forehead then followed him inside.

She looked again to the east and watched the cascade of yellow shades as the sun began its rise. But there was something off about it, Alicia felt. It seemed too early, too soon to start the new day. Yet here it was.

And then, along that same eastern horizon, came a pair of amber headlights that roved the highway's winding curves. They seemed to get a mile closer with every breath. The car ducked behind a hill and when it crested she saw it was again that white Chevy Bel-Air.

She looked through the glass of the station doors to Luke and the attendant struggling with something, she couldn't make it out from here. When she turned around again, the Bel-Air had closed the gap entirely, now pulling into the station.

The door spring open and out stepped that tall man from before with the dirty suit and the dark sunglasses and the perfect rows of brilliant white teeth.

He walked with speedy, powerful intent toward Alicia.

"Luke," she tried, but found that her voice no longer worked.

The man never broke stride until he was at a distance where his open mouth revealed that his teeth had sharpened to points. He aimed a crooked finger as he smiled.

"You've been a bad girl," the man said, and his voice sounded coarse and fragmented, almost like radio static. "You've been neglecting your duty."

"Luke," she tried again, still nothing.

"Your duty," he hissed in a whisper as he was now fully upon her, his icy cold fist wrapped around her neck. Alicia smelled sulfur. "You have been neglecting your role."

He leaned forward and through the reflection in his sunglasses Alicia saw someone else. Someone besides herself. An older woman with long black hair down over her shoulders and a crooked nose that seemed to protrude out far enough to nearly strike the man's glasses.

The woman stared blankly.

"It is time, darling," this woman said through the reflection, as she always did right now on cue, this swerve into nightmare becoming more and more frequent.

*

COATED IN SWEAT, Alicia reached across the bed to feel the cool of the empty side. She spun

upward and faced the dimpled ceiling of the Santa Monica two-bedroom that they used to share. It was painted with horizontal lines of moonlight cast from the Los Angeles sky.

It was that dream again.

Luke at the wheel. The flat tire. The gas station. That thin man. That woman telling her it was time.

She reached to her neck and felt the gold ouroboros that hung around her neck, even now, years after she had found it, years after Malinko.

Chapter Sixteen

THE BREAK-UP HAD BEEN BREWING for awhile, they'd both known, maybe even as far back as that cross-country trip from Chicago to Los Angeles with that notable layover on Route 66.

Maybe even before, she admitted to herself now and then. Maybe it was in Chicago where they'd both begun to build up, brick by brick, their walls of resentments and disgust at the cloying quirks they'd once found attractive.

But it wasn't until she returned home one day to a box of rotten fish in the dining room corner that sealed it.

It was still the pandemic back then and they'd been working from home. Well, she'd been working, now in year two at an analyst position in the new marketing firm that specialized in tech

consulting. Whatever that meant.

In the meanwhile, Luke's combination of freelance one-off gigs had taken on a similar flavor to what it had been in Chicago—on-set craft services, PA'ing, days as a background actor, busboy. But when they were put on indefinite hold as the virus continued its cross-country spread, he'd filled his newly open time with video gaming that took up enough bandwidth to throttle her thrice-daily Zoom check-ins that would stagger, freeze, drop entirely.

It must have been during one of these all-day gaming sessions while she was locked away in what they'd call her office when he'd heard the doorbell ring and left the game long enough to grab from the delivery driver their monthly box of Alaskan frozen fish, something she'd signed up for months back, she said to avoid grocery store contamination but really just for something to do, a way to spend money. And after he brought in the box, he must've simply kicked it into the corner. Three days later, coming back from her nightly jog to the pier and back, her sense of smell must have cleared with the ocean spray so that when she walked through the door she was hit with a stench. It took them half an hour to find it under a pile of blankets he'd casually tossed on the ground after another night of sleeping on the couch.

"I'm sorry..." he said.

"Why did this happen," she started, and in that moment she knew the result of the fight, as if she saw the predestined contours of a train on tracks weaving through the crevices of a mountain range.

"I said I'm sorry," he said again.

"Why, why, why, why," she said.

He stormed from the living room and slammed the bedroom door and through the wood she heard the sound of his fist boom against the wall.

"Sorry is not good enough," she spoke to the closed door. "Why did this happen?"

She stewed as he rummaged through the bedroom, and knew she had one chance left, that when he opened the door she could quash it all with a look of understanding, with arms extended out, but when the door opened she simply stood aside as he stormed through the living room then out the front door. He called the next day with new sternness in his voice and announced he was staying on George's couch, that he'd be back later to pick up the rest of his things, he wasn't sure when.

This was years ago.

It'd been aiming down this path awhile, they both knew. They hadn't gone on a proper date in months, they'd quit having sex altogether, and even when they kissed goodnight or good morning or goodbye, those perfunctory acts that give relationships shape, it was with dry and stiff lips.

It was really never the same after Malinko. But then again, how could it be.

She'd lost touch with Luke over the years, the common erosion that occurs when two people on the same path for so long split at some fork to diverge away. She caught glimpses enough on social media to know he still lived in Los Angeles, but it wasn't clear where. Somewhere east. And

it seemed like he had a new girlfriend, although those facts were similarly muddled. He hadn't posted with the same frequency as before, back when they were together.

Alicia laid in bed. That woman's grinning face from her dream still appearing between the strips of shadow painted on the ceiling from the street lamp and the cracked window slats. If the past was any indication she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep for another few hours, so she sat up.

The clock read **12:05**. Her bedroom walls were barren of anything except the lone mark from Luke's fist and the dreamcatcher her Aunt Betty had gotten them as a housewarming gift once they'd found the apartment that was to be their own.

She stepped from the bed and walked into the kitchen to the sink, turning on the faucet and pulling her blonde hair—now uniform in color, the strip of pink long grown out—back over a shoulder. She dipped her head at a side angle to gulp water, wiped her mouth, and walked down the dimly-lit hallway into the second bedroom slash home office which, after Luke's departure, she'd remodeled.

She flipped the switch and the lightbulb near the door illuminated the mass of pages and photos and maps that she had collected and taped up.

There were print-outs of Malinko history she'd swiped from Wikipedia, a short history regarding its apocryphal founding by the gold miner and then a disputed claim that it has been "uninhabited since at least 1988" with a citation linking to a

dead page by a local newspaper that'd folded long ago. There was a short blog post on "Weird Route 66" that felt more SEO placeholder than anything next to an image from a digitized copy of the Malinko Journal with a black-and-white photo of a car's frame accordion'd into the town's church but the copy too blurry to read.

In the corner of the room sat the roll-top desk they'd gotten from the Rose Bowl thrift market. She opened a drawer and pulled out the pack of cigarettes she still felt she needed to hide. She cracked a window and struck her lighter and her flame cast flickering orange on the first photo along the next wall.

It was a blown-up print-out of the "Welcome to Malinko" sign. Pixelated, but you could still make out the bullet holes.

The remaining three walls were covered from ceiling-to-floor in photos she'd taken from Google Maps, spending those long nights when she couldn't get back to sleep pivoting her cursor the least further bit along that stretch of Route 66, snapping a screenshot, and printing it out to complete the puzzle. Now when she paced the room, she was surrounded once again by the decrepit brick structures that constituted the town's Main Street.

She inhaled and wafted smoke against the image of the clothing shop where they'd played Jeff's prank with the mannequins. It had been so long ago now that she'd forgotten the color of the minivan but she still remembered their faces.

A few steps forward and there was the broken

door that led into what was once Cobb's Bar, where the whole town used to get together. Past a strip of duct tape she'd set on the floor to indicate the eastern intersection there was Luther's garage, and there was the motel.

Where they'd stayed those strange nights in a strange nowhere. Where they were attacked, where they fought back. Where they heard that radio show. Where the two of them—her and Luke—seemed to be the most in-sync with one another that they'd ever been.

She finished her cigarette and rolled up the desk's dimpled top. Inside was an old laptop she kept around for one function only.

She turned it on and logged onto a website used to geolocate and listen to radio broadcasts from around the world. She zoomed again into that patch of desert near the California border then turned up the computer's volume and set the site to scan.

She pulled the metal chair from the desk and set it in the room's center. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply as she listened to the roving static and began to remember what had happened out there, or got close to it at least, trying to figure out what she'd missed, where she'd made a mistake. It was the only way Alicia had found that she could put herself back to sleep.

She heard her phone vibrate through the wall and her eyes popped open. Before she even read the blue light of the caller ID, she knew it was him.

"Hey there," she said.

"Hey Leash," Luke said. "Was hoping you'd be up."

She sat on the bed and examined her ceiling, wondering if the woman's face would appear. Or if she was actually awake this time.

"I got a message tonight," he said, and her face went red. "It was from Jeff. Yeah, that Jeff."

Her hand crept up to her throat.

"It said—check Kelsey's necklace," Luke said.

Alicia's fingertips felt the gold of the ouroboros that hung from her neck.

Chapter Seventeen

THEY'D DECIDED TO MEET AT A DINER in a demilitarized zone between her place in Santa Monica and his cramped studio in Silver Lake.

She got there first and took a seat at the counter, realizing that a booth made more sense for their interaction, but admitting to herself that she needed access to the chrome reflection beyond to make sure that her shirt fit properly, that her hair wasn't out of place, that she didn't look as though she hasn't slept more than 15 minutes a night for the past few months.

The bell over the diner's front door chimed and she twisted on her stool. It was an old couple, the man holding the door open with an elbow for the woman who took short, painful steps as if she was recovering from an injury. She spun back to her reflection.

The waitress came by with the pot of steaming coffee and topped off Alicia's mug. As she waited

for it to cool she thought about the last time she'd seen Luke.

It was a year ago, at least. A holiday party in Van Nuys.

It was at some friends, one of those couples who were true mutuals, who couldn't claim either of them as their own, and with enough time since the break-up—by then, a year and change—the popular consensus was that they'd be far enough along in their emotional evolutions to at least be able to smile through inevitably bumping into one other every now and then.

But when she saw him, a new beard and hair down to his shoulders, she felt hot fire in her cheeks and hoped it was dark enough under the clear night sky that he wouldn't notice.

"Hey, Alicia," he'd said.

"Hey," she said back, her eyes focused on his forehead.

She couldn't remember what they'd spoken about. "How they were," a new TV show, work, gossip about old neighbors or Chicago friends. Later, when she went over it in her head before bed, it was a blur.

The diner's bell rang again and Alicia swallowed, turned. It was a young man who scanned the room behind thick glasses until he found a similarly-bespectacled man who waved him over.

"What can I do for you, honey?" the waitress said to Alicia.

She looked at her watch. Five minutes until they were scheduled to meet up. In retrospect, she'd gotten there a lot earlier than she'd needed.

"Give me a few more minutes, that's all," Alicia said. "He should be here soon."

The waitress tilted her chin skeptically then went off to other clientele.

Alicia could only claim a sort of secondary empathy for service workers like the waitress, as Luke had complained before. On the other hand, he could first-hand understand the frustration of random folks who come in to order coffee or water, and just sit and sit, then sit some more. If seats were filling up, Luke once told her, there were tricks to get them to push on. Sometimes, he said, people got stuck like a skipping record and just needed a jolt to get moving again.

The bell chimed once more, and there he was.

It took five clicks of his bootheels on the linoleum before her synapses connected the current vision to her past memory, there being just enough subtle differences since the last time she'd seen him that it felt like it was an uncanny valley projection standing there. His hair was a little longer? Or shorter? He had somehow fewer wrinkles? He'd lost weight? He wore sunglasses, which felt like some new characteristic.

"Hey, Leash," he said.

"Hey," she said. "So, what do we do here?"

He sat on the stool next to her and removed his sunglasses to set them on the tabletop then stared into the reflective chrome. They locked eyes.

"Like, do we have to negotiate a treaty or something," she said.

"As a matter of fact," he said, reaching behind him. "I have the terms of settlement here that we

just need your lawyer to go over."

He placed a bare palm on the tabletop.

"How about we just settle with a hug or something?" she said.

He considered for a moment.

"A hug will be acceptable," he said.

She twisted and her stool creaked loud enough that the entire assembly of diners—the elderly couple, three kids who seemed to be ditching class, that pair in glasses passing scraps of paper to one another, the waitress checking her phone—all turned to investigate the clatter. Alicia held her hands up, palms out.

"This is normal, everyone," she said, "just two people who had a longtime love affair meeting for the first time in a long time."

Luke laughed as the patrons went back to their dishes and conversations. Alicia spread her arms and gave Luke a hug. He reciprocated.

"It's great to see you," she whispered.

"You too, you too," Luke said, and took a deep breath through his nose. She pulled away and noticed red surrounding his eyes. "Been too long."

"That is how this goes," she said, and climbed back onto her stool, carefully adjusting to not produce the abrasive noise this time. "That's always how these things go."

"That's what I've been told," he said.

Dishes rattled in the kitchen, someone coughed. They felt the bass of a semi-truck rolling outside. She broke the standstill.

"I think we should start with Malinko," she said.

"I think we should start with that necklace then,"

he said. "That's what Jeff said in his message."

Luke took out his phone and explained how, years back on Main Street, Jeff and him had traded Instagram handles. When he received that text earlier from "Jeff Malinko," he'd assumed the number had been disconnected and sold to a spam operation. Until he read the message.

Alicia removed the necklace and set it on the counter.

"I've been looking at this forever and nothing makes sense," Alicia said. "The ouroboros, a snake eating its own tale. I looked up all this shit, too."

Luke lifted the necklace and examined it more closely.

"It was Egyptian, then Greek, and it became a symbol for Gnostic… things," she said, Luke fiddling around. "It's also symbolic of having sex, I read that somewhere. But most everything is too if you think abo—"

Click.

A tiny scroll fell onto the counter. It'd come from a secret, small opening near the snake's head.

"…you're joking," she said, grabbing the scrap.

She held it to the diner lights and squinted, then slowly pulled an edged corner to unravel it. It was the size of a Post-it.

She lay it on the counter.

they took us.
find Flora.
get her map.

Chapter Eighteen

FINDING FLORA was a stroke of luck.

All they had to go on was Jeff's old Instagram account, sonicyouth4life ("not a joke") where the cryptic DM had come from. All the messages Luke sent in response were never answered, never even read.

His most recent post, from years back, was that bullet-punctured sign reading, "Welcome to Malinko."

The caption beneath: "Is the end near?"

They went back in his feed and there was a selfie of Jeff reclining on a motel bed, his smirk lit by his own phone's glow, behind him that familiar faux wood from the Malinko Motel. Before those were photos of landscapes at sunset, massive turbines on the hillside, a road cutting through the valley taken from the passenger seat perspective of a red Jeep.

They scrolled further back and found a selfie of Jeff and Kelsey in front of a backdrop of painted adobe where a Christian cross was nestled on top. Caption: "Salvation Mountain, Salton Sea."

One pic before held the same background but this time there was a third person standing between them. She was tiny and pale with a head of shaved blonde hair and an incredibly smooth face. Her teeth were a single band of white and her aqua blue eyes were wide open even as Jeff and Kelsey squinted into the harsh sun.

The caption: "Our search has brought us to the desert, and to Flora. It feels like the closest we've been to Olivia in years."

Flora.

find Flora.

Alicia and Luke drove out into the desert the following week. She used vacation days for a "family emergency" and he simply stopped responded to texts telling him he'd lose his job if he no-show, no-call'd again.

They took her Toyota Elantra. A day after they arrived at Aunt Betty's with the bullet-torn and hood-dented Civic, neighbors began giving them strange looks, so they'd gotten rid of it for $500 cash and no questions asked in a Target parking lot on Victory Boulevard. Luke was living in Los Angeles, somehow, without a car

When she arrived at his building in the Silver Lake hills overlooking Sunset she parked and called his number. He busted from the building with a duffel bag draped over his shoulder that he tossed in the backseat with a "hey" before taking

his place as passenger.

They spent the hour and change before escaping the Riverside sprawl with defanged small talk over a soundtrack of her Spotify playlist. Stuff about work, shitty landlords, celebrity sightings—Jeff Goldblum was the only one who overlapped. He got antsy and began to fiddle around in his seat. Lowering the visor, rifling through the glovebox, opening the storage container between seats.

"Holy shit," he said, reaching inside.

He pulled out Alicia's portable CD player, its cord neatly wrapped around, the black foam of its headphones cushioning either side.

"I can't believe you still have this!" Luke said.

She reached over to grab the clump of plastic and wires, and gently set it back where it belonged.

"You never know when you might need it in an emergency," she said.

Luke raised an eyebrow.

"Not every place has internet, even now," she said, latching the console lid and returning focus to the road.

It took them into the desert and wound toward Joshua Tree until near Indio the road crested a hill on its way south. As she drove he searched his phone for any indications of someone named Flora living in Salton Sea but finding none.

"Did I hear you had a girlfriend?" Alicia finally asked.

"And who would you have heard that from?" he answered.

"Word gets around."

"Does it?"

Alicia paused.

"I checked your Instagram."

Luke watched the two lanes of CA-86 open into flatlands.

"That was a while ago," he said.

Wispy clouds hung in an otherwise empty sky and they passed a truck pulled onto the shoulder. A man poured water from a plastic jug into his radiator as a woman held a damp rag to the back of his neck.

"Are you going to ask about me?" Alicia asked.

"I already know, Leash," he said. "Word gets around."

The former couple drove on and neared the limits of a town named Mecca. They took an onramp to CA-111 where the sun cast a reddish hue that forced an annoyed Alicia to lower the shade.

The road hung left and the smell of death wafted from a slaughterhouse nearby. To their right, a mass of palms with clinging dead fronds. Over another hill and they saw open desert with a wide space that shimmered as if it was filled with oil.

The Salton Sea.

They came upon the skeletal structure of a two-story motel packed in dried dirt that cracked like broken glass. Its front yard held a beached boat tipped on its side and next to it a withered lounge chair in front of the broad frame of a big screen rear projection TV. They passed a vacation property whose fencing once blocked intruders from swimming, an obstruction that'd been cut through many, many years prior, the lake or at

least what was left of it liberated again.

"Seems like the end of the world out here," Alicia said.

They passed a sign for a town called Bombay Beach and remnants of life began to emerge. Light shone from inside a house. A plastic toy car of vibrant colors sat in a driveway of loose gravel. Two working bicycles rested against the side of a fully intact metal fence.

On the side of the road walked an old woman with a brown rag held against her brow. She pushed a cart filled with metal pipes, rods, a variety of gears. She glanced at the passing car for a moment before her attention was caught by another glint in the desert and off she wandered in its direction.

They came upon rows of parked cars. Clean, without the dustings of fresh dirt. Soon they saw people carrying plastic bags and others hefting heavy furniture.

A bearded man in a faded T-shirt gripped a chair with painted seashells glued to its arms. His rail-thin accomplice wore a wide-brim straw hat and massive sunglasses that covered most of her forehead. The woman pressed her key fob and they loaded their find into the trunk of their red Prius.

Alicia paralleled into an open spot and they exited into the slowly massing crowd of Angeleno hipsters.

According to the handwritten signs, they'd happened upon the town's weekly rummage sale, just over a small hill in the unused dirt lot of some dead chain store. The stalls had been separated by blankets and each was manned by a seller

showcasing trinkets or scavenged items beneath the shadows of wide umbrellas.

Luke and Alicia browsed the offerings and eventually came upon a man resting in a lawn chair. He wore long sideburns and a leather vest over his bare chest and rested his boothell on an open case filled with nails, hammers, arcane metal tools. A few stalls down was a man whose ribs showed through his shirt as he sat in a grade school chair, its tiny desk bolted on. Next to him was an old woman, wrinkled like the shell of a roly-poly, selling old vinyl records out of milk crates.

"What're y'all in the market for?" the old woman said as they approached.

"Not anything in the boxes," Luke said. "Looking for someone named Flora."

"Sure, I know Flora," she said. "Who doesn't?"

"She's got some stuff we're looking to buy," Luke said.

"Not the first I've heard that," she said, nodding as she picked her teeth.

"Where can we find her?" Alicia asked.

"Same as always," the woman responded. "You kids do know where that is, don't you?"

"If we knew, we wouldn't be asking," Luke said.

"Suppose not," the woman said, and moved to greet a new couple that'd begun browsing through the records. "Paying customers get my attention first," she said, "I do hope you understand."

Luke and Alicia huddled.

"I think she wants a bribe," Luke whispered.

"No shit?" Alicia mocked, fingers already in her purse. "What do you think? Twenty? Forty?"

"Forty!" Luke shouted, then modulated to a whisper. "Dollars?"

"She has what we need," she said, and pulled out two twenties. "We didn't drive all this way to get stonewalled for forty bucks."

She barged between the saleswoman and the new couple and held up the twin bills. The old woman snatched and stuffed them into her jeans front pocket.

"That way," she angled a thumb over her shoulder toward a tall radio antenna that felt incongruous to the rest of the landscape. Like some mistake.

"There's a trailer underneath," the woman said. "That'll be her."

Luke and Alicia returned to the Elantra. Loose stones cracked as they pulled onto the road and continued east. The number of cars parked for the market became sporadic, then gone altogether. They were all alone on the road again.

Daylight gave way to dusk and the blinking red of the towering antenna strobed scarlet glow in the air. They followed its beacon to a dirt lane and specks of dust rose in the car's tail lights as they idled.

Alicia made out strange shapes ahead.

"Turn on your lights," Luke said.

The beams bounced off twin rows of sun-bleached bovine skulls that marked a curving path. She stepped on the gas and they followed the winds until the car lights hit the reflective chrome of an Airstream parked under the antenna. A wooden frame surrounded the trailer on all sides, supplying a screened-in porch front entrance.

Alicia slowed to a stop and turned off the car. In the new silence they heard chimes from the porch twinkling in the night's growing wind.

Motion from inside the trailer.

Window drapes opened briskly and a harsh purple light fanned across the desert floor, the lavender winnowing to a cone then disappearing entirely as the drapes slammed shut again.

"Guess someone's home," Alicia said.

Chapter Nineteen

LUKE TOOK A MOMENT to find words but before he retrieved any that fit Alicia had already pulled open the driver's side door and let herself out into the desert.

"Leash, do we have a plan?" he called out, but she only smiled through the dusty windshield.

The night chill rose goosebumps on Alicia's arms so she hugged her bare triceps for warmth. She heard a soft rustle and in the moonlight she found a branch scraping against a rusted bicycle that'd been set upside-down, its back wheel spinning in the wind, catching the radio antenna's red blinks with each spin of its reflector.

Alicia heard a creak from the trailer and through the porch's screen saw vague, shadowy movement.

"Leash?" Luke whispered, finally creeping out of the car. "Should we talk about this first?"

"What do you want?" a voice screeched from the darkness.

From inside of the trailer an orange ember glowed bright then hung like a firefly for a single moment before dying out. In its place there came a plume of gray smoke that wisped through the fissures in the porch screen.

Alicia turned back to Luke for assistance but he simply gestured for her to go ahead, the motion of his eyebrows suggesting that he wanted to make sure everyone understand how this idea of running into battle without a plan was all hers, actually. She retorted with a similar but sarcastic shrugging motion and he matched hers again. They were at a standstill.

"Well?" the voice called out. "Not interested in freezing my ass off if you two can't work it out yourselves."

"Sorry," Alicia squinted toward the porch. "Hello?"

"Why praise be to Jesus, she can speak," the voice croaked. "Sorry-hello to yourself."

The cigarette ember glowed to bright, vibrant life followed by another puff of smoke through the screen.

"If you came for my crystals, it's a bit late," the voice said, "but I can make it work for you, for anyone really, but only for the right price."

"Thank you for the offer, bu—" Luke began, footsteps crunching gravel as he stepped toward the voice.

But before he could finish his sentence, the trailer door had opened again to a batch of light

that silhouetted the woman's sinewy frame so it looked like the standing skeleton of a medical practitioner, and then the shadow disappeared upon the door slamming shut.

The desert was then silent enough that they heard the radio antenna's light blink off and on and off again.

"Genius, champ," Alicia said. "Maybe take the backseat on this one."

"With great fucking pleasure, Leash," Luke said, and rested on the Elantra's hood.

"Excuse me!" Alicia shouted to the trailer. "Excuse my man here! He doesn't get crystals!"

Alicia shrugged to Luke who gave her a modestly encouraging thumbs up in return.

The porch lights flipped on and the trailer's door crept open. They saw once more the woman's slender and brawny silhouette through the porch screen's haze.

"Men ain't ever gonna get it, honey," the voice said.

The porch floor groaned under the tiny woman's footsteps and the screen door whined opened. The woman glided down the three short stairs into the shadows, then out into the moonlight.

It was the woman from Jeff's photo, and the gruff voice didn't match what they were seeing.

She wore a polka-dot dress and looked like she was in her early 20s with spiky blond hair and a face without a single imperfection. The woman stared at them with wide open eyes that didn't blink, and seemed almost to glow in the dark.

She examined Alicia head to toe then gave

Luke the same once-over as she sucked down one last puff from her cigarette before flicking its spent carcuss into hissing sand.

"Name's Flora, but you probably already knew that," she turned to Alicia. "What are you looking for exactly, hun?"

"Well," Alicia said, "I've been getting these wrinkles in my cheeks. I know it's inevitable, but I'd like to slow down that process if it's possible."

"Anything's possible," Flora said, and clicked on a small flashlight that burned a burst of white onto Alicia's face. "You're getting them alright, no doubt about that," Flora said. "How old are you?"

"Forty," Alicia said, "or a little more than that."

"Sure, sure. I remember the changes that come with that age," Flora said through a hoarse laugh that concluded with a nostril honk and a projected shot of phlegm. "Barely now, but some of it I still do. I still just do."

Flora continued her examination. Thumb and forefinger to test the skin on Alicia's arms, her fingers, her legs. "Supple, supple," Flora mumbled, then tested Alicia's chin. "Not so supple, but something we can work with."

Flora pulled back to Alicia's neck and whispered arcane measurements to herself before rising her light back to Alicia's face. As she did her beam caught the glint of gold hanging around Alicia's neck. Flora clicked off her light, the exam evidently over.

She dipped down her head so her face was bathed in shadow. "I've got just the crystal for you," Flora said. "Let me show you."

Flora spun back to the trailer, walked up the steps, and the screen door snapped shut behind her. Alicia shrugged to Luke, still perched on the Elantra's hood, and opened the door to walk inside.

Luke hopped off the car's hood and set his feet on the sand to follow, but a moment after Alicia had passed the threshold, the trailer's front door slammed shut with a loud metallic clang as three deadbolts shot into locks.

"Wai—," Alicia heard Luke shout, but the rest was clipped off.

Chapter Twenty

SHE HEARD LUKE SCREAMING AND POUNDING on the heavy, iron door.

A tingling flash of peril almost like the blush of embarrassment rose through Alicia's body.

She felt a presence behind her then a new soft touch on her shoulder. Somehow, she didn't feel in danger anymore.

"Tell him you're okay," Flora whispered, removing the warmth from her hand. "No need for him to wake the neighbors."

Through Alicia's mind flashed the image of the vast desolation in which they were surrounded and she closed her eyes to wish it away.

"I'm okay, Luke," Alicia softly coughed, then shouted a second attempt, with more gusto this time. "I'm okay!"

"You sure?" Luke's voice was muffled through the layers of security.

"In any case, there's no way he's getting in here," Flora said, almost apologetically. "No way anyone is, not without my say-so."

Alicia spun to Flora, closer than she'd expected.

The young woman nodded her head, her shiny face. A strange kindness surrounded her vibrant blue eyes.

"I'm sure," Alicia said. "Just give us a minute here."

Through the door Alicia heard the patter of Luke's feet pacing on the porch. She spun and took in the rest of the trailer's interior.

Its walls were faux wood on which hung framed paintings with vibrant colors and portraits of grouped strangers in black and white. To her left was a kitchenette with a bench folded out across a Formica table with an edge of aluminum that ran along its entire side. Steel pots and pans hung from hooks around the exhaust fan, and beyond the kitchen was a closed accordion door leading off to somewhere else. To Alicia's right there was the rest of the living space. Cramped but manageable.

Flora was there now, reclining into a green plush couch that took up an entire side of the trailer. She reached to the nearby TV tray and grabbed a ripened tomato that'd been sitting on top. She took a bite. Seeds and juice escaped from her lips then ran down her chin.

"Excuse my manners," Flora said, reaching to collect a napkin.

Alicia saw the rusted six-shooter revolver resting on her lap. Flora clocked the reaction and

smiled through a chew.

"Well, now, don't go worrying too much about that," Flora said through another bite. "Didn't like the odds of two-versus-one is all."

Flora stood from the couch, the gun now held limply in her hand. Alicia began to back away as she approached but Flora moved with a speed swift enough to catch her off-guard. She reached across to set the tomato's blanched core on the kitchen table.

"Don't imagine you're here for my crystals," Flora said, "what with you coming in wearing that necklace and all."

Alicia felt the cool metal against her flesh.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" Flora said, twirling the revolver on the table like the focal point in a game of spin-the-bottle. She nodded toward the green couch, and Alicia got the message, so she sat and told a brief summary of how they'd ended up at her outpost here near the Salton Sea.

A road trip from Chicago to Los Angeles years back, their touristic jaunt down Route 66, and then their brief stay in Malinko. She left out a few details—Luke smashing out the mechanic's brains, for one, the woman motelier ending up below their wheels in the middle of the street, for two—and concluded by saying they'd found their new friend's necklace left behind in their room. They just wanted to return it.

"I've been wearing it to keep from losing it," Alicia said.

"So, let me get this straight," Flora said, waving

the gun to emphasize her incomprehension at the story being laid out, "a few years back y'all met some strangers, found a gal's necklace, and now suddenly you decided to come way out here and try to give it back?" She used the gun's barrel to scratch her temple. "This was the best you two could come up with?"

"Told you," Luke's muffled voice came through the iron door.

"Anyways," Flora said. "Where do I come in? What do I have to do with any of this?"

Alicia told her that the couple they'd been looking for had contacted them recently.

"Jeff and Kelsey," Alicia said, then her brain caught up with her mouth, "well, we never did find out their last names."

"Sure," Flora said, new awareness coming across her face. "Sure, Jeff and Kelsey."

Alicia nodded to the revolver in Flora's hand.

"Any way we can remove that from this conversation?"

Flora smiled faintly then opened a drawer. She deposited it and the revolver rattled against forks and knives. She pulled open another and took out a soft pack of Marlboro Reds then lit one up.

"Sure, sure, Jeff and Kelsey and I are old friends," Flora said with brow furrowed as thick smoke escaped into the air. "Really old. But I haven't seen them in years now. They stopped in that one day, a while back, then went off."

"We got a message that said to check Kelsey's necklace," Alicia said, "when we did, this came out."

She set the opened message onto the Formica table. Flora leaned to read it.

they took us.
find Flora.
get her map.

Flora sucked another pull from the Red as she stared at the note.

"Maybe it's time to bring that boy of yours inside," Flora said.

Flora's hand crept under the sink and suddenly the locks loudly disengaged. Luke burst in and seeing Alicia on the couch rushed to her in a panic. She smiled and mouthed, "I'm fine."

"Young love always feels so tenuous," Flora said.

"You have no idea," Alicia said.

Flora exhaled another plume then stamped out the cigarette with an ashtray hiss. She grabbed her soft pack and found it empty so she crushed it into a ball and tossed it into the corner. She moved toward the couch where Alicia still sat and Luke reacted in a threatening pose until Alicia's open hand raised to settle down his protective instinct. Flora ignored all that showmanship and reached down next to Alicia where tucked between the couch cushions she found another soft pack of Reds.

A lone cigarette rattled inside. She lit and continued telling her story as if Luke had been standing there the whole time.

"I didn't know Kelsey much," she croaked on her way back to the Formica. "Only had met her the once, a long while back, years and years back. She couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old."

Luke and Alicia looked at Flora's youthful face and tried to do the math.

"No, it was her sister who I knew," Flora said, letting the cigarette smolder. "Olivia. Yeah, Olivia. The one who went missing."

She scanned her wall as if trying to search for a particular photo but after a while she gave up and returned her attention back to her guests.

"And Olivia and Jeff, well, they were together like so," Flora held two fingers spread in a peace sign then entangled them with loud knuckle cracks into a messy entwined pair.

She separated them out again.

"It was a long time ago, as I said. Those kinds of friendships seem like they'll last forever, but like anything, they go away. They all do."

Alicia leaned forward.

"When we saw them back then, back in Malinko, Kelsey and Jeff had mentioned they were looking for someone out there, out in the desert, somehow who had gone missing," Alicia said. "Was that Olivia?"

Flora nodded.

"Now we're getting into some real history," Flora said, retrieving the half-spent cigarette. "Olivia had gone missing a long time ago, and when they'd come out to me here at the trailer, they'd

come to pick back up on her trail. They came out here to find out what I still knew about it all."

"And why would you know anything?" Alicia asked.

Flora sucked down one more huff and let the smoke emerge from her lips as she spoke.

"Because I was the last person to see Olivia alive."

Chapter Twenty-One

FLORA WENT ON with her story.

"Me and Olive grew up in Orange County. It had just started sprawling back then," she said. "We were best friends since the first grade. Went through scrunchies and crimping and boys who thought they were already men. She'd found Jeff freshman year, and they were thick as it goes from day one. Sometimes it works like that."

Flora exhaled smoke that floated into Luke's eyes and made them water, she quickly waved her hands to dissipate the tendrils.

"Excuse me, honey, just used to living alone," Flora said. "After high school, we were about to head our separate ways. Her to a college in the east, me sticking around SoCal, and to mark the occasion of us not never seeing each other again, at least not in the way we knew, we decided to go on one last road trip together. A girls-only trip."

Flora inhaled, reached to crack open her tiny kitchen window, blew smoke into the night.

"We started in late July," she said. "First night we went to Joshua Tree and wound through all those creepy desert yuccas, all them like repenting figures praying to the heavens. Something about them, something not right. Anyway, we ended at a townie bar and I danced with some local. In the middle of the song, he licked my damn neck. Right there on the dancefloor."

The nostalgia of sweet reminiscence washed over her eyes.

"We spent the night at some fleabag motel, and the next day, kept heading east," Flora said. "Came into that town—"

"Malinko," Alicia said.

"That was it alright," Flora said. "And that's where things get fuzzy."

She tapped her temple and made a hollow popping sound with her mouth.

"What does that mean?" Luke said.

"Just like... not there. I don't remember," Flora said. "Cops found me on the side of the road, and I didn't come to until we were back at the station. Nope, not until I was at the station. At the station. At the station, at the station, atthestationatthesta"

Flora began subtly shaking her head side to side then more quickly with pained groans so her face became a blur obscured except for the wincing as if she was in some terrible pain and her mouth gaped open as if trying to scream but no sound from within would come.

Luke and Alicia's hands found each other's grip.

Flora's spastic movements halted, as did her breath. Her body was simply present. Motionless on the table's other side.

"You okay?" Alicia said.

She unwound her fingers from Luke's and walked to the sink to fill a glass, then set the water next to Flora with a thud. At the noise, Flora's eyes opened wide.

She squinted as if adjusting to the room's light for the first time then brought her palms to her eyes and pressed against the bridge of her nose like trying to relieve sinus pressure. She squeezed harder and the skin on her face pulled taut and smooth like a freshly ironed silk sheet.

She held this pose, then released. Her face held more wrinkles than before.

"Sorry," Flora said, cradling the glass, bringing it to her lips. "Headaches get me sometimes."

"That was some headache," Luke said.

"They said the desert would be good for them," Flora said. "But they seem to be happening more and more often nowadays."

She picked up her smoldering cigarette.

"The only thing I have any memory of is that motel in Malinko," Flora said, and there came a creak from the sofa as Alicia and Luke both leaned forward. "Woke up to a knock on the door. The owner was pounding on the other side, telling us we had to get out. When I looked at the other bed, Olive was already gone. Just vanished."

She drew another puff and shook her head, more gentle this time, still trying to figure it out.

"But the bigger shock came later that day, when

the owners said we weren't there for just one night," Flora said. "We'd been there a full week. Somehow, time had simply vanished. Our parents had gotten the cops to kick a dragnet to find us, and that's what brought the pounding on the door."

Flora dragged and Alicia now saw how her fingers were cracked, dotted with cancerous-looking sun spots. She hadn't noticed them before.

"If I was gonna hazard a guess, I'd say we'd gotten drugged in that Joshua Tree bar," Flora said. "Anyway, weeks turned to months, Olivia never turned up. Sheriffs stuck it on the backburner as they do. Olive's family dangled reward money, but that only lured grifters. Months turned to years, and eventually we all got on as best we could."

"But Kelsey and Jeff still thought there was something left to find?" Alicia said.

"You know how hope works," Flora slyly smiled. "Last thing to die."

A simmering rattle from the fridge's ice box filled the quiet.

"I'd steered clear of them all since it went down. Had the sense, justified or otherwise, that they'd blamed me for Olive gone missing. Still don't know how Jeff and Kelsey found me." She gestured around the trailer. "I keep a low profile. But then, one day, they just drove up that road and knocked on my door, just like y'all."

"And what did you tell them?" Alicia said.

"Same story I'm telling you, same stuff I told the cops back then," Flora said. "We went on that road trip, Joshua Tree to Malinko, then she was gone."

Outside, a howling wind sprinkled sibilant sand against the trailer's metal sides.

"What about a map?" Alicia asked. "Jeff said something about a map."

A brief recognition flashed across Flora's eyes—she seemed to bury it, furrowing her brow.

"Don't know nothing about that," she said, glancing at the clock, then standing and walking to the door. "Well, I do enjoy the company as much as the next person, but when it's time, it's—"

Flora's face contorted with great seismic pain. She held the table to steady herself, but it tipped—her body fell to the floor onto a stack of old newspapers and magazines. Luke got on his hands and knees to help and found her face with an eerie calmness, her skin clammy but loose, somehow. As if she was wore a mask.

Her eyes fluttered, then composed toward Luke.

"Well, what do you think you're gonna do with that, girl?" Flora said.

Luke squinted with confusion then turned around. Alicia stood in the kitchenette, aiming the revolver at Flora.

"Leash?" Luke offered.

"We need to know," Alicia said. "What's the map?"

Flora's face held new clarity.

"So, you'd like to see it," she smirked. "You'd like to see the most wonderful place in the world."

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE DANGLING LAMP CAST HARSH YELLOW on the pages that Flora had torn out from spiral notebooks then scattered across the tabletop. They rustled as she tried to piece together some artless jigsaw. Alicia hovered in observation, Luke reclined on the couch.

In her hand Flora held the pen parallel to another lit cigarette so the two seemed like cousins but only one of them devlish. She thought for a moment as she mouthed silent words as if incanting some secret prayer and then leaned forward to make more mysterious markings on rapidly filling pages.

"Must go through," Flora muttered. "It looks like a dead-end, but must go through."

She scrawled must go through must go through must go along the bottom of the pages over and over and over.

They'd been zen mapmaking for over an hour now, with Flora speak-mumbling in stops and starts and her eyes alternately stretched wide open then pressed shut, deep in thought, trying to summon something that had long ago sunken deep into the tar pit of her memories.

Another sheet filled up.

She plucked it casually and left gray streaks of ash down the paper, then brought it to the kitchen counter where she dropped it atop the stack that had been accumulating. In the pile were sheets with a scrawled drawing of a highway, an overpass, a road winding between two pyramids, a tall pile of loose rocks, and each included cryptic annotations:

mind the cacti
through the horizon
burial mound?

Who knew what it all added up to.

"Can we help you in any way?" Alicia said, leaning forward on her tip toes.

"You can give me back my gun," Flora said, eyes still glued to the pages.

Alicia shifted her stance, trying to make the loaded threat in her hand seem more casual than serious.

"Any *other* way we can help?" Luke called out from the couch.

"Just shut up is all then," Flora said. "I need to concentrate."

Flora stuck the pen back into her mouth and

chewed the cap, then pounced back to the next page. At its bottom she drew a half-moon and filled it with ink scratches until it was entirely blacked out. Next to it, she etched the outline of what looked to be a man trying to thumb a ride.

"Cactus," she said, tapping her pen on the sketch to illustrate some indecipherable point she was trying to make. "Cowboy cactus."

"Got it," Alicia responded. "A... cowboy cactus."

Flora wrote cowboy cactus on a sheet, added it to the pile.

"You won't know until you're there," Flora said, hustling back to start another sheet before she lost whatever thread she still had a faint grasp of. "It's a trick that it plays. It saps the energy around it. That's how it works."

"It?" Alicia asked.

"The beast in the meteor," Flora said, matter-of-factly, then looked down again.

She began again to trace squiggly lines.

"Saps, saps it away, saps it all away" Flora said, her voice now lowering into a guttural whisper. "It saps. Saps. Saps."

She kept etching broad outlines until her attention focused on one specifically.

"Saps," she croaked. "Saps."

The pen's sharp edge tore out a hole, splitting the paper in two and creating a dark mark on the table itself.

"Okay, okay," Alicia said. "Let's take a break."

She stretched a calming hand to Flora's bare shoulder but when she touched skin Flora stood and flung herself up as she screamed.

"Don't touch me!"

Her voice rattled the rows of decorative ceramic plates in a glass case against the wall.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said, retreating.

Flora's eyes darted between her two guests with growing confusion, as if she'd just woken from a bad dream.

She inhaled and her eyes drifted back to the table. She locked back onto the words cowboy cactus and it all seemed to come back to her. She went back to the stack near the sink to recalibrate, then to the tabletop where she tapped the pen against her front teeth in thought.

She dipped her head and angled it close to a page then scratched out the representation of a car before creating a series of winding, pointed arrows around the base of her "beast in the meteor."

"It's there," Flora tapped the page. "Inside there. That's where you'll go. That's where you'll want to go."

She retrieved the stack from the sink and shuffled them in an order known only to her before setting them all back on the table.

A chime sounded through the trailer. They turned to the source.

A tiny cuckoo escaped from the small door of a miniature wooden clock that hung on the wall. It was the first of twelve eventual chimes.

Flora closed her eyes, set down her pen, and placed her hands flat on the table.

"It is time for you to leave," Flora said. "This is all I can help you with, I'm afraid. Now, I must prepare. Please go."

The couch creaked with the release of Luke's weight as he stood and grabbed the stack of map-like pages. He nodded Alicia toward the door and, after a short staredown, she relented and pushed open the door to drift into the cold night air.

"Thank you so mu—" Alicia said, her voice cut short by the slam of the door, the harsh clang of the deadbolt.

Luke and Alicia stood in the faint moonlight that seeped in through the porch screens.

"That was something, alright," Luke said.

"You're not wrong," Alicia said.

"Do we think we actually learned anything?" he said, hoisting the stack of ramblings. "How much are we trusting these?"

"One way to find out."

A deep rattling hum came from inside the trailer and the porch filled with purple light. They raised their hands to block the glow, and between their fingers saw how the light was coming from a window into some back room. They stepped forward to squint inside.

The purple hue in this hidden room was augmented by strange furniture and blinking green and red lights that were attached to metallic nodes in a chaotic pattern.

They heard the accordion door entrance pull open and in walked Flora. She bolted the door behind her and turned to the window. Luke and Alicia froze, hoping the glare would obscure them, but it didn't matter. Flora pulled a screeching chain and down rolled a thick, metal screen that blocked the purple light and their view.

They stood for a moment on the porch listening to the deep resonant hum from inside, then walked down the three steps back onto the desert sand that crunched under feet on their way back to the car.

Alicia got in the driver's seat, leaned over to examine the loose pages of Flora's scribbles. She realized she still held Flora's gun.

She turned to Luke with a shrug.

"Uh?" she said.

He lifted an eyebrow.

"I mean, do you even know how to use that thing?" he asked. "Do you know how many bullets are left?"

"Maybe I'll just set it down here," Alicia said, reaching down to place it beneath the driver's seat for safekeeping.

She keyed the ignition.

The Elantra's radio caught a signal from a station that was playing a crooning quartet with a bare acoustic guitar.

"I don't want to set the world on fire," sang the radio. "I just want to start a flame in your heart."

The radio fritzed out into static as another shock of purple lit through the rearview. A loud, grinding sound came from the trailer and when they turned they saw how the entire structure was rocking ever so slightly as if an earthquake tremor had focused entirely in that spot alone before the trailer settled back into place and the violet color dimmed to nothing.

"Those must be *some* crystals," Luke said.

The car's radio returned.

"I've lost all ambition for worldly acclaim," sang the radio, now at a quicker tempo, a higher pitch.

"Maybe we should," Luke said, his hand lofted toward the windshield, suggesting it was time for them to take their exit.

Alicia put the Elantra in drive and maneuvered a three-point turn that set them off down the driveway, past the bleached cow skulls, back out into the road proper.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ALICIA WOKE WITH HER FOREHEAD BAKING in sun that'd snuck in through the tent's open flaps.

She blindly reached to close them shut and there was Luke, his face smashed against his pillow in sleep. She let out a cough soft enough that only subtle movement came from behind his eyelids, and then moment later he pursed his lips and wrinkled his nose, then began to fully wake.

"We could always just forget this and go back to L.A.," Luke whispered.

She separated from the crook of his arm and gave him a stink-eyed look that was good enough for an answer.

They packed the tent and stuffed it in the trunk and were soon back on the highway, trying to make sense of the directions from Flora's mysterious stack of papers.

The radio carried news of wildfires and a light earthquake nearby—it had made some paintings go crooked on walls, but nothing in the way of serious damage. Luke switched to the AM dial where preachers brought further portents of apocalypse before he dialed further into the ether.

They took an interstate cloverleaf heading east. In the distance was a mountainous hill that looked like soft-serve ice cream. Luke compared it to markings on the second page of Flora's scribblings.

"Keep that way," he said, flipping to another sheet. "Does that look kinda like shark teeth to you?"

Alicia shrugged and drove on.

The noon sun shone on wind farms to their north. Alicia thought she recalled seeing those on the maps. Luke flipped to a page with squiggly lines on a ridgetop and Alicia turned off at the next ramp.

They hung right at a pair of roadside memorials, one name long faded away while the other had fresh flowers in front. They continued in that direction, the only car on the side road blacktop.

Alicia checked her phone. Two bars of service.

They wound between geological formations that rose high in sharp outcroppings, contoured however many millions of years ago. The high rock obscured the overhead sun and pitched the car into cold shadows for a moment, before they emerged into streaks of pink and purple across the sunset sky.

Luke looked at the notes and compared the shape of an approaching hill, but couldn't find

anything resembling it. He reached to the dashboard where he'd laid out a few pages and soon found a match.

The two pyramids.

"Turn right," he said.

"Aye-aye," Alicia responded.

She hugged a turn on the asphalt as an AM preacher told of tortures that awaited unless one gave to the cause, then detailed the P.O. Box for donations needed now more than ever. Alicia took another right on a lonely road. There, they both saw the odd cactus on top of the hill.

Its arms were bent downward in some genetic mutation, malformed by nuclear testing or maybe just the happenstance of fate. Its top gave off the impression that it was wearing a bulbous ten-gallon hat.

"The fucking cowboy cactus!" Alicia said, bouncing in her seat.

Luke smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Okay, well, what's next?"

"Apparently some road next to it," he scanned the pages. "Hold on."

Alicia idled the car and got out to examine the deformed cactus. As she did, shadows from its arms began to lengthen, and near their darkened tips she saw a small bush. She nudged it with her foot and it caught the wind and departed. It had only been a tumbleweed momentarily at rest.

Alicia took a knee and felt the sand with her hands. She found a hardened tread mark and then its parallel track a few feet away. She stood and used the fading sunlight to follow it into the

distance. All at once, a trail opened up in her vision.

It was a set of two marked lines wide enough to fit a car that wound forward into the desert for miles and miles.

"I think we found it," she called back.

She got back into the driver's seat and aimed onto the trail. She checked her phone again. Zero bars.

The shadows from the ridges lengthened as they drove along the trail's contours. The radio played a song about tulips sung in falsetto before the signal sputtered and then went out entirely. The only sound was rocks crunching beneath tires and the evening wind rustling scrub brush.

They drove on. White moonlight began to take over. In the headlights they saw the path curve around a rock formation, and around that bend, it opened to a looming gray mound that dominated the landscape. At its bottom was a round darkness that seemed to swallow the headlights.

"Saps the energy," Alicia muttered.

"What?" Luke asked.

"Nothing," she said. "We're here."

She slowly drove forward, and the headlights illuminated textured dirt walls on the inside of a cave that'd been dug into the mound. They inched closer and saw a glint of metal above.

Alicia flipped on the high beams. A green sign was bolted to the rocky exterior.

"Welcome to New Malinko."

She idled, and they both exited to try to stare deeper into the black.

"Looks like a dead end," Luke said.

"It turns up ahead," Alicia said. "We just can't see it from here."

"You sure?"

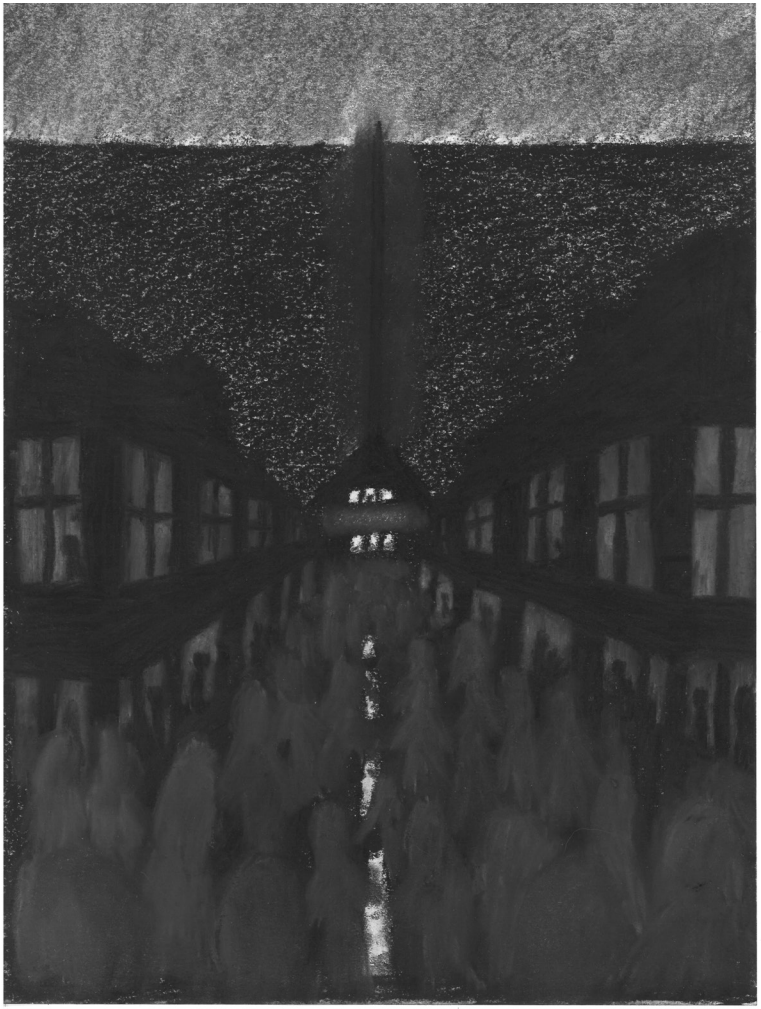
"It's a tunnel," Alicia said. "Must go through."

"Must go through," he nodded.

They returned to the car and silently debated about a plan, or least possibilities, as the moon drifted in its arc through the star-dotted sky, but even in those moments, they knew they were just gathering nerves for the inevitable push forward.

And then eventually, as these things do, an energizing aura crept up into them. She reached for his hand and he squeezed back and they knew it was time.

Alicia shifted to drive and steered them into the darkness.



Part IV
The Town

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE TUNNEL'S JAGGED INTERIOR was lit a hellish red by the Elantra's rear lights.

Ahead, white beams illuminated twin bands of dust hovering like highway lanes. Beyond, only darkness.

Alicia drove slowly, following winding turns cut into the rock at such dramatic angles as to barely allow any vehicle to pass. It almost felt like the tunnel's architecture somehow wasn't adding up, like they were traveling in circles and should be reaching the entrance they had come through just up there at the next bend.

The tires crunched gravel and only a subtle buzz of static came over the radio. They turned a new corner and a sliver of light expanded as they approached. It opened up and separated from the blackness of the walls, and they both realized they were looking out of the tunnel's end.

Alicia hesitated and Luke turned with eyes open wide and a mouth unable to form words, and she pressed the gas.

They drove through.

As they cleared the threshold, new music began to flow from the car's speakers, the soft sounds of a big band performance. A warm gust of dry air whistled through their cracked windows. On the horizon they saw an amber glow that clashed with the galactic band of the Milky Way in the clear sky.

They inched forward and the smooth sound under their wheels registered that they were again on paved road, the Elantra's headlights showing that it was the width of two cars with a yellow stripe down the middle, two impeccably smooth cement gutters on either side draining down a gentle slope. They continued down the hell.

The glow materialized into sulphuric street lights that cast amber ovals onto the pavement. The edges of each pool of light kissed the next so it looked like a series of double helixes spun out as far as they could see.

Their eyes adjusted to the darkness and they could just make out faint, boxy shadows on either side of the road. Almost as if they were hanging in mid-air. Under the moonlit the penumbras became parallel lines of houses that'd been built into the ridge, uniform brick and wood structures, two stories each with a balcony and a peaked roof. It was difficult to tell how many there were.

One of the porch lights flicked on.

"Uh," Luke started.

Alicia, startled, stepped on the gas and they continued down the slope, down to the bottom of the valley, into orange haze that'd blotted out the entire area. Looming palm trees dotted the road's sides like shadowy sentries, and ahead were twin rows of flat-top structures that looked like retail stores.

A green neon haze shone from a sign hanging from a building to their left, and when it came into focus they saw it announced:



It blazed atop a three-story mansion structure with a U-shaped driveway leading up to it decorated with a colonnade and a rim of lights highlighting a fresh paint job. Alicia steered left and across the street from the hotel their headlights caught the glint of shiny chrome pumps in front of a pristine mechanic's garage.

"Guess they upgraded," Luke said.

Alicia rolled them forward past the hotel and garage and they came upon a crossroads with a hanging stoplight flashing yellow as it swayed in the gentle breeze. A sign nearby stated in green and white lettering that Main Street was straight ahead, Rose Road was pitched to their left, and

Lavender Lane was to their right.

"Which way we heading, Leash?" Luke asked.

Through the windshield Alicia saw the outlines of Main Street where twin bands of street lamps dotted either side of the wide road. Moving shadows crept in the darkness of balconies that hung over the sidewalks.

"Just not straight," she said, then spun the wheel to the left onto what had been demarcated as Rose Road.

The Elantra went up a curved slope that bent right so that the road was raised yet parallel to Main.

There were only a few street lights on Rose, and on either side stood identical brick and wood houses with identical grass lawns out front, each perfectly manicured so they looked almost like putting greens. To their left, the outside of town stretched uphill toward some edge of land that was too obscured in the darkness, while the ones to their right cascaded downward into the valley toward Main. The houses were each painted deep scarlet red that was edged with bright, white trim and each had an oak tree out front, somehow growing in the interior of this desert crater. They all had driveways that ended with a garage, closed but wide enough for two.

They continued straight on Rose Road. A few interior lights in the houses were turned on but most were dark at this late hour. The road came to a rightward bend and they began to slope back down toward Main Street, now on the other end of town.

There was an odd stale presence to the air. As if encased in some plastic cage. It wasn't clear where the borders were, as if they could run up to some edge of reality until they were banging their faces against the transparent prison.

They hit another intersection and Alicia pulled left into a patch of darkness and parked on the road's side. She looked through the rearview to Main behind them and again saw forms lingering on the street, watching in their direction, carefully stepping out from the shadows to examine these new intruders from a distance.

"What do you think they're gonna do?" Alicia asked, but Luke's attention was focused ahead, through the windshield.

She followed it. They were facing a dead-end into a cul-de-sac, its furthest edge occupied by an imposing three-story brick building that rose to a pentagonal point at its top. She saw the faint outline of a robust, tri-sided sign that was hung above its entrance.

"What is this place?" Alicia asked.

A response came from a dainty voice outside of Alicia's open window.

"Welcome to New Malinko," the voice said. "Welcome to our town."

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE VOICE CAME FROM A WOMAN in a straw hat and a white dress. She looked to be in her late 40s maybe 50s and she offered a meek wave as she tilted her chin to the moonlight. Her smooth cheeks wrinkled as she cast a warm smile.

"Y'all new or something?" she asked, a slight lilt to her voice.

"We took a wrong turn," Alicia said. "We saw some lights this way, and now we're just looking for somewhere to spend the night. Sorry about that."

"Oh, no need to apologize, my dear," the woman said. "All that we get out this way are wrong turns, believe you me. My name's Darlene."

She reached through the open window and offered her hand to Alicia who took it. As she introduced herself she felt a warm wave of shock at just how firm the stranger's handshake was.

"And right now, the two of you are in the grand town of New Malinko," Darlene said.

"That's what the sign told us," Luke said, tilting to the stranger. "But it's, well, it's certainly an odd place for a town."

Darlene shrugged to let the question go and leaned over Alicia's lap to shake hands with Luke who similarly winced upon receiving her grip.

"Pleasure to meet the both of you," Darlene said. "Now, we do have a hotel here in New Malinko. You passed it on your way in, I believe. Unless you took some entrance into town that none of us know about yet!"

She burst out into a laugh that echoed through the empty cul-de-sac.

"Anyway, more'n happy to get you situated s'long as you don't mind stopping into Cobb's beforehand," she said. "That's our bar here, by the by."

"We'd just rath—" Luke started.

"That sounds great," Alicia broke in.

Darlene lurked a smile into the car.

"I'd imagine after a long night of traveling like the two of you's must've had, it'd sound mighty scrumptious to have yourselves a night cap," Darlene said, then twirled around and began walking back down Main Street with a gingerly hop to her step. "Come on along then," she said over her shoulder. "We won't bite."

As Alicia shifted the Elantra into drive Darlene spun back around waving her hands as if shooing a bug.

"No, no, no, no need for all that," Darlene said.

"We walk around here."

She paused for the newcomers and opened her purse for a pack of cigarettes then lit one. After a lengthy moment with no movement she called back to the car.

"If you're worried about someone taking your stuff, don't!" she said. "We're not the kind who rob our guests. Not like y'all city folks. Trust me, I know!"

She let out another wheezing laugh that sputtered smoke like exhaust from a dying car and began again to walk away from them back into the Main Street storefronts.

Alicia turned to Luke and the two faced off silently but even before the first word was spoken Alicia had stepped outside.

"Alrighty, then," Luke said to himself, and met her around the back of the car. They hustle-walked to catch up.

"Beautiful night," Darlene said, taking in a full breath through her mouth before twin gray trails flowed from her nostrils. "Same as ever, yet somehow, better than before," she smiled, "maybe because you're all here now."

They crossed the intersection and got onto Main Street proper where they passed between the twin rows of brick buildings carrying flat, broad awnings that shielded street lamps to cast black rectangles onto the sidewalk. Luke and Alicia both quickly came to the same realization—that this was a mirror image of the Malinko they'd seen on Route 66.

But now it was cleaned, now it was occupied.

The first shop on their left was New Malinko Hardware and a few doors from that was the blue exterior of a place called Martha's. Through its windows Alicia made out barber shop chairs. Next door was an ice cream parlor then a restaurant before a narrow alleyway with concrete steps leading between the shops up to the row of houses on what the sign had called Lavender Lane.

From within this darkness came sharp footsteps that echoed against the alley walls, and then came a voice.

"Darlene!" it called in a piercingly high pitch.

A woman appeared from the shadows. She was older with brown hair down to her shoulders, and she wore a pink dress that clung tightly to her frame like a wrapped present.

"Thought that was you," the woman said.

Another figure stepped from behind. He was trim and well-groomed, and wore a small straw hat with thin clothes that wouldn't have been out of place on the Havana Malecon.

"Rebecca and George, good to see you," Darlene said through a hiss of smoke between her teeth.

The new couple gave Darlene gentle hugs while their eyes lingered over her shoulder at the new strangers to town.

"Let me introduce you," Darlene said, picking up on the awkwardness. "Alicia and Luke, these are the Krays. George and Rebecca. Alicia and Luke are new friends of ours."

"Wrong turn, I'm guessing?" George said with a wry smile.

"You two don't have to give anyone that story about a wrong turn," Darlene said. "Word travels far and wide about New Malinko these days, what with that damn internet and all, so we aren't too shocked when outsiders want to check out our mysterious town."

"Let's say it was a *few* wrong turns," Luke said.

"You won't be saying that for long," Rebecca said, flashing teeth stained white. "Those who quote unquote stumble onto us soon believe it's the best damn decision they ever quote unquote accidentally made."

"After a few drinks that is," George said.

"And maybe a few more," Rebecca said.

"Speaking of, let's get to getting," Darlene said.

She led the group down the sidewalk and they began to pass by stores displaying wares through windows so clean you barely noticed they were there at all. One showcased pots and plants and another exhibited fishing poles and tennis rackets while the next presented clothes of vintage designs and patterns that must have been handed down over multiple generations through arthritic hands or last wills and testaments.

Alicia examined the group's reflections in the windows. Hers and Luke's were solid under the street lamps but something was off whenever she tried to get a good look at her companions. They looked blurred. As if speeding by.

There was music up ahead. A deep speedy bassline bounced against the brick and rattled the windows and there came the sibilant cymbal as it laid down the quick tempo of surf rock.

Across the street they saw a group of three huddled in a cloud of cigarette smoke. They were lit in flashing red by a neon sign above a dark entrance that read **Cobb's**.

Darlene spun with a bright smile on her face, as if presenting a gift.

"Here we are," Darlene said. "The world infamous Cobb's."

Darlene led them across the street toward the bullshit session outside the bar. The three briefly nodded hellos at Darlene and the crew but quieted their conversation as the two strangers came into view.

"New guests to town," Darlene explained.

One of the smokers was an older man with a tanned face and gray hair down past his shoulders. He tossed the last bit of his cigarette into the gutter and stubbed it out with the heel of his boot.

"Well," he said, gliding past them all on his way across the street, "welcome to the show."

He pulled open the bar's heavy door and the music from inside sounded clear into the night. Twin tremelo-picked guitars with heavy reverb swirling back and forth accompanied by a baritone sax and what sounded like an electric organ.

He held open the door for his two compatriot smokers who got the message and stubbed out their own cigarettes before stepping inside. The door closed and again only the bass and drums could be heard.

Luke walked to the lone exterior glass brick window and tried to peer inside but it was too heavily obscured that he only saw vague shapes

shifting in the dim lights.

"That's just Jimmy being Jimmy," Darlene said. "Some folks here still don't take kindly to strangers. Luckily, they're in the minority."

In the reflection of the window Alicia watched George gently roll his eyes.

"Anyway," Rebecca said, "you're gonna love it."

"You're gonna love it, but I do have to be honest. It's gonna be strange at first," Darlene said. "Give everyone a moment to get used to you two. Like dipping your toe into a hot tub."

Darlene smiled at Luke and Alicia with a squint of scrutiny as if gauging their fear. When finally satisfied Darlene pulled open Cobb's hefty wooden door and the two newcomers were again hit with waves of escaping music before they both ducked their heads and marshaled each other inside.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE BROAD DOOR OPENED into a dimly-lit cavernous space created of brick walls and high ceilings with exposed wooden beams that seemed to quiver in the flickers of the candlelight. A hint of sawdust and spilt beer from inside wafted toward the newcomers.

"Welcome to Cobb's," Darlene said.

The bar was populated by the looming spectres of hovering drinkers who kept to the shadows as they watched the other drunks twirl under the spinning mirrorball that speckled the blurred blob with roving lights on the dancefloor proper. The far back held a short stage that was lit in ambient red and populated by the six-piece band riding the cosmic waves of a surf rock jam. Patrons sat at or leaned against the long wooden bar that ran the room's length and sat under a thatched roof of palm grass in Tiki stylings.

The Krays waved goodbye with a "nice to meet you" gesture then ducked into the Tiki separation toward a trio at the far elbow of the L-shaped bar. Alicia and Luke remained near the door and saw the eyes of the patrons scan to catch a glimpse of them, then whisper to nearby friends who'd also clock the new strangers before passing along notice to whatever next group was nearby, the word of their arrival slowly making the rounds.

"Let's get you a drink," Darlene winked, taking Alicia's arm and bringing them to the bar. "Don't worry about those gawkers, they'll warm up in time. Order whatever you want."

"Just a water's fine," Luke said, then answered her raised eyebrow. "Taking a little break."

"I'll take a shot and a beer," Alicia but in.

Darlene called the bartender over with a sharp finger snap. He was a bald man with a bulky mustache and a body like a stack of rubber tires, and he bent forward with his left ear as Darlene asked for the drinks, then looked over her shoulder to find the newcomers. Alicia noticed a subtle shift in his eyes before he turned fetch the booze.

"That's Al," Darlene said. "One of the nicest guys you'll meet."

He returned with the order and slid the drinks across the bar, paying extra careful attention passing the glass of water, as if to make sure he didn't spill a single precious drop.

"And how much do we owe?" Luke asked over the dim of barroom conversation and swirling guitars.

The entire band ceased playing mid-beat.

A silence permeated the room.

Only the quiet groans of the wooden floor under the collective weight of the halted dancers and the rhythmic creaks of the mirrorball still spinning above.

Alicia turned to Darlene, whose eyebrows were upturned dramatically, as if Luke had just accidentally set off an explosion. The newcomers slowly spun and a hundred sets of peering eyes were wordlessly staring back their way.

Their faces differed in specifics but were generally the same—old yet smooth, as if the wrinkles they'd earned from a long life lived were somehow preserved behind plastic wrap. Some wore hats, others had flannels half-unbuttoned to expose bare chests or tight t-shirts. A few were dressed in fine whites and scarlet reds, washed and pressed for a night on the town. They held glasses of wine or beers beaded with sweat or elaborate tiki drinks colored an aqua blue.

Darlene set her beer on the bar and moved between the townies and the tourists.

"They're okay," she said. "Just made a wrong turn is all."

"A real wrong turn," a voice rasped from deep in the bar's shadows.

"Real real," said another.

"We don't want any trouble," Luke said, placing his glass on the bar to free up his hands for an approaching battle, as if that'd matter against this quantity of mob. "We'll leave."

Hot wind came rattling through the wooden slates of the bar's back windows.

"We've been through this kind of thing before," a voice called out from the back.

"And it always turns out bad," offered another.

"We can't let them leave," said one more. "We can't let them tell others."

Alicia took down her shot and then drew a quick pull from her beer. She set the glass on the bar with enough force that suds splashed over the rim, then she stepped in front of Luke to address the babbling crowd.

"We don't mean to intrude," Alicia said. "And if two kids like us entering your town is too much trouble, just say the word and we'll get out of here."

She reached her hand to the bar, lifted her glass, took another sip.

"After we fucking finish our fucking drinks, of course," she said.

Luke's eyes narrowed at Alicia.

"Leash," he said under his breath, balling his hands and taking a step back for leverage.

Then he saw a tinge of a smirk flash across Darlene's face. He followed her gaze to the front of the crowd where a man with tanned skin and a gray mustache began to produce his own emerging smile. Suddenly the bar broke into giggles, then boisterous rolling laughs.

Darlene raised an eyebrow at Alicia.

"You're a feisty one alright, but we're just messing with you," Darlene said. "No need to pay for your drinks. They're on the house."

Darlene lifted her glass and the newcomers followed suit. The rest of the bar crowd lifted up their own and the Malinkites all boomed out a toast.

"To the new blood!" they shouted.

A resonant hum in the bar as they waited for the newcomers to say something.

"Fine?" Luke said.

"Okay!" Alicia shouted.

Another loud cheer and they all downed their drinks as the band began to play again. The crowd spun back to their muffled conversations, loud debates, gyrations on the dancefloor. Luke bent toward Alicia's ear.

"What got into you there?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, "just have a feel for this kind of crowd I guess."

Darlene set her empty on the bar and grabbed a newly filled one.

"Sorry about that," Darlene said, more to Luke. "One of those fun little rituals we have here. Keeps us from dying of boredom."

"Yeah, extremely fun stuff," Luke said. "Not at all felt like we were about to get torn to death."

Alicia leaned her elbows back against the bar and took it all in.

She focused on one couple on the dancefloor—a tall man in a cowboy hat and a brown shirt, in his arms a short blonde wearing a polka-dot dress. Her thin stature gave the impression of someone in her 20s but when the cowboy swung her around and the mirrorball lit her face Alicia saw that she, too, was well into middle age.

And then into view there came a squat man of similar age who was an inch or two over five feet, with wild eyes, a trimmed grey goatee, and what hair he had left pulled in a ponytail that emerged

from a yellow bandana. He shrugged off his pink tank top like a boxer entering a match and exposed a compact structure of sinewy muscles, then took a broad step up onto a tabletop and spread his arms for balance. On the next beat from the band he leapt into the air and seemed to hover a second longer than gravity should allow before landing with bent-knee in dancefloor space that'd seemingly been reserved just for him. Everyone cheered.

Alicia saw movement in the corner of her eye—the bartender waving to get Darlene's attention. Their impromptu host nodded in response and leaned in toward the couple.

"A friend wants to meet you," Darlene said. "And this is one of those requests, I'm afraid, that we can't turn down."

Darlene took Alicia by the hand who in turn took Luke's and the trio snaked through the staggering dancers to the booths that lined Cobb's other end. Each had dim lamps in the center of the tables that cast soft light on the twos or threes of Malinkites who huddled there sipping cocktails and beers, gossiping about the rest of town.

Darlene approached the last table where three women sat side by side.

"This is Frankie, and that's Margaret," Darlene said, swinging an arm to the two women on the right.

They were twins or close to it, each with puffs of gray hair encircling their faces like clouds. They smiled with pursed lips and fluttered their eyelids in strange synchrony as if they were sending coded messages.

"And this is Leigh," Darlene said, introducing the woman on the left.

Leigh had slicked-back black hair that was elegantly bracketed by dual streaks of light gray. She looked up from a book she'd been reading—an old red hardcover with no markings or insignia. She slammed it closed and placed it on the table, then removed her glasses and let them hang on the cord around her neck. She examined the newcomers over the top of her prominent nose and the creases in her brow smoothed as she did.

"We don't technically have a mayor in New Malinko," Darlene half-whispered, "but she's as close as we get."

"Please," Leigh said, casting away the notion with a flick of her wrist.

She set her knuckles atop the book to lift herself up and the bar's red overheads traced surprising definition in her biceps.

"Make yourself at home," Leigh said.

The twins took their leave toward the dancefloor and Darlene subtly pushed Luke and Alicia in to take their place.

"Hope our little joke wasn't too frightening," Leigh said over the band, now playing an outlaw country song led by a whirling harmonica.

"Not at all," Luke said, sipping his seltzer. "We love a good hazing."

Leigh ignored him and turned to Alicia.

"And what did you think, young lady?" the woman asked.

"You all have a strange situation out here," Alicia said, "out here in the middle of nowhere."

A smile peeled back Leigh's lips, exposing a row of teeth as white as whale bone.

"You don't know the half of it," she said, then let out a laugh that hummed a pitch overwhelming the rest of the bar. Luke winced at the sound and felt the others at the bar shift toward them.

Leigh's laugh settled and she took in a crisp breath, nostrils flaring on exhale.

"So, please, tell us," she began, "how did you find us? And there's no need to fib. We love our guests."

Luke began to speak but Alicia cut him off.

"We stopped near Salton Sea, and heard about this town from a lady selling crystals," Alicia said.

"Flora then," Leigh said with a knowing nod, resting back into the booth. "She's an interesting one. Drugs will do that to a person. But now that you're here, it's time for another of our silly little rituals."

She stood up on the booth's cushion in a single and swift motion then stuck thumb and forefinger into her mouth. She blew a high-pitched whistle that blared through the bar. The guitarist and bassist onstage hit an off-key note then muted their instruments. All conversations ceased as every patron turned to their booth.

Leigh suddenly jumped up on top of the table with an eerily spry motion. It wobbled under her feet.

"Alright, everyone," Leigh screamed to the rapt crowd. "Time to show these fuckers around!"

The bar broke out in cheers that shook dust from the rafters.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE TOWNSFOLK AND NEWCOMERS sprayed out of Cobb's in every direction muttering conversations under the Main Street lights until they habitually coalesced around Leigh and quieted down.

"You're gonna love this, everyone does," Darlene whispered to the newcomers, still getting their bearings within this new congregation. "We love a good show around here."

The crowd parted to allow Al Cobb through, carrying a wooden chair in his strong hands. He placed it in the circle's center and Leigh, even with however many years she had on her, leapt onto the chair with the flourish of a carnival barker.

"Gather round, gather round!" Leigh shouted. "We have new blood in town tonight, and with new blood, we must perform our New Malinko greeting to make them feel at home."

She scanned through the crowd and found their guests of honor—Alicia and Luke with Darlene just behind them, placing hands on the smalls of their backs and gently pushing them forward to take their positions.

"Don't worry, we'll be saving the ritualistic bloodletting for later," she stage-whispered miming a dramatic wink. The crowd all laughed, and soon enough, Luke and Alicia chuckled as well.

Leigh lowered her brow and sternly pointed to Luke.

"You," Leigh called out. "Name."

"Luke Stanza."

"Welcome, Luke Stanza!" the Malinkites all shouted.

"And you," Leigh said, now turned to Alicia.

"Alicia Rodricks!"

"Welcome, Alicia Rodricks!" the Malinkites all shouted.

Darlene grabbed Alicia's shoulders in a comforting squeeze and Alicia patted her hand in acceptance.

"It is because of our new friends," Leigh announced, "that we have another opportunity to give a tour of our small, fascinating, fantastical, proud town of New Malinko!"

"New Malinko!" the town all called, hoisting the glasses that they'd absconded from the bar with, sloshing with beer, wine, mixed drink concoctions.

The chorus swirled around then struck the storefronts of Main Street before they rebounded and returned somehow with newly added sonority.

"To New Malinko!" Leigh called, holding up her own beer, liquid spilling over the rim.

She downed hers in a single gulp and then as if waiting for her cue everyone else guzzled theirs as well.

A soft breeze came in from the town's far end. Alicia closed her eyes to protect them from the dust, and for a moment, she felt a type of peace she hadn't experienced in quite some time. Then there came a high-pitched ringing ruckus as empty steins shattered on the pavement in boisterous celebration.

"Okay then!" Leigh said, reaching for Al Cobb's outstretched hand, using it to help her jump to the asphalt. "Let us begin!"

She walked to a nearby storefront. It was a hardware store with a red sign up top, its ambient light too hazy to read. One of its windows held displays of shovels and bags of soil, while over in the next were a pair of yellow gardening gloves sitting in a velvet-lined case.

"This is Howell's," Leigh announced, then scanned the crowd. "Where is he anyhow?"

"Right here!" a hand rose up from the back.

He muscled through to present a frame that looked near 250 pounds with reddened cheeks behind dark facial hair that was overtaking his cheeks like a werewolf two minutes past midnight.

"This is my place. Pleasure to meet you," he said, shaking hands with the newcomers.

"Howell's granddad, Harry Pearth, he opened this, one of the first stores on our patch of Route 66, well before it became the thoroughfare you all

know and love," Leigh said. "And Harry passed it down to Howell's daddy—"

"He was a Howell, too," Howell offered, somewhat bashfully. "I'm a Junior, technically."

"From Harry to Howell to Howell," Leigh grinned, then slapped Howell on his shoulder as if letting him off the hook.

He slunk back into the crowd. Leigh walked across the street.

As they moved, Alicia caught a glimpse of reflective silver on the road through the swinging legs of the townsfolk. She tried to angle her head to get a better view, but before she made it out, Leigh raised her fist in the air and the entire group halted in a synchronized motion. With military precision they formed a half-circle around her as she stood in front of the next storefront. The Malinkites parted to allow Luke and Alicia their front row positions.

They were looking into a clothing shop with four mannequins, brightly lit, each advertising different outfits. The male shape wore a red-and-white flannel with freshly pressed jeans, the woman a white dress with floral designs that flowed past her ankles. The clothes looked vaguely familiar to Alicia, she couldn't place why.

"This is Judy's store," Leigh said, then cupped a hand around her mouth to call out. "Judy! Where you at?"

A slight commotion. A tall man with a pencil-thin mustache and flat straw hat hustled in wearing a worried look. He approached Leigh and bent to whisper, and her face lit with a smile.

"You'll have to excuse Judy," she announced. "From what I'm hearing, she made herself a dalliance tonight at the bar and, well, two of us are currently indisposed."

A round of snickering laughs scattered through the Malinkites. Heads scanned around to log who was there and, more importantly, who wasn't.

"Anyway—second verse, same as the first," Leigh began again to the newcomers. "Judy's parents opened the store after the route opened. He was a wholesaler out of St. Louis who took his extra stock this way to give it a go. And when they'd had enough money to last awhile, they moved the whole family out here for good. Three generations later, the store still offers the best in comfort and style."

Leigh closed her monologue and moved down the road, the crowd swelling behind. As they did, Alicia looked through the parting of the feet and made out the silver insignia emblazoned on the road:

66

She turned to Luke. He followed her gaze as she nodded at the numbers—but before they could say a word, Leigh rose another fist. Again the crowd froze.

This time they'd stopped in front of a squat building with a silver, chrome front and curved edges like an Airstream trailer. Its windows were shielded by half-open plastic blinds. Through the horizontal gaps, and with the aid of a streetlamp,

they saw rows of booths, scattered tables and chairs.

"No town in America is complete without a grease pit with cheap eats," Leigh said.

As she spoke the curved glass in the neon sign out front began to hum, then flickered on in radiation-green hue:



The Malinkites all let out a synchronized gasp that felt more rehearsed than sincere. The diner's front door creaked open. Out walked a short woman with rosy red cheeks and a bob of white hair.

"Did I time it right this time?" she meekly asked.

"It was great, Betty," Leigh said, then presented her to the crowd. "Betty, everyone!"

Betty blushed and offered a slight wave.

"She's been trying to get the timing for those lights just right for years now," Leigh said to the visiting couple. "And, by golly, tonight I think she did! Anyway, same story you're used to by now. Her parents owned it, and theirs before, and it's been a fixture since this wasn't anything more than just a big old desert nothing."

Leigh walked away, pulling the group as she did. They passed more stores down Main Street, and she had a story for each one.

There was the ice cream parlor with empty stools waiting to be occupied. Across the street was the bicycle shop with shiny wheels hanging in the windows. That was next to the grocery store

with an outdoor fruit stand, its offerings covered by a tarp for the rest of the night. Next to that was a restaurant with white curtains pulled over broad bay windows.

"And this is Festini's," Leigh said. "Best Italian food you'll find in town."

"The only Italian food!" someone shouted, to the giddy delight of everyone around.

The crowd walked toward where the Elantra was still parked in the darkened cul-de-sac at the edge of town. Leigh slowed her pace and stopped at the intersection. Everyone halted.

"Now, hold on," she said, turning to Luke and Alicia. "We have to make sure it's safe before we cross."

She looked to her right up the turn to Lavender Lane. The rest of town mimicked her motion. Then she swiveled to the left incline up Rose Road and the Malinkites followed her moves.

"All clear!" the Malinkites shouted. Whoops and hollers echoed through the night.

"Can never be too careful," Leigh winked.

She crossed the intersection, leading the town into the cul-de-sac. The three-story brick structure loomed up ahead.

"And now, our town's pride and joy," Leigh said.

A hum sounded ahead of them and Alicia and Luke were engulfed in a murmur of anticipation simmering through the crowd.

"You're gonna love this," whispered Darlene from behind.

A lightbulb, seemingly hovering in the air, lit and buzzed with a fierce orange glow.

The crowd reacted to its new life with "oohs" and "ahs." Another bulb flickered and caught, then another, then another.

Luke and Alicia realized they were looking at the marquee of an old theater house, each new bulb reflecting in the widening eyes of the Malinkites who gazed upon the illumination in penitent awe.

All at once the rest of the sign flicked on.

It read:

Tonight's Performance:

It was followed by a blank title, yet to be filled in.

"Our town's grandest gathering space—no offense to Cobb's," Leigh said with a graceful stretch of her arms. "The New Malinko opera house."

It was an impressive brick building with a peaked roof and four tall doorways beneath nestled archways. On the second floor, above the shining marquee, were cathedral windows in the shape of a cross, each radiating soft light from inside. Attached to its roof was a massive antenna—a cross-grid of metal with a barbed wire wrap that spiraled up its full length. It seemed almost to pierce the night sky.

"It seats two hundred, though that leaves plenty of room even if we're all inside, which to be frank isn't all that unusual," Leigh said, "No grand story here about its lineage or being passed down through generations. Just something we felt was appropriate for our little town to have, and so we

just like to show it off every chance we get."

In the silence, a stomach loudly grumbled. Those around the noise let out chuckles that broke the atmosphere of awe.

"And that's the bell telling us it's time to conclude our tour," Leigh said. "So, now is the time for you all to clap, and then get home and have yourselves a late night snack."

She gave a slight bow, the townsfolk burst into applause. The newcomers caught on and followed suit.

The commotion died and the crowd encircled Luke and Alicia, giving them handshakes or quick pats on the back, something to welcome them with, and then dispersed in all directions. Some down Main Street, others filled up Rose or Lavender.

Alicia and Luke stood there, deciding what next to do. The marquee lights flicked off, casting them back into darkness, and they found themselves alone on the street, save for Darlene, who still lingered at their side.

"Let's get you settled in for the night, shall we?" she said, curling her arms into theirs.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE THREE OF THEM strolled the emptied-out Main Street back toward the hill leading to the town's entrance tunnel. Alicia thought they might be heading east—on second thought, was it west?—but it was tough to tell with the moon obscured behind dense clouds.

They approached the hanging stop light still blinking yellow to the desolate streets.

"Now, I need to ask a question—and forgive me if this comes off poorly," Luke said to Darlene. She halted. "But there's only so many of you, and there aren't many tourists flowing through... so what gives with this hotel?"

"An astute question," Darlene said. "We're self-sustaining as far as our needs go. But yes, every so often we host a kind of summit for

outsiders, largely from your neck of the woods, out in Los Angeles."

There came a crunching sound from behind them and over their shoulders they saw Al Cobb the bartender sweeping up the bits of broken steins into a large pile on the pavement. The light of the street lamps caught glitters of kaleidoscopic waves with every motion of his broom.

"See, there's a special thing going on here that those people enjoy," Darlene continued. "For whatever reason, cell phone service hasn't made its way out here. We don't even have a single digital item in any of our homes or stores. It just doesn't work well with the environment, for whatever reason. Go ahead and check."

Darlene opened her hand in invitation. The newcomers reached for their cell phones—no bars of service.

"And some city folks, the ones who can afford the vacation at least, get the most joy from unplugging entirely for an extended weekend. But we haven't hosted one of those parties in quite some time now," Darlene said with a flutter of regret in her voice. "They ran their course, I suppose. When you work for tourists, you open yourself up to certain changes."

She thought for a moment then snapped her fingers.

"Like a Trojan Horse." She paused and considered that as if making a mental note. "Yeah, that's good. Exactly that," she snapped again. "Anyway, we ended that a while back. Didn't want to make the same mistake again..."

She trailed off as they continued through the empty intersection where Rose and Lavender converged with Main, out to the last two occupied plots of New Malinko—the gas station to their left, Hotel Malinko to the right—before the road headed up to the tunnel.

Alicia glanced at the gas station, and for a brief moment there came the image flashing through her memory of being pinned down behind the pumps by gunfire.

"Here we are," Darlene said.

The hotel was markedly different from the motel on Route 66.

It was an all-wood structure two stories in height, painted bright white with a wraparound porch on its second level. The windows cast yellow bands through cracked blinds onto a patch of freshly-manicured grass out front. Sitting on top was a metal weathervane that pointed out to the tunnel, out to the rest of the world.

"Seems fancy," Luke said. "Like, more than what our budget allows."

Darlene waved the comment away, almost annoyed. She walked the concrete path bisecting the lawn, decorated with rows of bright red tulips on either side.

"I don't think we need to spend the night," Luke said. "It's only—"

He took out his phone but Darlene's cold grip grasped his hand before he remembered that no cell service meant no clock.

"It's a hair past 10," Darlene said. "Too late to head back home, trust me. Anyway, even with

all that posh camping gear you brought with you, you're not gonna sleep any better than on one of the soft, king-size beds at the Grand Malinko."

Luke opened his mouth to offer a rebuttal.

"This is where you'll be staying," Darlene stated, then continued up the hotel's entrance.

She walked up three short steps to the front entrance and pushed open the wooden door and held it for the newcomers. They followed her and stepped inside—momentarily blinded by the bright lobby lights.

A crystal chandelier casting quivering light onto the red carpet and golden yellow wallpaper hung between the expansive lobby's four support columns, each with intricate carvings etched in wood.

Piled beneath it in the lobby's center was the luggage that'd been in their car. All of it. Even Alicia's ancient portable CD player from the storage area between the seats had been taken inside.

"Thought we'd give y'all a hand," Darlene said.

A soft rumbling came from behind a column. Alicia and Luke stepped around to see.

An old man was seated behind a wide desk that took up nearly the entire wall. He seemed older, in his late 70s or early 80s, the first actual old person they'd seen in town. He had a white bushy mustache and wore a bright red bellhop's hat. The fabric of his red coat looked clean and recently ironed. His eyes were closed and he breathed in deep, steady huffs as the back of his head rested against a grandfather clock.

"Yoo-hoo!" Darlene called out.

The old man's eyes snapped open and the newcomers saw their veneer of clouded haze.

Darlene stepped in his direction and the man rose up creakily. He brushed his slacks flat as if to look more presentable, then his lips and eyes slowly creased into a welcoming smile.

"Oh, hello, hello," he spoke in a high-pitched quiver. "Didn't see you there. Was off in my own world, I suppose."

"No charge for daydreaming, Curtis," Darlene said. "We have new guests in town who'll be spending the night."

"A blessing," Curtis said. "A true blessing."

He slowly meandered his way to the end of the desk where a spotless antique register sat. As they approached his eyes began to drift off, his face went blank. His cheeks sagged, like he hadn't slept in a century or more. His brow relaxed, his breaths rolled slow and deep.

Darlene coughed into her hand and rising brightness came onto Curtis's face.

"May I carry your bags to your room?" Curtis said.

Achingly, he offered a lanky arm.

"We can manage," Luke said.

"But thank you," Alicia said.

A constant smile remained on Curtis's face. His hazel eyes glared an increasing strain as they teared with the accumulating dust. The bright chandelier lit his face, his wrinkles shadowed in relief. A look of confusion washed over his face.

"Is there any other way I can help our guests?" Curtis said through a forced smile.

"It's okay, Curtis," Darlene said, drumming a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Let's just show them the room, how's that sound?"

The tension in Curtis's shoulders loosened, his face smoothed.

"That sounds wonderful," he finally said.

He turned from the guests and walked down a thin hallway that lay past the hotel's front desk. They followed behind to another expansive room with a grand staircase made of marble and decorated with a strip of deep maroon carpeting that ran down its middle. It led to a second floor balcony that wrapped around the interior. Alicia thought it felt so much bigger in here than it looked outside.

Curtis gripped the railing as he heavily ascended. Luke and Alicia hung behind with Darlene.

"Is he okay?" Alicia whispered to Darlene.

She answered with a what-can-you-do shrug, then walked up the stairs herself, taking the unoccupied middle carpeted lane to pass Curtis by the tenth step.

At the top, the second floor landing opened to hallways in either direction lined with doors marked by red numbers stenciled on white. The ends of each hallway held small, round tables with lamps that hazily lit curtains that softly billowed and with each passing breeze offered a sliver of view from the open windows behind.

Curtis turned to his right then thought again and instead spun left and finally crept to room number 11. He reached into his front pocket and

withdrew a heavy ring of jangling keys, fumbling for a specific one and when found he it he stuck it into the lock and twisted the knob. He reached in to flip on the light switch.

"Nothing but the best for our guests," Darlene said behind the newcomers, beaming with pride.

They followed Curtis into a foyer, then stepped through and saw their room's furnishings spread over what somehow felt like the entire second floor. Ahead was a living room with hardwood floor and a brown couch set on a deep blue rug. In the corner was a waist-high wooden radio between two bookshelves that presented thick volumes with worn spines. An open set of double doors led into the bedroom where the outline of a king-size bed sat in darkness.

"This is incredible!" Alicia exclaimed.

Luke was equally impressed but tried to keep a poker face.

"To clarify," he leaned to Darlene. "We don't have to pay for this?"

Darlene fluttered her hands again then crossed to a broad window that took up most of the wall. She whipped open the curtains.

"Best view in town," Darlene said.

Outside was an expansive panorama of New Malinko—the straightaway of the now-vacated Main Street, the dark shadow of the massive theater that sat far off in the distant cul-de-sac, the twin rows of houses lining the embankments on either side.

"Well," Darlene said, closing the drapes. "We'll let you two get to your business."

With a boisterous giddiness in her step, she strolled back through the open door where Curtis stood in his strange waking haze. His eyes roamed the room even as the rest of his face remained perfectly still. Darlene set a soft hand on his shoulder and he returned to something resembling consciousness as she led him out into the hallway.

"Goodnight," she said, softly closing the door.

Alicia and Luke waited until the twin sets of footsteps creaking on the hallway floorboards gave way to silence.

"Well," Alicia said.

"Well," Luke said back.

"This sure is something," she said.

"It sure is, Leash," he said.

Her eyes were drawn to an oil painting at the room's far end. It depicted the silhouette of a man with a stern visage, standing with a leg up on the front bumper of his white automobile. He gripped a shovel as he glared into the distance where an oil derrick loomed, the image so clear she felt it was about to begin pumping.

Alicia leaned forward to more closer examine the depiction of the shovel. She squinted and swore there was something reflecting in its silver blade, but when she turned to mention it to Luke, he was already pulling against her body and kissing the back of her neck.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ALICIA WOKE FROM FRENZIED DREAMS, dreams of deep fear and pain that emanated from shadowy figures.

She felt Luke still sleeping peacefully at her side, his deep breaths wafting pulsations of warmth through the blanket that they shared. She tried to wipe away the violent visions that reverberated from her brain.

She quietly left their bed and walked into the living room toward to the broad window where hints of light diffused through the curtains. She pulled them open and looked out onto the streets and houses of New Malinko.

Main Street was empty, its lamps flickering at random intervals as if there was a short circuit in their wiring. The lights of one house in the distance flicked on, then another one across the way followed suit.

Quickly the twin rows of hillside houses all came to life, each of them casting faint orange colored glows that sat in the bed of moonlight pale blue, until the entire town from top to bottom was completely lit.

She squinted toward the far end of town, but from her perch she couldn't see the theater at all. That side of town had been cloaked in a miasma of purple-tinted fog that hung over the cul-de-sac as if it was some burnt haze that was coming from distant fires.

The fog rolled and formed into a cone toward her, right down the pipe of Main Street, its wispy tendrils extending off into the stores and then finding pathways up the ridges and into the windows of the houses where the residents slept. It became a roving, glowing miasma that quickly, all too suddenly, approached the hotel window where she stood. It fogged up her vision then began to creep in through the side cracks.

Alicia shuddered with tingles as a strange new vibrancy entered her body.

By the next moment that she could later recall, the fog had disappeared, the energy had departed entirely.

Alicia opened her eyes.

The streetlamps up and down Main Street blinked out, and the distant theater's marquee blared an incandescent yellow that was far too bright to read from her distance. And suddenly it too snapped off so only moonlight again lit the road and the tops of the brick built stores that lined the central street.

She turned away from the window with her thoughts in a clouded haze as she slowly shuffled back into the bedroom and toward the sound of Luke's deep breaths.

Chapter Thirty

SUNRISE CREPT OVER JAGGED DESERT ROCKS and then over the desolate flat like the fireball of an atom bomb. Shadows deepened as light fell upon this ancient topography.

The lumination approached a large crater, seemingly incongruous with the rest of the landscape, and for a brief moment there glinted a piece of metal that rose above the crater's rim like a reflective beacon and then the flicker disappeared as the sun continued the arch of its ascent.

The shadows of cacti lengthened, shortened and fattened. The creatures of the desert scattered for shade in rocky nooks to wait out the sweltering blaze of the approaching midday. Only then when the sun had crested above the obstruction of the rim's edges did it shine down into the mysterious crater itself.

It was new day in New Malinko.

Sunlight hit the pointed top of the theater structure first, then the hotel's weathervane that still aimed toward the tunnel entrance, before it struck the tops of the houses that were perched on the town's western ridge, then finally the flat rooftops of the shops that rested in the valley of Main Street.

The light streamed in through the parted shades of the window on the hotel's top floor and it woke Alicia from her dream.

Her body felt pulverized. Her leg muscles were tight, her biceps gave off a dull throb. There was a slight ringing in her ears.

She stepped off the bed toward the window and she heard Luke stir behind her.

"Damn, Leash," he said, sitting up on his elbows to take out his earplugs, wiping away the pieces of crust from his eyes, before flopping back down onto the pillows. "How about we close them drapes?"

She moved with her mind still in a haze as she casually pulled the curtains shut, pitching the room back into darkness before she walked through the open double doors toward the blocky shapes of furniture sitting in the living room. With each step her mind cleared and the vague pain dissipated, as if her body was loosening with every movement that she took. When she reached the broad living room windows, it had disappeared entirely.

"What time is it anyway?" Luke slurred from the other room.

"Around noon," she said and opened the drapes for an invasion by brilliant light. It collected on the opposite wall and washed out the painting of the distant oil derrick, the man and the car, the shovel in his fist.

Alicia walked onto the balcony outside and began to examine the town's true layout.

It had previously been obscured by the night, but now in sunlight, the shadowy backdrop of the horizon revealed itself as a ridge surrounding the town, all the way up above the rows of houses on Rose and Lavender. It was all like a funnel, sloping inward to where Main ran across its center. From Alicia's perspective it felt like a still painting for a moment—then suddenly as if they were waiting for their cue, the cogs of town life began to turn.

There was Al Cobb, the stout bartender himself, ambling from the grocery store with a bag hanging from his elbow, the lush green ends of a carrot bunch wiggling with every boot step. He went under the awning of the bookstore and pulled open the door, but rather than walking in, he stepped aside and held it open as the twins Frankie and Margaret, strolled out with books in their hands.

They delivered pleasantries to Al, who cupped a hand to his left ear as he listened to their end of the conversation. Even from this distance Alicia saw how the slightly taller one—was that Frankie? or Margaret?—had a thing for the bartender, while he clearly had a crush on the other one. They finished up and said goodbye, and Al walked inside.

The twins continued past the bicycle shop and crossed the street to the barber shop and then the ice cream parlor, where customers already gathered outside licked their cones with furious intention before they melted in the rising heat.

A new figure emerged from the alleyway past the restaurant. A hefty man with a lengthy beard. He turned to the twins and they exchanged soft hellos before carrying on in their respective ways.

Alicia's gaze followed this portly fellow as he ducked into the alley between the music shop and bike shop, then disappeared between the buildings. She spotted him a moment later, jogging up the stairway with remarkable dexterity, up to the houses on Rose Road. He swung a right and walked past four identical houses, then slowed to a stroll, coming to rest with his forearm against an oak tree. He peered curiously toward one of the houses.

Alicia watched the man peer through the window and then, suddenly, he spun around with great alarm, retracing his steps, retreating down to the stairs heading back to Main.

"What are you up to?" Luke's voice called behind her. Alicia felt his hands grip the sides of her hips in a tight squeeze.

"Just looking at the town," she said, nudging him back.

He sidled up next to her to take in the view.

"And what do you see so far?" he said.

"A town where everybody knows everybody," she said. "But a town where there are still some secrets."

"Same as any place," Luke said. "And what do you think that person's secret is?"

She followed the aim of his finger to the right toward the gas station, then past it to the tunnel leading into town.

From the darkness there emerged a tall and dark silhouette surrounded by waves of radiant heat. As he neared she saw that it was a lanky man dressed all in black with a short stovepipe hat atop his head. Alicia couldn't recall seeing him the night before.

The figure continued down the slope. He approached and they saw a strip of vertical white centered within his black collar. The insignia of a priest.

"Why would someone be walking into town?" Alicia asked.

"Maybe he's just coming from some sermon in the desert," Luke said. "I'm more curious about what's going on with that guy."

Alicia followed Luke's nod to the man, the large one from before, now crouched on the staircase. He rose his head to peek just above its top step, then ducked behind the stairs again.

They followed his line of sight to the driveway of the same house that he'd approached earlier. From this slab of concrete a blue sedan backed out, then pulled away.

The inquisitive man watched the car turn onto the road that sloped gently to Main, then take the straightaway to the tunnel exiting out of town. When they turned back, the man was already at the doorway of the house, embracing a woman.

The two disappeared inside, the door snapped shut.

"Like I said," Luke said, "same as any place."

"I wouldn't quite agree!" a voice shouted from below.

It was a scratchy voice, as if the speaker was straining to be heard. An odd guttural lisp.

Alicia and Luke peered over the railing. There was the tall man in black, looking up to them.

The priest.

The brim of his hat shaded his face. They saw only the perfectly straight bright whites of his smile.

"How do you both do?" he said.

The priest tipped his hat then twiddled his fingers in a dainty hello.

"Hello there," Alicia called down.

The priest's smile somehow grew even wider at her response. He turned to Luke as if expecting the same courtesy, but his smile faded as Luke remained silent.

"Never did get a chance to meet the two of you last night," the priest called up. "I apologize for that."

A shiver went up Alicia's spine as she recognized his voice.

The priest placed an arm across his belly and pivoted in a slow, graceful bow of amends. He held a cloth-bound book with gold edging along the outside, and as he rose from his bow, he pulled the book behind his back as if to shield it from view.

"My name is Reverend Bloom," the priest said. "And you are Alicia, and you are Luke."

"We are," Alicia said.

"As you can imagine word travels fast around here," the priest said. "I was out of town last night, but when news got to me that New Malinko had fresh guests, well, I had to come back to meet them myself."

The ends of his lips curled up as he raised his head from his hat's shadow into the sun, revealing his face. It was gray and weathered, and he had sharp stubble in the deep grooves of his tightened cheeks. In spit of his smile, his deep blue eyes remained emotionless, static.

"And how long do you suppose you'll be staying with us?" the priest asked.

"Oh, just today—" Luke began.

"—we may leave today," Alicia interrupted. "But there's no need to get ahead of ourselves."

"I, too, enjoy leaving plans up to their own whims," the priest said, holding up his book. "But for now, my own duty calls. Have a sermon that still needs writing."

"Nice to make your acquaintance," Alicia said. "We're about to get ourselves together, then head into town for breakfast."

"Isn't that splendid," the priest said, folding his fingers together as if in prayer, his book tucked under his arm. "I wish I had a recommendation, but as you can see," he waved to the street, "you don't have much in the way of choice here."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Luke said.

The man stared back for a silent moment before tipping his hat forward. Shadow again descended over his eyes.

"I'll be seeing you two," he said, then continued with a new bounce to his step past the intersection onto Main Street.

They watched him stroll the sidewalk and pass the hardware store. As he did, the door opened and out stepped a hearty man clad in overalls. He turned toward the priest, hastily greeted him with a hesitancy in his shoulders, then quickly walked away in the opposite direction.

The priest crossed the street to the diner. The faint bell over its front door chimed. Two couples exited, saw the priest, and straightened upright as if caught by a proctor, before hurrying off.

The priest continued on toward the cul-de-sac—the townsfolk giving nervous greetings before hustling away—and then he disappeared through the theater's front doors.

"What do you mean we may leave today," Luke said.

"Luke, why are we here, and have we accomplished our reason for coming all this way?" Alicia said, then gripped his arms. "Jeff and Kelsey, you remember them?"

She reached into the neck of her shirt and pulled out her necklace. The golden ouroboros sat on top of her t-shirt. He nodded as if finally waking from a dream.

"Plus, I think we got our first big break," she said.

"What do you mean?" Luke asked, his eyes brightening.

"Didn't you hear that priest's voice?" Alicia said, somewhat aghast. "That's the voice of the host from that radio show."

Chapter Thirty-One

THEY TOOK SHOWERS ONE AT A TIME, changed and packed, setting their bags near the door for a quick exit, just in case. The hallway floorboards creaked as they approached the grand staircase and they walked down to the lobby.

Curtis sat in his chair behind the front desk, eyes fluttering in a languid gaze. He didn't flinch until they approached.

"My guests have awoken," he said, slowly standing as a smile forcefully crept across his face. "And what do you two have planned for today?"

"Give them a dang second, Curtis!" Darlene's voice came from behind a door at the other end, and then in she walked, wearing a black sundress accented with orange flowers, holding a tray with two glasses of orange juice.

"We'll get you a real breakfast," Darlene said. "This is just a little something-something first."

She held out the tray and they took their glasses. The juice was fresh and sweet.

"This is incredible," Luke said. "Where did you get this from?"

"Grown right here in New Malinko," Darlene cut in. "We're blessed. Very blessed."

She thrust out the tray again for their glasses, and Darlene spun to the kitchen and returned empty-handed before the door could swing shut.

"Well, let's get on and show you our beautiful town during daylight," Darlene said.

They said goodbye to Curtis, already resting his head against the grandfather clock, staring with a distant gaze motionless except subtle breathing.

The trio stepped through the hotel's front door into sunlight and Alicia made a concerted effort to avoid glancing at the gas station as they crossed the intersection to the strip of shops.

"Here we are," Darlene said.

Through pristine storefronts they watched townsfolk browse aisles, make purchases. Outside, groups of twos and threes strolled the sidewalks, smiling and greeting the guests as they passed.

The townsfolk all looked familiar to Alicia but their names had been lost in the previous night's blur. Some re-introduced themselves—Henry, Allison, Marion, Nicole, Johnny—but these too were quickly forgotten. They shook hands and exchanged stories of their own desert travels from back in the day, way back, back before it was easy to get a car moving at eighty miles an hour, and they all seemed an indeterminate middle age between late career and early retirement, with

smooth, fresh faces, rather than those tanned like hides, weathered by years in sun and dust.

After the gauntlet, they finally got to Betty's diner.

They entered to the crash of cookware, the sizzle of bacon, conversational cacophony. The layout looked familiar to Alicia, though she couldn't pin down why. Every seat was occupied.

"Just one second," Darlene said, holding a finger up to the guests.

She made her way to a back booth, where a man flipped idly through a newspaper. He sipped from a steaming cup as Darlene leaned down to speak inaudible words. He nodded and rustled his paper back into proper order, tucked them under his arm, and made his way through the diner, a broad smile beaming on his face.

"Oh, you didn't have to," Alicia offered.

"It is my pleasure," the man said, then left through the front door under the sound of the ringing bell.

Darlene was already in the now-emptied booth waving them over. They crossed the green and white tiles and took their seats. Alicia pulled a menu off the holster at the table's edge, but before she opened it, Darlene snatched it away.

"You won't need that, honey," Darlene said.

Darlene caught the attention of a waitress—a round woman with a dark black bob of hair—with a finger-snap. Without even coming over, she withdrew a thin pencil from her hair that she used to jot an order on her pad, tore off the sheet, and clipped it on the metal rack that spun into the

kitchen. A grimacing man in chef whites read the scrawl and let out an exaggerated huff.

"Oh, give it a rest Larry," the waitress shouted over the restaurant din, a joking lilt to her voice as she theatrically rolled her eyes.

Alicia saw a smirking couple in one of the booths. At another table a foursome of middle-aged folks seemed to be stifling back laughter.

Darlene ignored the snickers and set her hands on the table to begin laying out the day's plans. They had a lot to get to, she explained.

First they'd devour their specials, then digest while chatting with any Malinkites passing by to make their casual benediction.

"If you'd like to humor them, of course," Darlene added.

They'd get the check—but don't worry about that, she added, as guests never pay—before making their way back to browse the shops for anything they'd like to take back to L.A. with them. Then finally it'd be time to stop at Bruce's. He was having a pre-4th of July BBQ before tomorrow's big celebration.

"Is that tomorrow already?" Alicia murmured. "Traveling sure does a number on your sense of time."

A bell rang in the kitchen and two filled plates were set onto the window. The waitress plucked them up and brought them to the table with a stern look on her face.

"Thank you, Doris," Darlene said without making eye contact.

Doris ignored Darlene entirely and gave a

forced smile to the newcomers before turning on her heel and trudging away.

"Don't worry about her," Darlene said. "She just doesn't know what her place is yet, is all."

Alicia and Luke looked at their plates. A beautiful scramble with chopped fresh peppers and onions, and bits of seasoned gray meat that looked like homemade sausage. On a third plate was a pile of fried potatoes topped with slices of sauteed heirloom tomatoes.

"This looks amazing," Alicia said.

Doris returned with three mugs of steaming hot coffees. "Here," she said. "Cream on the counter." She went off to check on other tables.

"Bon appetit!" Darlene said.

Alicia and Luke picked up their forks and dug in, savoring. At each muffled appreciation of the meal Darlene clapped with glee as she rocked in her seat.

"And this all from here?" Luke said.

"It's locally sourced," Darlene said. "We are truly blessed."

It took another ten minutes to get through it, with Darlene making regular exclamations until they left thoroughly cleaned plates and drained the rest of their coffees before Doris came over to top them off.

Alicia and Luke spent the next hour in the booth holding court as Malinkites slowly passed in procession, greeting Darlene and giving the newcomers a welcoming address, and then answering any questions that the Malinkites had about what life was like in Los Angeles.

Finally, Darlene looked at her watch and cut off the meet-and-greet. She stood up and the newcomers followed her toward the door.

"Put it on my tab as always, Doris," Darlene called back into the restaurant as the bell dinged them adieu.

Outside, sidewalks were bustling as the afternoon waned. Groups of townsfolk milled in and out of stores, huddled on stoops, or were perched on benches, chatting and gossiping. Darlene led them past the music shop and the sound of an accordion drifted through a cracked open door. They stepped into a clothing store, the sign above reading Judy's Boutique.

Almost immediately, a set of vintage dresses caught Alicia's eye, so Darlene got her situated in a dressing room. The proprietor—Judy herself, a short woman with a polished face and cloud of white hair—helped with the zipper. The curtain closed behind Alicia.

Luke sat down next to two other men, also waiting for their partners' return. They smiled in camaraderie at Luke.

"Sorry for staring," Alicia overheard one of the men say from the dressing room. "Just something like the closest to a celebrity sighting we get around here."

The man wore a flannel shirt, his head full of brown hair. He introduced himself as Doc and put an arm around the man next to him, wearing a brown button-up and bifocals. Doc introduced him as Jonesy.

"Heard you folks just came in," Jonesy said.

"We did," Luke said.

"Pretty fun time last night," said Doc. "Always gets wild when new folks come to town."

"And how are you two enjoying the accommodations so far?" Jonesy asked

"The room's really wonderful, and breakfast was great. I'm not much of a shopper," Luke trailed off, nodding to the dressing rooms.

"The years I've spent in this chair," Doc said with a smirk. "Years I'll never get back—"

"—but years we wouldn't spend anywhere else," Jonesy finished.

"Is there anything else we can do for you?" Doc said.

"I can't think of any—" Luke started.

"Simply let us know if there is," Jonesy interrupted.

"We are here to help," Doc finished.

They heard the swish of the dressing room curtain and out walked Alicia. Doc and Jonesy let out harmonized whistles. "They aren't wrong," Alicia could tell Luke was thinking.

The dress was peach and speckled with orange dots. It flowed down to her knees and the hem lifted as she circled to show it off. She turned her head to assure Luke was taking it all in, and found that he certainly was.

"What do you think?" Alicia said through a smile, her dimples showing.

"It looks great, Leash," he said, slowly standing. "You look great."

"Like this was made for her," Darlene said behind her.

Luke walked to Alicia and set his hands on her shoulders, then reached for the price tag hanging on back from a safety pin.

"Oh, I don't even want to look," Alicia said.

Darlene lunged for the tag, her hand brushing Luke and giving off a shock of static electricity that made him instinctively withdraw. She tore off the tag, leaving the dangling safety pin softly chiming against a button.

"Haven't let you pay yet, not gonna start now," Darlene said.

"You can't possibly mean that," Alicia said.

Darlene crumpled the tag into a ball, stuffed it in her pocket.

"We have to get going anyway," Darlene said, collecting her purse.

"Wait, I have to change back," Alicia said, then bashfully turned to Judy. "Or can I wear this out?"

"Sure can, hun!" Judy said with a dimpled smirk. "It's your property now, do with it as you please!"

Another smile crossed Alicia's face, broader than the last. She ducked into the dressing room to collect her things while Luke turned to Doc and Jonesy, still gawking from their seats.

"Hope you two don't get stuck in those chairs," Luke said, then offered a hand.

Doc took it, and Luke felt a little sting on his fingertips—another static shock. Doc looked Luke dead in the eyes.

"Can't let that one go," Doc said. "She's something special. Very special indeed."

Doc withdrew and Luke felt the tingling shoot through his arm.

"Doing my best," he said as Alicia came from the dressing room, her old outfit hanging over her shoulder.

"What was that about?" she whispered.

Luke shrugged.

"Now that just won't do," Judy said, and bent down behind the counter to retrieve a red purse with a thin strap. "Give me that now."

Judy took Alicia's old outfit, folded it in half, placed it inside of the purse. She lifted it onto Alicia's shoulder.

"There," Judy said. "Much more dignified."

Alicia thanked her for the accessory and Judy responded with a deep hug. Alicia smelled a perfume that smelled like roses. Judy pulled back with fresh tears in her eyes, then turned away and headed to a back room.

"Don't mind her," Doc called out. "Just gets emotional is all."

Alicia said goodbye to the two old men in their chairs as Luke held open the door.

Darlene was smoking outside. A gray trail escaped from her lips and caught the edge of the sunlight, now fully dipped past the crater's soaring wall.

"Shall we?" Darlene said, crossing the street.

The newcomers followed, Alicia with a fresh glow in her new peach polka-dot dress, Luke strutting in his own proud way as she held the crook of his elbow.

The liveliness of Main Street had by now died down. It was still daylight, but the tall ridges of the crater had already cast much of the town in

shadow. Only a few Malinkites strolled about, a laziness to their steps, as if they'd just eaten a grand meal and were walking it off.

Darlene aimed for the alley between the shops that led them up the stairs to Rose Road. They took a right and arrived at a house with a trail of Malinkites trickling up the side entrance.

As they approached Alicia grabbed Luke's wrist. He leaned his ear toward her, and she whispered.

"It's that house from before."

He took another look at the house and it came back to him—the one where they'd observed that bearded stout man snooping around before he went inside for his dalliance with the married woman.

"Welcome to Bruce and Laura's," Darlene said, holding the wooden gate for them to enter along the house's side.

The trimmed light green grass of Bruce and Laura's backyard sloped slightly upward as it hugged the rim. Darlene told the newcomers it was "prime real estate" as they watched the crowd mingle under strands of colored Christmas lights that'd been strung overhead. Al Cobb was off in the corner by himself, drinking a cloudy beverage from a plastic cup. He saw them, kept sipping.

"That is simply an amazing dress," came a voice from behind.

They turned and there was Leigh, the "mayor" herself. She was again wearing all black, and flanked by the twins, Frankie and Margaret.

"Don't you just love it," Alicia said, twirling again, her new red purse dangling with the spin.

"It's like it was made especially for you," Leigh said, her dark eyes examined the fit, her lips pursed, stoic.

She sipped an orange-colored cocktail and the twins lifted theirs as well. Darlene returned with two filled cups that she handed to the newcomers. Alicia tasted that it was a rum drink with a hint of coconut cream cut with lime soda, while Luke took his whiff of alcohol and kept the cup holstered in his fist.

Leigh looked past them, her dark eyes widening.

"Let me show you something," Leigh said, shouldering them aside on her way to the yard's far end.

At the property edge was a set of steep stairs carved into the hill. Leigh rapidly took them two at a time while Luke and Alicia huffed behind. At the top was a short wooden deck, set at a height allowing them to view over the top rim.

The desert floor stretched out to the horizon. Grooves in the rocky outcroppings darkened in shadow as scrub brushes quivered in the evening breeze. In the far distance they saw the metallic twinkling of reflective trucks and cars barreling across the highway, and beyond that was the faint presence of a row of emaciated buildings that huddled next to a hill. Up there it was peaceful and calm, an entirely different scene from the partygoers clinking glasses and yelling songs as they walked barefoot on Bruce's lush lawn down below.

"This is Bruce's little spy perch," Leigh said. "Sometimes I catch him up here, keeping an eye on everything for us."

They gazed to the backyard, then the town entire. The sun was by now entirely occluded by the rim on the crater's opposite side so the buildings on Main had taken on graying tones.

"And in three, two," Leigh said, then silently mouthed, "one."

A street lamp near the tunnel flicked on, light pooled on the road. The next lamp came on, casting a second glowing circle onto the street. Then came the next, and so on, down the slope until the incandescent trail reached the intersection. The interior lights of the gas station and hotel both snapped on as if suddenly plugged in. Like dominoes, the lamps of Main Street caught one at a time, bright circles against clean shop windows, illuminating faint oblong shapes on the sidewalks. On the opposite hill, lights in the windows of the homes blinked to life, and finally, the cul-de-sac at the town's edge caught glow from the streetlights surrounding it. The theater remained dark, standing in stark shadows.

Luke and Darlene kept conversing about the view, but their words faded into the background as Alicia watched a single light flick on in the theater's second floor. And then, a silhouette in the window.

Suddenly, loud snaps echoed through the canyon and, in the starry sky above, explosions with gossamer drips of red, white, and blue that came with a chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs" from the Malinkites. They looked down and found the host, Bruce, smirking up to them for approval as he began setting up a second row of fireworks.

"A good, necessary test before tomorrow," Leigh said quietly, but with a voice that still carried through the party noise. "But enough for now, Bruce."

Bruce hastily retrieved the new row and piled them back into his quiver. It would have to wait.

Alicia returned her gaze to the theater, but the light in the window had gone off.

"Okay everyone," Bruce shouted, hoisting a red plastic cup. "Time to take it inside!"

The Malinkites filed in, and the group with Leigh, Darlene, and the newcomers came down off the wooden deck and followed in as well.

They entered into a tiled kitchen that led into an expansive living room, where the partygoers—the ones left anyway, it felt like half had already departed—were finishing their drinks.

The room's decor was mostly faux wood except for the stone fireplace. In the corner stood a tall radio in an art deco style.

Alicia felt Luke anxiously grip her hand. He nodded across the room, and there was that stout man, the one who'd been lurking around the house.

"That's Jimmy Reynolds," Darlene said, coming between them, as if she'd already known the contents of their silent conversation. "He's been having an affair with Laura, Bruce's wife. Been going on for awhile now."

They looked back to Jimmy, who stared into the kitchen. And there was Laura, the party's hostess, casually sipping a drink as she made eyes back at him.

"Stop gawking," Darlene hissed.

"And everyone just knows about this?" Alicia whispered back.

"Darling, everyone knows everything here," Darlene said, "but we still play our little pretend games to keep it fun."

Darlene peeled off to join another conversation.

"And how is your day going?" Leigh said behind them, her voice a steady hum like static. She was flanked again by the twins.

"It's been a whirlwind," Luke said.

Leigh nodded solemnly, the twins mirrored her.

"Darlene sometimes gets a wild hair up her ass when it comes to showing people around," Leigh said.

"Wild hair," the twins both agreed.

"So," Leigh said with a contemplative nod.

The rest of the party murmur had disappeared deep into the background as Leigh's single word, an invitation of sorts, floated in the air.

She slowly took a seat in a nearby wooden chair and the twins perched on either arm. Alicia and Luke, as if pulled by some unknown force, sat cross-legged in front of her. Leigh placed her palms on her knees.

"So, what questions do you have about New Malinko?" Leigh asked.

The first thing Luke wanted to know about was the crops. How this small town in the middle of the desert sustained themselves.

"We're blessed," Leigh answered. "Let me show you something."

She stood and walked to the house's broad front windows overlooking the town. She clicked her tongue and pointed across the way. In the middle of the row of identical houses was a structure with glass windows, taller and wider than those around it, glowing from within. An electrical wire ran through one of the windows inside.

"Our greenhouse," she said. "Amazing what you can do with the right knowledge and a little luck."

She returned to the chair.

"And what's next?" Leigh said. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Anything," the twins echoed.

"What about you, my dear?" Leigh said, turning to Alicia. "Do you have any questions?"

"I do have one," Alicia began. "What's with that town on Route 66?"

A knowing smile crept across Leigh's face as the twins slightly shifted in their seats.

"Well," Leigh started, "that's a story, alright."

Chapter Thirty-Two

LEIGH BEGAN HER GRAND TALE of how New Malinko came to be.

This community they were visiting, she told the newcomers, out here in the middle of the meteor crater deep in the desert of the American Southwest, a special kind of nowhere, was indeed related to that husk of a town on Route 66. That was its blueprint, and in a way, its still-living twin.

Way, way back, after it was apparent the highway's installation would cinch closed the economic artery keeping the town alive, a group of residents grew tired of being powerless against the momentum of their circumstances.

They'd watched friends and neighbors trickle away, and didn't want to simply let the dwindling of the population destroy what they'd built out there in the harsh landscape with their own hands. But they also realized that wherever they

ended up after that town, likely scattered off to the whims of chance and the tides of jobs, each starting over in their own way, they'd still have to fend off those same dynamics of value, real or otherwise, synonymous in a special way, as the perception itself held equal importance anyhow, built into soil by those who'd come before, such being the immutable nature of the system they'd all been born into.

"For those of us remaining, a dozen or so in all," Leigh said, "we decided to carve a different path."

As Leigh explained, they'd taken a few investigative trips that circumnavigated their area of the desert. "Hard trips in heat that'd make you shrivel up," she said. She detailed journeys of harshness and deadliness that, to Alicia, had the tone of stories told through generational phone tag, each relay adding another layer of danger to the tale. After those trevails, finally, the dozen lucked into this strange land, hidden away from the flows of accumulation that begat rhythmic cycles of construction then deconstruction, greatly blessed to provide for them and all the mouths yet to come.

The original dozen slowly constructed the town, a relatively simple proposition as the footprint had already been agreed upon: they'd mimic the Route 66 original.

They cut the tunnel with borrowed equipment, then laid roads by trading favors or learning to work the machinery themselves. When the walls and roofs were finished, they returned to "Old" Malinko and brought back with them whatever wasn't nailed down or hadn't been scavenged away.

Over the years, as the original dozen began to grow older, they knew that expansion was needed. They'd leak word to others and invite them into their community, always keeping in mind there was only so much land and space to go around. Soon, the vacancies were filled.

"Which brings us to the present," Leigh said. "Which brings us to you."

The town's mayor rested back in her chair. The wrinkles around her eyes had deepened, it seemed, since the start of her story. The twins flanking her sides shut their eyes and subtly moaned with a pleasurable resonance as if they'd just ingested a hearty meal. Alicia and Luke sat silently, waiting for Leigh to begin again, but she stayed quiet and gently folded her fingers together in a teepee'd gesture of finality.

Luke finally blurt it out.

"We have to tell you something," Luke said, "we're here beca—"

A loud buzz rang through the room. Everyone's attention turned to the corner, where a harsh red light flashed atop the vintage radio.

"Time for Cobb's, everyone!" someone shouted, and a cheer went up through the room.

Leigh smiled at the newcomers.

"We must pause our story for the moment," she said, rising from her chair. "Tradition calls."

She melded into the crowd. The twins followed, then the newcomers, and they all departed the house and headed for the staircase back down to Main Street.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ON THE WAY DOWN, Alicia reached to grab Luke's hand and gave it a squeeze to halt his progress, then leaned into his ear.

"You were about to tell them..." she began.

He nodded, they continued.

"Don't you think this is something we should talk about?" she hissed.

"We have to get it over with," he hissed back.

"Well," Alicia said. "Maybe just... not yet, anyway."

"Then when?"

He ripped his hand from her grip and quickly took a few steps to give him further distance.

They followed the exiting stream of Malinkites through the alleyway onto Main, under street lamps that bathed them in ghostly glow. They joined the tributary of another group that was coming from the town's opposite side, seemingly

from a similar get-together, and they all merged together under the red neon sign of Cobb's before heading in through the door. The night's music had already begun.

The music again was a surf rock jam session with twin electric guitars that spit rapid notes of fuzzy reverb through the tall dancefloor, the deep basslines hovering throughout the low-hanging Tiki hut section that partitioned off the bar, where the newcomers had sidled up to.

Alicia got another beer and another shot while Luke ordered a virgin painkiller, which Al Cobb begin to make with a pained expression on his face. He brought back the simple pours and they waited for his alcohol-free concoction on a pair of stools that creaked beneath their weight.

"May sobriety not be your fate for long," spoke a raspy voice next to them.

They shifted and saw that it was the stout man with the beard from before, the lurker and adulterer, the one who'd been introduced to them as Jimmy.

"It may feel right, and even necessary," Jimmy said, raising his whiskey in a toast. "But life is a torture without the occasional inebriate."

The band all at once shifted its beat. The bar's lights dimmed to a scarlet haze.

"It is, it is," Alicia heard Luke say, but by then she'd moved off her stool toward the dancefloor, the new beat now beckoning to her.

The song crawled to an end and in its vacuum there came the sound of a muted horn. There was a murmur in the crowd and everyone shifted for a better view of the stage.

The curtains billowed and parted, and out came the bell of a trumpet, its gold reflecting spotlight white. It pushed forward and from behind it there came the man who was playing it. He was short with a swollen neck and thick eyebrows that rose on every blow from his lips. The sound of the backing band reemerged to lay down a slow waltzing tempo beneath his trumpet lead.

"Who am I to get in the way of one's self-control?" Jimmy said, who knocked back the rest of his whiskey and slammed it on the bar. "But if I am to be your enabler, all you need to do is say the word."

"I apprecia—" Luke began to say to Jimmy, but before he finished, he saw that the stool where Alicia had been was empty.

A momentary panic tightened his insides. But then he scanned the dancefloor and immediately saw Alicia in its middle, before she disappeared into the throng of townsfolk who were similarly swaying to the music.

Luke stood from his stool to get a better look. Watching Alicia dance was one of the wonders of the world, Luke had confided to her more than a few times over their relationship.

"Well maybe just the one," Luke told Jimmy, who snapped his fingers to Al for a pair of fresh cocktails.

The first time Luke saw her dance—in the living room of that mutual friend's house party where they'd met, however many years and miles, however many fights ago it was by now—he'd found her dance moves confusing, despite

somehow being in perfect rhythm.

Over their years together, he'd examined from the sidelines in wonder as others tried to dance with her—friends, mostly, but strangers too—and they'd quickly learn that there was no dancing with her, only near her, as she'd ignore them completely, taken by the music, swerving around them, seeing them as obstacles to avoid or magnetic bodies to siphon some force and claim as her own. When she got into those grooves, the only thing anyone could do was inhabit the vague space around her and revel in awe. And they'd be lucky to do so, Luke had thought.

But still, even here in this strange town at the end of the world, they all tried to rein her in.

Luke stirred his Tiki drink colored a shocking purple and watched Bruce, the host of the barbecue, approach Alicia with confident swagger in his eyes. He reached a hand to take hers, but she swatted it away. Next was Darlene, but Alicia clocked her quickly and responded with a curt smile before she, too, became simply another body in her vicinity. The twins, Frankie and Margaret, synchronized knee flexes to the rhythm, but they were parted. The squat muscular man with ponytailed grey hair pulled through a yellow bandana strode onto a tabletop, his shirt already gone, and waited for dancefloor space to clear so he could finally do his leap.

The band had now locked into a bluesy groove as the trumpet blared. Alicia's arms swayed as she closed her eyes.

She'd taken over the dancefloor center all to herself.

Whenever Alicia was in these states, she felt consumed by a quivering meditative aura, as if she was some phantom occupying an unwitting body, a droning fugue. There was no purpose or control, simply innate reaction to those around her.

The humbled Malinkites looked on in reverence, opening space whenever she approached, pleased to be in her environs, to be part of her night.

Alicia felt power, and through her squinting eyes sensed a warmth in their smiles, as if they were trying to relive some experience they thought they'd forgotten, some life they'd once known.

The band's rhythm slowed and frayed as the song came to a conclusion, and the cavernous space was again filled with silence.

The horn player took a slight bow at the polite applause, and he and the rest of the band disappeared behind the curtains. The fog in Alicia's brain cleared and her leg muscles gently tingled with recovery from her dance.

The crowd dissipated as they returned back to their booths or to the bar for refills, and Alicia found the back of Luke's head, waiting for her with an arm resting on the bartop's edge. He was facing the other way, speaking to someone else she couldn't see.

The bodies of the drunks suddenly parted, and she made out who Luke had been talking to—the smiling face of Sam Waterson, the proprietor of the Malinko Motel out on Route 66.

Chapter Thirty-Four

THE BAR'S WHITE OVERHEADS shone bright on Alicia, catching her breath as she felt pulsing throbs thumping through her cheeks.

The throng of Malinkites on the dancefloor had flooded back to the bar to deposit their empty glasses, coming between the conversing Luke and Sam Waterson for a brief moment, and when they parted, Luke, as if sensing her, whirled around and they locked eyes. He smiled with a warmth she hadn't experienced in some time, and when she approached, she'd found that Sam had disappeared.

"Luke," she began, "was that…"

He nodded and took a swig from the cocktail, a plume of alcohol wafted from his breath.

"Yes, yes," he said, setting an open hand on her shoulder. "But it's fine, it's fine. It was all just one big misunderstanding, is all."

Alicia looked into Luke's eyes. They held a strange glassy quality. He sipped again.

"What do you mean?" Alicia asked. "One big misunderstanding?"

"We didn't know the whole story," he said.

Leigh passed through the throng of drinkers and placed a hand on Alicia's forearm. Her fingers were thin icicles on Alicia's skin.

"Now is not the time," the mayor said.

"No, no. This can't wait," Alicia said, turning to Luke. "Tell them what happened. Tell them what happened to us out there."

Leigh's hand now felt warm, then hot, almost burning. Alicia pulled her arm away.

"I'm afraid we don't have the time," Leigh said. "We have a schedule to keep."

Leigh re-entered the stream of Malinkites that were now departing the bar. Luke rested his open hand on the back of Alicia's neck and leaned into her ear.

"Trust me," he whispered, "it's all going to be okay."

"What the fuck is going on?" she hissed.

He took her hand, his fingers interlacing hers. She felt sticky sweat from his palm. Luke pulled her forward tenderly.

As they exited, Alicia saw a man standing by the jukebox, his back to them as he scanned the musical offerings. The red light silently flashed on top of the jukebox, giving his suited silhouette a scarlet glow. At this angle, Alicia couldn't see his face, but he held a fedora in his hand, and his deep black hair had been pomaded straight back.

Another exiting bunch of Malinkites filed between them, and when they departed, the man at the jukebox had left.

When they made it out into the open air, the crowd numbered a hundred or more, formed into a loosely organized clump like an arrow pointing down Main Street toward the cul-de-sac.

Luke brought them into the mumbling congregation, and when they entered, as if everyone was waiting for them to join, the crowd began shuffling past the closed storefronts that flanked either side. Other Malinkites appeared as well, seemingly out of nowhere, to join in on the procession.

All at once, the street lights blinked out.

In the darkness, Alicia felt the ambient heat from the mass of bodies. She heard a chorus of heaving, wheezing breaths, and then looked skyward into the darkness. Stars like pinholes in black velvet. As a single mass they crossed into the intersection into the darkened cul-de-sac, the theater a gray block in the darkness.

She looked at the faces around them, some recognizable, many not, as if the town had somehow doubled or tripled in population. None of them returned her gaze, or even acknowledged her—they only stared forward.

A buzzing hum.

A murmur through the crowd.

A lone lightbulb on the marquee ignited.

It was in the sign's upper right corner, and it buzzed with a fierce flaxen glow that lit the townsfolk faces as they stared, their widening eyes all ogling in awe.

The rest of the marquee flicked on and bathed the town in its glow. It read:



Alicia saw that Luke's face was equally enraptured, his eyes glazed with the same giddiness.

"Luke?" she tried.

He didn't respond.

From the front there came a loud metallic whoosh as the theater doors opened. A moment later, the mass began to shuffle in. Left foot, right foot, left, right, all in unison. Alicia felt momentum pushing from behind, pressing against her shoulders. She felt her body rise, her feet no longer touching the concrete, as the tight procession pulled her in through the theater doors.

A massive crystal chandelier hung from a gilded chain in the theater's grand lobby, which stretched three tall stories high and was blanketed on all sides in velvet wallpaper. The Malinkites trampled the lobby's cherry red carpeting toward three entrances into the auditorium, long purple curtains hanging in front.

Through the shuffling feet of the otherwise mute townsfolk Alicia heard the clink of a rusty chain. The curtains rose in a bunch and revealed the theater space beyond. An organ began to play.

The town walked in, and Luke and Alicia had no choice but to move with them.

Alicia felt Luke squeeze her hand. She turned, and in his eyes saw a sort of giddy anticipatory excitement she hadn't seen from him before, not in years. They crossed into the theater, the volume of the organ increasing as they approached.

Once inside, Alicia had trouble making out the theater's dimensions. The angles seemed off, canted in strange ways. As if built from impossible geometry. They ushered down an aisle, dimly lit in red and blue. Ahead, at the end of the sloping theater seats, an enormous red curtain obscured the stage.

The Malinkites, silent, as if occupying a holy place, separated left and right as they filled the rows to take their seats. Alicia felt a hand on her arm, and there was Darlene with a soft smile. She steered her toward the center, and the seats around them were all soon occupied. They sat, and Darlene leaned over.

"I'm so excited for you two," she whispered, ever so slightly, so as not to disturb the sacred still. "Everyone remembers their first show."

Luke smiled at the curtain, Alicia examined the rest of the theater.

The stage was flanked by two carve-outs, each with a marble statue, some sort of Grecian bust. Next to them were three stories of box seats filled with empty wooden chairs, soon filled with Malinkites as well. It was a packed house.

In the middle box to their right, Alicia found the face of Sam Waterson as he took his seat. He mechanically swiveled his head as if sensing Alicia's stare and locked eyes with her.

She squeezed Luke's hand, who turned in reflex, then saw Sam. The two men nodded slowly in some deep silent communication, and Sam shifted his attention back to the stage.

"It's fine, Leash," Luke softly spoke. "It's fine."

She felt her hand lose feeling as he squeezed, and she pulled it from his grasp. Even in the dark lighting she saw faint traces of the fingernail divots he'd left behind. He still grinned—gritting his teeth, clenching his jaw, eyes teary.

"Leash, it's fine," he repeated with a wheeze. "It's fi—"

The organ music rose and drowned his voice. Alicia felt a cool breeze waft through the open space. The organist held one final note then released, and the note dissipated into the auditorium.

A lone brass horn shot through the air. Out from the part in the curtains walked the short trumpet player from Cobb's. He bowed as he played, then took a spot on stage right. The curtain slowly opened to reveal the rest of the band, who created a bed of harmonies.

Goosebumps rose on Alicia's neck as she recognized the song—the intro to that radio show they'd heard on Route 66.

A bright spotlight flicked on from the rafters and created a circle of white on the stage's left side, a lone microphone standing within its ring. They heard footsteps in the darkness, and into the illumination stepped Leigh.

She looked different. Her black dress had been traded for a white silk gown that frayed at

the bottom near her ankles, accentuated with sequins that shimmered and made it look as if she was constantly shifting in front of their eyes.

Leigh waved a greeting. She tenderly leaned forward and pushed her lips to the microphone.

"It is time for another midnight tale of The Confessional," she spoke in an elegant tone over the band's music. "Tonight's episode brought to you by Cobb's Bar, the best damn dive on this end of the world. Right there on Main Street in Malinko. Just come on by."

Drums began to beat, the horns blared again, the mood shifted.

Another curtain opened from the back of the stage to reveal a dozen more Malinkites—men in suits, women in cocktail dresses. They walked to the right, where a number of podiums, each fashioned with its own microphone, stood. With looks of serious professionalism, they all rifled through the loose pages they held in their hands, stacking them into order.

A woman leaned forward into her microphone and began to mimic the sound of a whistling wind. Amplified by the speakers, it cascaded through the auditorium.

"And now, tonight's tale by the preacher," Leigh read from her script. "Knock On The Door."

She stepped back, out of the spotlight.

A new light switched on to illuminate center stage, and into this there came the glare of rotating silver. It was a microphone dangling from the rafters.

Suddenly, as if appearing from thin air, there appeared the tall visage of the priest.

He carried the same book in the crook of his arm, and solemnly bowed at the waist before leaning forward to grasp the suspended microphone.

"I am the preacher," he spoke. "And I know the darkness that lies in all of our hearts."

A quiver came from the crowd as they rocked in their seats and bit their tongues, trying to contain shouts of adulation.

Another spotlight burned on and cast a circle at an empty spot at the front of the stage. They heard a sharp creaking in the distant darkness that approached closer and closer until the faint contours of a metal frame rolled into the light. Alicia could just barely make out the bare foot of a woman inside the contraption before her eyes adjusted and she could see the rest of her body.

"On a cold and windy night at the Franklin residence," the priest spoke into his microphone, "there was a knock on the door."

Another performer struck a piece of wood with his knuckles. Knock, knock, knock.

"And that is when our star this evening entered our story," the priest said. "Her name is Gertrude, but she goes by Gertie."

The cart was pushed into the spotlight. The stagehand helpers, all clad in black, fell back and dissolved into darkness.

On the cart was an older woman who'd been bound to it. She wore a black gown that stretched to her calves and her long dark hair fell down

the front of her shoulders. She looked familiar to Alicia, somehow.

Tears rolled down her smiling cheeks like twin rivers as she tried to look past the blinding floor lights.

"What is this?" Alicia whispered through tightened teeth.

Three Malinkites in the row ahead twirled around to glare at the interruption. Luke held out a hand in apology, then turned to her, harsh smile plastered on his face.

"Just watch the show," he whispered back.

The band stopped the music, so the only sounds were the soft creaks in the floorboards as the bound Gertie writhed in the metal cart. When she did, Alicia saw a drop of blood fall from her wrist where the chain had broken through skin.

Gertie lifted her head and squinted into the spotlight. Her eyes were reddened and swollen, his lips pulled back in a smile.

A new sound came from the rafters, a grating and grinding. Gertie treid to lift her head, but a buckle clamped around her neck kept it in place. A second microphone came descending from a cord, spinning slowly. It was similar to the first, but with a brilliant golden hue that glistened in the lights.

"Who..." Gertie spoke into the microphone, fear in her voice. "Who is there?"

Chapter Thirty-Five

SHARP FOOTSTEPS ECHOED through the auditorium as the priest stepped toward the woman.

He leaned into her ear and whispered. Her eyebrows raised momentarily, then lowered again with some faint look of resignation as she began to stare into some vague space in front of her. The sound of rattling chains echoed through the space as the tension she once held taut was released.

"Luke?" Alicia tried again.

The Malinkites in the row ahead spun around once more with angry looks, and Luke slowly turned to her. He presented her with gritted teeth, his face tightened as if it was about to stretch apart along his bones and tear away, his eyes bloodshot, his ears pulled back.

"Sinners must be punished," he said, then turned back to the show.

"Luke, what the fu—" Alicia said, sitting up out of her chair.

Suddenly, she felt a hand grip the back of her neck and clavicle, pinching a nerve that sent a flash of sharp pain through her side. She winced, slumped back into her seat.

"Watch the show," a voice hissed into her ear.

The bright flashes at the corners of her eyes faded. She felt the hand hovering near her neck, and smelled a waft of peppermint breeze past her face, but she didn't dare look behind.

"But when Gertie got to the door," boomed the priest's voice through the auditorium speakers. "No one was there."

There was a woman at one of the podiums with a hinged piece of wood angled into a microphone. The sound of a creaking door echoed from the vertical banks of speakers placed on the stage's sides. In a moment there came the sound of the door closing.

"Now," the priest spoke into his microphone, "this wasn't the first time this strange caller had come beckoning."

Alicia saw twin snakes of mascara running down Gertie's cheeks. The corners of her mouth turned upward in a closed-lip smile as her wide nostrils flared.

"But tonight was different," the priest said. "Tonight, Gertie was all alone in the house. Her husband, Jeffrey, had taken their kids to the movies. And it had been going great, until..."

Another knocking sound. The priest quietly scampered across the stage to Gertie and again

whispered into her ear. He held a page out in front of her.

The door opened.

"Hello?" she read from the script into the golden microphone. "This isn't funny."

The priest rasped into his own microphone.

"Yet this was a woman who recently said that she didn't think men are needed in our society," he spoke. "That women can get by all on their own, without the aid of a male mate at their side."

A subtle gasp rippled through the audience as the sound of a door closing groaned through the theater.

"Well," the priest announced. "Let's see how well this works out for our friend Gertie tonight."

Another knock. The priest aimed a finger of direction at Gertie, who spoke.

"I'm calling my husband," she stammered out.

A dial tone, then the sound of scissors cutting a cord. The tone went dead.

The priest aimed a cue to the caged woman.

"Hello?" she stammered into the golden microphone. "Hello?"

"But no one was there to answer her cries for help tonight," the priest said. "She was all alone."

One of the performers—even from this distance, Alicia could see it was the nice man who'd given up his booth at the diner—stepped forward and spoke into his microphone.

"Looking for someone?" the man hissed, absolute hate seething from his voice.

"Oh, no please," Gertie said, terror rippling through her vocal chords. "No one."

"We're all alone now," the man hissed again. "And there's no one to help you."

"And what Gertie was about to find out," the priest intoned, "was the serious nature of just what that meant..."

A rustling came from deep in the back of the stage, and Alicia saw movement behind a second layer of curtains.

"...maybe she needed some help from a man after all," the priest said.

The curtains pulled apart. Glinting metal appeared.

Gertie tried to strain her head to see, frantic swishes back and forth now so her face was nearly a blur under the theater lights. Behind her approached two figures clad in black pulling a large metallic contraption into view. As they pushed it into the lights, a gasp simmered in the auditorium.

It was a confusing mess of alloy, a scaffolding of machinery ten feet tall with a frame of black pipes from which protruded chains and circular saws and machinery and motors and leather strips that hung limply at the sides with metal buckles glinting under spotlights as they waited to be used.

An audience member let out a whisper. "The bone crusher."

"Do you repent!" the priest's voice boomed.

Gertie's eyebrows furrowed. Her lips quivered, then parted as she spoke, too quietly for the golden microphone to pick up her words.

"Gertie, we're on the air," the priest said. "Please, speak loudly, for all our listeners at home."

She squinted past the harsh lights into the crowd. Without hesitation, she spoke.

"I said, yes. I repent."

A gasping wheeze rippled through the theater, then a scratching noise from the left. Alicia turned and Luke gripping his armrest, his fingernails digging into the wood.

"Then your reward awaits," the priest calmly spoke.

The priest snapped his fingers. Two black-clad helpers flanked Gertie and grabbed her arms. A third scurried from stage right and unlocked the chains that'd bound her ankles. She slumped, and another helper came to lift her back up.

From the back another helper wheeled the grotesque contraption to the front of the stage while two helpers, moving with the practiced choreography of magician assistants, grabbed Gertie and strapped her into the machine, laying her at a canted angle. They buckled the straps and pulled them taut to test their hold, then retreated in the shadows offstage.

As they did, the dangling golden microphone shifted to where Gertie was being held, her whimpering cries captured for broadcast over the air.

"Gertie," the priest said, taking the mic from his stand, approaching her. "Most nights we take only phone calls, but tonight we make an exception. Tonight, we turn to the theater audience."

He walked into the spotlight and examined the crowd.

"Is there anyone here who wishes to speak up in this person's defense?" he said into the microphone.

Gertie's face tilted toward the crowd, seeking some solace in the dark, finding none. Her tears twinkled in the lights. She whispered something that couldn't be heard, answered only by the audience's silence.

Alicia turned to Luke, who seemly enraptured with the action, eagerness in his eyes, his tongue running across the top of his lips. She set her hands on the armrests and stood from her seat in one swift motion. Hands from behind reached out to grab her neck, pull her down, but before they could she got out a scream.

"Stop the show!"

But it was too late. The whir of the machine stirred through the auditorium, drowning out her scream.

A hot flash went up through Alicia's face as she realized what was to happen. There came a loud scream from the stage, and she saw Gertie's body utterly and instantly dismantled in a horrific display of viscous red splashes and puffs of brilliant white. It all happened at once—she was there and then she simply wasn't.

Gristle and blood stained the floor, but the tableau was soon overwhelmed by a growing fog cast in a purple hue.

Next to her, Luke lay sprawled in his seat, eyes rolled back, only the whites showing. He vibrated in his seat. Below, the rest of the Malinkites violently spasmed in their seats. Even the priest onstage had taken a knee and bowed his head as he shivered in his red cloak.

And then the purple overtook Alicia as well, and she felt it all too.

Chapter Thirty-Six

MILES AWAY, Flora sat in her trailer's back room, reclining in her customized BarcaLounger. Red and green lights flickered in the otherwise dark as she listened to that night's performance.

In front of her lay a giant funnel that pointed in her direction, its deep black hole seeming to stretch into infinity. Behind were multiple tubes and pipes that she'd welded together over the years, and they spread like the schematic of a mess of sewage lines, each extending to shelves nailed to the walls, each line ending at a small radio that had similarly been tuned to the only station she cared about, all coming in with the aid of the tall repeater antenna that stretched skyward outside.

Out of the funnel there came the voice of the Host.

Her beloved Host.

She closed her eyes.

The band softly played, the show began.

The voice of that night's star began to whimper, as they all did, then it was later drowned by the whirring of bandsaws, as happens. Flora heard the woman's piercing screams as the ghastly sound of metal cut through the flesh and bone that once was.

Flora winced as the wrinkles across her forehead deepened, sharpening in her hard, aged skin. Her eyes clouded, her vision blurred, her head throbbed.

She felt the new warmth radiating from the funnel as the purple aura flowed into view, and then sucked in air through her nostrils to prepare for pain, which it always did, however brief, and when it came, it stretched her bones and pinched her muscles and tightened her face and ejected the cataracts that'd gathered on her corneas since the last dosage. The nails on her fingers and toes tingled, an electrocution that didn't burn. This stage of the process always felt like it lasted forever but, Flora knew, it'd only be a few more seconds.

When it was all over, she settled back into her chair, a dampness covering her body, a new sheen of sweat on her face. Her insides still quivered with tension, her body sapped of all energy in its stage of rebirth.

"This concludes another midnight tale of The Confessional," spoke the announcer. In an instant, Flora closed her eyes and was sound asleep.



Interlude

BACK THEN they called him something different, and at sunset, he'd close the doors to his church, nestled in that odd teardrop-shaped land at Malinko's western edge, and he'd go for his nighttime stroll.

One such evening, under a sunset of magenta and scarlet, he was walking down Main Street for his nightly pint or three at Al Cobb's when he came upon a stranger dressed all in white, standing in the road, resting against the trunk of a white Bel-Air, as if he'd been out there waiting just for him.

The man was clean-shaven, and his pursed lips were thin and chapped with the redness that comes with long weeks spent in the dry, desert air. He beckoned him over and they shook hands and traded niceties, and the man welcomed the priest into "his office" on the hood of his car.

"Spoke to some of your neighbors, but you," the man said with a knowing nod and a wag of his finger, "you are the type that seems to know a good deal when you see one."

The man unlocked and opened the massive briefcase. Inside sat a fiery glint of gold in the sunlight. The priest leaned over and saw that it was a microphone laid on a bed of velvet.

The stranger's sales pitch didn't take more than a minute.

They spit in their hands and shook, and the man got back into his Bel-Air and drove heading west, accelerating at an enormous speed like he was chasing the sun before it had vanished.

The priest didn't quite know what to do with his new toy. He messed with the town mechanic's various cords and preamps and other equipment down in the garage's basement where he'd taken up temporary residence as his home was still being built up the road. One day, he looked out of his window and saw the purple of the setting sun and on a whim took his golden microphone outside.

"There's a band of pink in the clouds now. It's like it's splitting the sky in two," he spoke into the microphone.

In his headphones, he heard his voice amplified, yet somehow its tone was both softer and more clarified, coming through more deeply and crisply than he was accustomed to.

He let the microphone drop to his side and in the headphones heard a loud rustling. He looked to where his hand was aimed and saw a flattened snake on the pavement.

It must have been run over by a passing car and seemed to be clinging on to just the faintest glimmer of life.

The snake swayed its head back and forth, opened and closed its fanged jaws, some still existent instinct. Out of mercy the priest picked up a large stone and smashed its head in, and when he did, he felt the slightest pang of energy rush through him—first in his ears, then through the rest of his body. Later that day, as he sat in the garage basement, he opened his journal and jotted attempts the experience, trying to capture the peculiar sensation in words.

Then came the experiments.

First bugs, then lizards, other snakes. He trapped a desert fox in a metal cage that he'd bought at Howell's hardware and when he aimed his revolver and put a bullet through its brain he felt the biggest jolt yet. It came with a faint purple aura that cascaded through his body and set his insides alight.

Later at a Cobb's dripping in American flags, it being the 4th of July, where from outside they could hear sporadic pops from the Applebaum kid setting off his bottle rockets, he'd let drunken word of his experiments slip to Leigh, the mayor and drunk. And that meant the rest of Malinko would know about the tests well before daybreak.

The next night, most of the town—what was left, anyway—gathered at Cobb's like usual, where the priest explained everything, as best he could. He took out the golden microphone and showed them all.

As if meant to be, like all of God's designs, just as that meeting in the low-ceilinged space of Cobb's was concluding, they heard the rumble of a speeding car motoring down Route 66, then the screech of brakes and the racket of a horrific crash.

The entire congregation ran out onto Main Street into the red haze of the bar's neon sign.

The Applebaum kid was still in the street. He set off another single firework into the sky and it cast a white glow off the storefront windows. In that sparkling light, the priest saw a tangle of sharp metal and spewing oil at the far edge of town.

The car had passed right through the front of his church, lodged deep enough that it seemed like they'd barely slowed down at all, despite the desperate hopes logged by the black wheel marks that'd been tattooed on the pavement.

The car's rear blinkers flashed red in the smoke and the townsfolk took a circuitous path to the accident, mindful of sparks. The car had accordioned, everything but the trunk had all but disappeared.

In the wreckage there was a bare arm cut shoulder to wrist, and it dangled from what must have once been a passenger side window.

The priest circled and found a woman's head. Her eyes were open, staring. Her lips began to move.

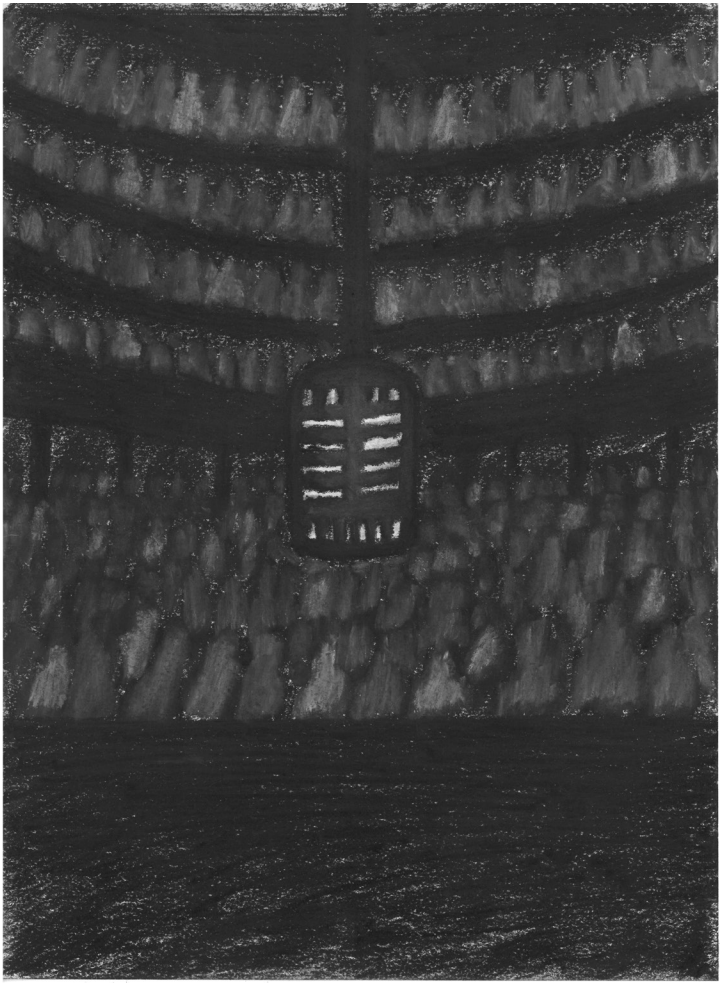
He pulled the headphones up from his shoulders, and placed them on his ears. He aimed the golden microphone at the woman's quivering lips. Faint whispers.

"What. What. what," she said. "what."

Her head went limp. In the next moment, the priest knew true ecstasy.

Leigh got to him before he passed out. As he lay on the ground, the mayor put the headphones on, and the aura flashed briefly before dissipating away so only the faint whir of wheels spinning in the splintered wood of the priest's church came through the earpieces.

The Applebaum kid set off another firework. The town all gawked at its glow.



Part V
The Show

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ALICIA STIRRED into foggy wakefulness as sunlight crept in through the room's opened curtains.

She turned from the glare and attempted to quash the piercing pain that'd invaded her brain by stuffing a pillow over her head and gripping the mattress' top edge to angle a stretch of her stiff back as she tried to piece together bits and pieces from what felt like another morning lost to another hangover.

Nothing in there was clear after Cobb's, only images of spinning around the dancefloor in a haze of shadows, the faces around her blurred beyond recognition. She took a deep breath, lifted herself up in bed, and finally opened her eyes.

The room began to whirl like a ship in rough seas, so she slammed her eyes shut again, but that only made it worse.

Ahead, the double doors to the living room were open. She focused on the wall at the other end, where that painting of the man and the oil derrick hung. The sunlight from the living room's open window came to a harsh point on the tip of the man's shovel.

The room crawled haltingly back to reality, and she crept her hand to the other side of the bed. She felt the chill of its emptiness.

At first she thought little of this. Previously, years back when they were together, during that stretch when she was letting herself go to the bars without any tethers, Luke, after he'd gotten sober at least, wasn't expected to just sit there like a silent lamb while she tossed around toward turbulent slumber. Judging by the throb in her head which was indicating last night's intake, she'd likely pushed him out to the couch sometime during the night, where he'd no doubt be waiting for her to rise.

She looked over again past his vacant side and saw his earplugs resting on the nightstand. Maybe he was already up, taking in the town's new day from the balcony. Perhaps he was downstairs having breakfast, something delicious that Darlene had served up with cheer.

Alicia flung off the blanket and saw that she was wearing that same dress from last night. That wasn't the best sign.

Luke used to at least change her out of her dance clothes and into pajamas before he poured her into the bed. But, then again, if their shared past held any clue to present behavior, she'd probably done

something to piss him off. She racked her brain, but her memory was still nothing but cloud.

She rolled from the bed. Her dress felt abrasive against her skin, so she slipped it off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor in a peach clump and kicked it toward the clothing pile that'd formed in the bedroom's corner. She pulled jeans from her suitcase and worked her way into them, feeling a strange tightness around her legs and waist, as if she'd worked out the night before. Maybe it was all that dancing.

She ran fingers over her thighs and her leg muscles pulsed through her jeans. She felt her stomach—new ripples in her abs. Tight, curved biceps flexed as she swung her arms.

Her eyes opened wide. She realized that the pouncing ache from her hangover had somehow cleared already.

"Hey Luke," she called into the living room.

Only a gentle breeze from the cracked balcony door. She walked into the living room and checked the couch. No Luke. Out on the balcony, the high desert sun shot a dagger in her eyes, before she shielded them and walked the entire wrap-around deck. She found no sign of Luke there either.

She looked down onto Main Street. The Malinkites roamed the stores, greeting each other as they passed, bags filled with purchases hanging from their arms. Same as the day before.

Movement to her left.

There was Jimmy Reynolds, lurking in the alleyway staircase. He leapt the final step and walked right down Rose Road, then stopped outside of

Bruce and Laura's, once again hesitating. Alicia saw the white cloth hung from a couch near the window, and he retreated down to the shadows of the staircase again to wait until the coast was clear.

Alicia went back inside into the bathroom and splashed water on her face. In the mirror she noticed that her skin had tightened—her wrinkles were gone, her blemishes had disappeared. She held a new glow within.

She walked down the creaky staircase to the hotel lobby where Curtis was behind the front desk, head back against the grandfather clock, staring off to some vague point across the room. Only when Alicia was almost upon him did his glassy eyes clear.

He turned to her.

"Why, hello there, miss," he tapped a finger on his ear and shrugged. "Didn't hear you. You know."

"Hey Curtis," Alicia said, and in his face saw veiled confusion, knowing that he should know who this was in front of him, but he just couldn't place her. "Happen to know where Luke went off to?"

Alicia saw more wheels struggling to turn behind his squinting hazel eyes.

"I'm afraid, I don't quite..." he trailed off, attention drifting to the lobby's opposite wall. He rested the back of his head against the clock, as if to feel its comforting rhythm as he tried to figure it all out.

"Don't sweat it," Alicia said, and walked out the front doors.

Across the street, the gas station was still.

It felt out of place amidst the boisterous action on the rest of Main Street, as if spiritually separated by the moat of the intersection. She jogged across the pavement, her calves aching briefly before they jolted with new energy, to the rows of stores where Malinkites hustled about.

Alicia walked the sidewalk, getting her bearings. All the Malinkites doffed their hats and gave her a warm smile as she passed, then carried on about their own business. A group parted to reveal Frankie and Margaret, wearing matching outfits of dark purple.

"Hello," the two spoke in chorus.

"Hello back to you," Alicia said.

"And how is your new day?" Frankie asked.

"Is it splendid?" Margaret asked.

"Still putting last night together," Alicia said. "Think I had one too many at Cobb's."

"Of course," Frankie said.

"Of course," Margaret said.

"First time is such bliss."

"But such confusion."

"But it does get better."

"You learn with age."

"Oh, I've been drunk before," Alicia said. "I'm an old pro at that."

"Of course."

"Old pro."

The twins stared with broad smiles.

"Have you two seen Luke around?" Alicia asked, and saw confusion boiling up onto their faces. "You know, the man I came with? The man I was with last night?"

"Haven't," Frankie said.

"Haven't," Margaret said a beat later.

"Good luck."

"Godspeed."

Off they went, crossing the street with determined steps and linked arms, swinging legs in perfect synchronization. They walked into Betty's diner and the bell above the door chimed. The din of conversation lingered for a moment before the slamming door sheared it off.

Alicia crossed the street and followed, entering under the bell's ping. As she stepped inside, the chatter halted and the rattle of the kitchenware silenced. The entire assembly of Malinkites—at the tables, at the booths, at the bartop—all swiveled to look at her.

"Oh," Alicia said, raising an eyebrow. "Hello?"

From the back booth came the sound of soft clapping, slow at first, then it increased in power and speed, and was picked up by other diners who added to the symphony, a rising feedback loop until the raucous thundering made metal countertops buzz, plates dance, mugs of coffee vibrate enough so the rising steam jittered like smoke-signal puffs, before finally there erupted hoots, hollers, finger-aided whistles that blared through the space.

Red flushed across Alicia's face.

"Thanks?" she said.

The claps slowed and quickly died. She stood alone as everyone returned to their seats and restarted their conversations.

"Okay then," she said to herself.

"Gotta finish cooking that burger today, Larry!" Alicia heard a voice shout from near the bar. "Some of 'em don't like it so raw!"

The waitress, Doris, with that pencil still behind her ear, was yelling into the kitchen. She gave Alicia a slight wink and, a moment later, a bell rang in the kitchen and out came a plate with a sizzling steak and heap of potatoes. Doris collected it and brought it to a hungry table.

Darlene materialized next to Alicia, squeezing her arm.

"You had quite a night there, missy, didn't ya?" Darlene giddily smiled.

"That's what it seems," Alicia said. "Although I'm still piecing together what actually happened."

"Sure, I remember that feeling," Darlene said. "It'll go away with some practice."

Alicia tilted her head, then looked past Darlene to the booth where they'd all sat together for breakfast yesterday morning.

There was Luke.

He was facing the other way—she could see the back of his head and, over his shoulder, the page of the newspaper he was pouring over.

"Oh, thank god," she said, making a beeline to the booth.

But as she approached, a queasy feeling entered her stomach. Something wasn't right.

There was a strange color to the back of Luke's neck, and she didn't recognize his clothes. When she set her hand on his shoulder she felt subtle differences in his musculature as he spun around. She found that instead of Luke it was, rather, the

nice man who'd given up his seat the morning before.

"Can I help you, dear?" he said.

A vision swirled in Alicia's head. She remembered a closed door, someone knocking outside?

"Oh, it's nothing," she said to the man.

He smiled as Doris swung by to set a plated steak in front of him. The man licked his lips, stuffed a napkin into his shirt collar, then picked up his fork and knife and began to carve up the meat.

Alicia stood there, confused. Looking at the man now, it didn't even make sense how she'd confuse him with Luke.

Her vision blurred, she felt lightheaded. Her knees quivered, then gave way.

"There, there," she heard Darlene say. "You're alright, dear. You're alright."

Next she was in a booth, a fresh glass of water in front of her. Darlene waved cool air on her face with a menu. The feeling was coming back to her legs.

"Have you seen Luke around?" Alicia asked. "I seem to have lost him this morning."

Darlene kept waving the menu but Alicia now saw a curious look on her face. Her grin had straightened, her face tightened, his lips pursed.

"I haven't, no," Darlene said curtly. "But maybe Leigh has," then to herself, "let's get this over with."

Darlene set down the menu and pinched Alicia's elbow. She pulled her up from the table, led her through the diner's gauntlet toward the

booths in back. In the central one again, like a fixture, there was Leigh, all dressed in black. Next to her sat those twins.

"Welcome, welcome," Leigh said, reaching out with both hands extended in warm clutches of embrace. "What a night we had, what a night."

Alicia shivered with faint déjà vu. Leigh's face looked different somehow—smoother, a new wakefulness.

"Now then, child, I'm sure you have questions," Leigh said. "What's on your mind?"

"Where's Luke?" Alicia said. "I'm starting to get worried."

Leigh nodded with a look of understanding, then condolence.

"Oh, don't you remember, child?" she said. "He's gone."

"What?" Alicia said.

"He's gone," Leigh said. "It's time to accept that he's gone for good."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

ALICIA FELT HEAT rise up her neck and into her face as some new vision began to flood in.

It was that woman that they'd met in that strange empty town on Route 66, whatever it was called, she couldn't recall now, not here.

What was her name, anyway? The one that they'd been looking for? The one with that strange necklace?

But she was seeing her again, now. Whoever it was. That woman.

She was on some stage, hovering in the blurred margins of her sight. Not quite her own perception, but something else. Like the floating, fragmented speech of signal broadcasts being blocked by mountains. And the woman was shaking, a blubbery mess of tears and fear. Into Alicia's vision there appeared a microphone, spinning as it dangled to capture her sobs.

And she—what *was* her name?—was attached to some metallic contraption, some torture device, that whirred to life as she began to scream.

"Is she back?" she heard Darlene say.

The vision snapped away.

Alicia was back in the diner booth.

"What do you mean," Alicia said, coming to. "What do you mean, he's gone?"

"Just that, my dear," Leigh said again, frankly as before. "Just that."

She looked past Alicia, raised a hand, snapped her fingers. Doris hustled over with a pad and pencil.

"What'll it be?" Doris said.

"One special for me," Darlene said.

"Us too," Frankie and Margaret said in unison.

Leigh nodded as well.

"Wait, hold on," Alicia said, eyes darting with vague confusion. "What the hell do you mean, he's gone?"

"Let's make that four specials and a TBD for now," Doris said.

She waited for Leigh's nod of confirmation, and when it was delivered, Doris wrote down the order and stuck the pencil back into her bob of black hair on her way to the kitchen.

"Try not to botch these orders, Larry!" she called out to snickers from the delighted diners.

Alicia felt a painful pinch on her arm, where Leigh had a full grab of her flesh. She let it go and set an elbow on the table.

"Now listen, and listen carefully, because it's important for you digest this information fully

and quickly," Leigh spoke in a register an octave deeper than usual. "Luke is gone. He was here, and now he is not. Now, he's gone. So it's best if we all just move on from that fact."

Doris returned with four rattling plates balancing on her arms, each with the same gray slosh of noodles mixed in with clumps of unknown meat. She laid them on the table with perfect precision, then pulled out her pencil and glared at Alicia.

"I think she still needs a minute," Darlene cut in.

Doris rolled her eyes, returned to the kitchen.

"Got a picky eater out here, Larry!" she called out. "You must've messed up her order yesterday!"

"Not my problem!" Larry called from somewhere deep inside the kitchen. "Where else is she gonna go?"

The Malinkites at the tables and booths all chuckled with joy.

"We know what you're going through, we've all been there too," Leigh said to Alicia, prodding at her dish with a fork. "The twins had married two brothers bent on starting their own muffler repair business, but their needs were never satisfied."

The twins picked up their orange juices and clinked the glasses hard enough the liquid sloshed. They took them down them in a single gulp.

"Darlene provided her own offering," Leigh said, "that isn't even worth getting into anymore, it's so far in the past."

"Honey," Darlene added, gently placing a hand on Alicia's forearm, "you are better off, trust us."

"Better off," Frankie and Margaret echoed.

"You'll thank us one day," Darlene said.

"Thank us."

"Thank us."

"He weighed you down, honey," Darlene said. "Dragging you like a damn anchor."

"An anchor."

"Anchor."

The twins nodded and smiled, flashing pearly whites that mismatched with their oddly-aged bodies.

"What you must realize, Alicia," Leigh started, "is that you are special."

"Special."

"Special."

"And this is where you belong," Leigh said.

"Belong."

"Belong."

Another vision erupted back into Alicia's mind, foggy at first.

She was in the old theater again, in the center aisle, about halfway up. She was alone under a bright spotlight, and then, she was again in the sanctity of the diner booth.

"What are you talking about?" Alicia said, her speech muddled.

"You are one of us," Darlene said. "You're Malinko material."

"You're meant to be here," Leigh said. "Like all of us."

"Us."

"Us."

Alicia suddenly recognized that the conversation from the other diners had entirely ceased,

that the clanking silverware had silenced.

She turned, and saw that not only had the entire diner stopped what they were doing to watch her, but now, the standing-room space between the tables had filled with other townsfolk. More were outside, pressing their faces flush against the front window. All of them standing, staring, like silent phantoms waiting for some cue.

"I was invited after saying goodbye to someone special," Darlene said. "It was the best thing that could've happened to either of us."

Leigh reached out a grasp of understanding. Darlene gulped and nodded, then returned a firm squeeze.

"What are you people talking abo—?" Alicia said.

Leigh balled her hand into a fist and pounded the table. The forks and knives jangled, the plates of gray sloshed.

"You felt it, didn't you?" Leigh said. "That tightness in your face, in your muscles. The energy that rolls back the stiffness in your joints, makes you limber again, makes you young just a little while longer."

A memory flashed before Alicia's eyes.

Back in the theater. The deep purple hue hovering above the stage disappeared and was replaced by a sharp contraption of rusted metal and black leather, then the sound of bone shredding under its blades, the noxious smell of shit, boards being stained by pink snowflakes.

Her eyes cleared.

The quartet was in front of her.

She felt the tightness on the bottom of her chin, that hanging clump of fat she'd been trying to get rid of for years with open slaps from her backhand, some old wives' tale she didn't really believe, but somehow did anyway. She reached to it and discovered that the piece of pesky flab had flattened.

Then she noticed how the odd pinch in her knee was gone entirely. She looked at her forearm for the scar she'd had ever since brushing past the sharpened metal on her uncle's broken car handle when she was in fourth grade. It had disappeared entirely.

"What's going on here?" Alicia said, shifting in the booth. "What's happening with me?"

"Something special," Darlene said.

Something magical," Leigh said.

"Magical."

"Magical."

"You ready yet?" Doris appeared, pencil in her hand. "Or do you need more time, hun?"

Alicia screamed.

It shot through the diner and shook the windowpanes. Those with faces pressed against the glass stepped back, startled. Those inside rolled back their eyes in an ecstasy of sorts, letting the noise sink in and collect.

Alicia turned to the booth. The older quartet sat calmly with their eyes gently closed, relishing the collection as well. She quickly palmed a steak knife from the table, then shuffled it into her lap.

Finally, the standing Doris opened her eyes, over which lay a thin glaze. She collected herself and lifted her hands in a defensive posture.

"I'll give you more time then," she said, backing away.

"Why don't we get you a special then?" Leigh said, shivering with fresh glow.

Alicia nodded.

Leigh snapped her fingers at Doris. She muttered to the kitchen, and Alicia heard a grunt of acknowledgement, the metallic sounds of food prep.

"We know it's scary," Darlene said, "but it doesn't have to be."

Alicia reached down to her lap and felt the point of the steak knife. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Their voices were miles away.

"It's a gift you're being given," Darlene said.

"A gift."

"Gift."

"Yes…" Alicia said, but couldn't finish the thought.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Darlene asked.

"Wanted."

"Wanted."

"You know what they say," Darlene said. "No plan, trash can."

Doris returned to the table with a plate of gray meat and noodles. Alicia's pulse pounded deep in her ears, blotting out the rest of the diner hum.

Then, in an instant, she pulled out the knife from her lap and set it flush against Leigh's throat.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

ALICIA PUSHED THE POINT against Leigh's throat, then applied enough pressure to pierce the outer layer of her skin. She drew the slightest trickle of blood.

"One move, this goes in," Alicia said.

Frankie and Margaret furrowed their brows as they continued chewing their meals. Darlene remained utterly still.

"What would you like, my dear?" Leigh spoke over her shoulder.

"To leave this place," Alicia said. "To go home."

"But you are," Darlene said, puzzled. "You are home."

"Home."

"Home."

Leigh pointedly nodded toward the twins. They rolled their eyes and exited the booth, allowing Alicia and her captive a path out.

"I'm going to need more room than that," Alicia said. "Or does your precious mayor bleed out right here?"

Darlene staggered from the booth as well. Only Alicia and Leigh remained inside.

"You're making a mistake, my dear," Leigh said.

"Be that as it may," Alicia said. "Let's get going."

Alicia steered Leigh from the booth, and the pair walked toward the diner entrance, the rest of the town instantly alert, continuing to slurp their noodles and gruel as they watched the show.

"You know you're not getting out this way," Leigh said as they moved toward the door.

Alicia spun around so that now she was behind Leigh, swiftly lowering the knife down to the woman's stomach.

"Maybe this way then," Alicia said.

The diners snickered, a new eagerness to their eyes. Alicia glanced over her shoulder and saw Doris leaning a tired elbow on the bar.

"Hey," Alicia called to Doris. "Why don't you step over where I can see you?"

Doris huffed in annoyance, then walked through the tables so that she was now seated front row for this matinee. She rested a fleshy arm on a table, then set her head on her fist, an unimpressed expression settling onto her heavily made-up face.

"Got us a show out here, Larry," Doris droned out.

"Not my problem!" he called back to another round of snickers.

"Alicia, I have a simple question," Leigh spoke. "Do you remember where you parked your car? And do you think it's still in working condition? Enough to get you through the desert and off to wherever it is you think is still your home?"

The Elantra, last parked in the cul-de-sac near the theater. It'd been at least a day since she'd last laid eyes on it.

"Plus," Leigh said, "we all know you're no murderer."

"No murderer."

"Murderer."

Alicia dug the knife deeper into Leigh's stomach, tearing her black dress.

"Where's Luke!" Alicia screamed.

Darlene stepped forward with raised hands.

"He's gone, Alicia," she said. "He's gone and you're free."

"Free."

"Free."

The rest of the diner echoed.

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

"Free,"

they said.

Alicia pulled Leigh toward the front door. As she did, she craned her neck to peer through the windows and found a clear path out to the street—in either direction, the sidewalks only held Malinkites who'd already ceded enough distance to allow for passage.

This was as far as her plan had taken her, Alicia now considered, but that was still far enough to continue.

Once outside, she'd have to recalculate—especially if the car wasn't where they'd left it, or it wouldn't start. But there were other cars in town, that was certain, and she still had this precious trading chip at her fingertips. She'd just have to borrow one of the townsfolk many cars, and drive out of town through the tunnel, take Leigh into the next town over, whatever that happened to be, and bring back enough police and sheriffs to expose this cult for whatever it truly was.

The influx of cops and SWAT teams would sweep the town and ultimately find Luke, and there'd be a grand reunion. They'd hug and kiss, maybe in the center of Main Street, with news cameras beaming the image live for all the viewers at home and on their phones.

And then her and Luke would return to Los Angeles to begin the latest chapter of their lives together.

The bell above the diner's front door chimed.

"Put it down," a voice called behind her. It was familiar.

She turned to look, and standing in the entrance to the diner, there was Jeff.

The man from that motel in that mysterious town. The one they were out here looking for. The one whose name she could, just barely, remember.

He wore stained overalls with a T-shirt underneath. His hair was swept to the right, his face freshly shaved. He smiled warmly.

"Hey there," Jeff said. "Long time."

"What's going on?" Alicia asked, confusion bubbling in her eyes.

"It's the most wonderful thing in the world, Alicia," he said. "Simply the most wonderful thing."

Alicia let the knife drop.

Chapter Forty

ALICIA LET LEIGH GO, off toward the twins, who embraced her hastily.

On Jeff's face she recognized a kind of apology deep in his eyes, but then he rushed past her to Darlene, whispered to her, held her hand. She nodded. Jeff grabbed a handful of napkins from a table, ran off to Leigh, and used them to dab the small trickle of blood that came from her neck while Leigh tried to hold shut the rip in her dress.

"What do you want, Alicia?" Jeff asked.

"To get out of here," Alicia responded.

"Let's go outside then," he said. "I have a lot to explain anyway."

"I want to keep the knife."

"Don't see a problem there."

Jeff pulled open the diner door to the chime of the bell and Alicia walked out, knife clutched at her side. He followed behind.

The two walked down Main, now deserted except for the silhouettes of faces leering through storefront windows.

They got to Judy's Boutique. Alicia hesitated for a moment, Jeff slowed as well.

"That was a good prank," Alicia said, nodding at the mannequins.

Jeff smiled, nodded.

"I was pretty proud of that one. Still am," he said, then spun to her. "How much of last night do you remember?"

"Enough," Alicia said. "It came back slowly, but there's enough now."

"Okay, good," he said. "That's a good start. That's important."

He reached toward her hand clutching the knife, and she pulled away at first, but then let her fingers loosen. He took the knife and placed it into the back pocket of his jeans, then held her hand, gently.

They walked past Judy's and down the block. As they wandered down an empty Main Street, Jeff began his story.

For years now, he told her, on and off, whenever they had the chance, Kelsey and him had been searching for Olivia—Kelsey's lost sister, Jeff's lost love.

Their trail, as Alicia had learned, had eventually led them to that trailer in Salton Sea, to Flora. She'd drawn them the same vague map, with the same coded details and unique madness, pointing them into the desert, into the tunnel.

But before they entered, they'd decided it was best to examine it from a safe distance.

That's when, years ago now, they came upon that dead town on Route 66.

"We'd been there already," Jeff said. "Trying to retrace Olivia's last known footsteps, where she'd been lost. The motel had different proprietors over the years, always a cute husband and wife couple. But that time we went out, something different happened."

He reached into his front pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one, offered one to Alicia, who accepted. They ignited and continued.

"That time, we met you two," Jeff said, exhaling hazy smoke. "And then, later that night, Luther removed us from our room."

An hour or so after they'd gone to sleep, Jeff told Alicia, they had heard keys jangling in the motel room door. A shadow darkened their doorway.

Jeff got out only a brief yelp before he felt a concussive thud against his skull, then saw the floor rise up to meet him. Next thing that Jeff remembered, his feet were dragging across the parking lot. He was lifted into the truck, where he passed out again.

"I woke up alone in the darkness of a mine, in a metal cart on some tracks," he said. "I heard Luther up top, singing to himself as he brought Kelsey down next to me."

Jeff had continued to feign sleep as he felt Kelsey's limp body placed next to his. Through

squinted eyes he watched Luther press a button to start the chain-pull, and they moved into the shaft.

After a while, he smelled dank earth and felt cuffs on his wrists and ankles. He finally opened his eyes, and they were in a row of jail cells, somewhere underground. Kelsey was in the cell next to his, similarly cuffed, awake with panic in her eyes.

"I could only see her out of one good eye," Jeff said. "The other was swollen shut with a compound fracture from Luther's blow."

Alicia stopped their walk and examined Jeff's face again. His eyebrows were healthy, his skin clean, not even the hint of a scar. And now that she looked at it closer, his face had changed in more subtle ways as well. His hairline had regained territory, his skin was still tanned but not with the rawhide texture as before. He was more youthful in appearance.

"Seems like you healed up," she said.

Jeff smirked as the shadows along Main Street lengthened, the short day's sun making its quick descent over the crater's rim.

"That's what I've be trying to tell you," Jeff said, gripping her bare arm. "They discovered something here. A new way to live."

A gust of wind careened down the road, kicking up faint wisps of desert sand. It swirled around their ankles as Jeff leaned closer.

"And now they want to invite you in, like they did with me," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Alicia said

In the distance came dampened sounds of distant hammering. Jeff smiled.

"I want to show you something," he said, taking her hand.

He led Alicia to the alleyway between shops, up the concrete staircase to the row of homes lining the ridge on Lavender Lane. At the top of the steps, Jeff turned to take in the entirety of New Malinko.

"Wait one second," he said. "This is my favorite part of the night."

He sat on the top step and Alicia took a seat next to him. They watched Main Street below them.

The street was again filled with roaming townsfolk, as if they were waiting for the two to depart in order to have unfettered access to their space again. Some carried bags, others held hands, more than a few clutched fresh vanilla ice cream cones. And then, one by one, the windows of the houses on the opposite side began to light from inside, a bold glow in the dampening night, hinting at private goings-on within.

"That's Jackson," Jeff said, aiming his cigarette across the way.

A dark silhouette appeared in a window.

"Three, two," Jeff counted down, "and one."

A tiny flicker of light rose to a man's face. A small orange ember glowed as he inhaled and then it died out and pitched his face into gray.

"He doesn't smoke in front of us," Jeff explained. "He thinks it's shameful."

Alicia finished her own cigarette and snuffed it on the concrete step under her shoe.

"I can empathize," she said.

"But every night at sunset, he strikes one for himself, right there on his porch," Jeff continued. "We all know, of course. You can't stay here for more than a few days without knowing everyone's quirks and secrets. But we still give him his hidden little treat."

Jeff nodded to a different window where another shadow had materialized. It was the wide shape of a woman. She held a small rug from the window and whipped it in the air, shaking a cloud of dust from its fibers.

"There's Lucy," he said, then nodded to another, where an old man was in his kitchen, mixing whatever contents were inside his large metal pot on the stove. "And there's Howell, with his dinner. Spaghetti and meatballs with a side of asparagus, as always."

Jeff shaped his hand into a gun and with his pointer finger began picking off the rest of the town.

"There's George, bang, and there's Frankie, bang," he said. "And there's Thomas, ka-pow."

He aimed at another window. A figure stepped onto the porch.

"And that's where I'm living now," he said, a strange catch in his voice, a wistfulness. "It's been years, but I'm still not used to that sight. Gonna take a while more."

In the moonlight she found Darlene, at her window, taking in the evening air.

Jeff sucked in breath. From within his half-buttoned shirt poked a chest full of hair from beneath.

"Alicia, that's Kelsey's sister. *That's* Olive. That's my love," Jeff said, taking another drag, then answering her obvious question. "We all take new names here, so her name is Darlene. Me, I'm Luther now."

Jeff twisted his body. There, indeed, printed across the right breast of his overalls, was Luther's name written in cursive. He finished his cigarette, let it fall next to the butt that Alicia had dropped, then put it out with his shoe. A smile flashed across his face, a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Darlene is who we were looking for," he said. "And I finally found her."

"Where's Kelsey, Jeff?" Alicia asked. "Where's Kelsey?"

He swallowed deeply.

The streetlights that bracketed Main all suddenly clicked on, illuminating the central road and the townsfolk flowing through.

"Ah, shucks, always hate it when those things come on," Jeff said. "It's much nicer without them mucking up the stars."

"Where's Kelsey, Jeff?" Alicia tried again.

He ignored that too, and stood. He offered Alicia a hand, which she accepted.

"Now," he said, "let's go see where you'll be living."

But before she got up, Alicia felt tingles from the sides of her vision as they enclosed and felt herself fainting into black.

Chapter Forty-One

THE SENSE THAT CAME BACK FIRST was sound—rattling clanks echoing through a small, cramped space. Next came dampness that lodged in the nostrils, an odd briny smell. Then, the weight of heavy chains on wrists and ankles.

Luke felt a dull throb in his face and down his back. He was lying on a hard mattress. He winced, and his cheeks sagged like water balloons. Fresh ache pinged with every flex of his muscles or movement of his limbs, and there was a piercing pain behind his eyes with a fogginess to his brain. Luke heard a sloshing sound, and opened his eyes.

He was looking at a cow.

It stared back with swollen, black eyes.

Its enormous frame was stationed behind vertical bars, which, Luke quickly realized, contained not the cow, who had been positioned outside of them, but rather himself.

Under the beast was a patch of astroturf. The cow blinked its eyes, then twisted its head and dipped its mouth into a metal trough screwed into the wall. As it chomped, Luke saw rippling vibrations from its side where there was placed a large white bandage marked with a faint splotch of red.

Luke examined the rest of his cell. The only light came from thin windows perched high up on the cement wall. He twisted off the bed and felt cold concrete on the bottoms of his bare feet. He reached forward, aching, and saw how the floor sloped down to a gutter that hugged the wall.

"You up yet?" a man's voice came from behind. "Well, you awake or what?"

Luke turned toward the voice and a shot of stinging pain bolted through his left shoulder, so he laid back down. He softly twisted and saw, past two empty cells, that there was another man, reclining on a bed as well. He had a bushy, unkempt beard and a shaved head darkened by tattoos. His dangling arm hung at his side where it was chained to a steel bar bolted to the wall.

"Guess you could call it that," Luke grunted.

"Well, what did you see?" the man said. "Out there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Before they brought you in here, what did you see?" the man said, more urgency to his voice. "We've been here for days and don't know what the fuck's going on."

"Who's 'we'?" Luke asked.

The bearded man leaned back to provide a sightline. Past him, in the next cell over, there

was a woman with blonde, greasy hair and sweat beading on her bulbous cheeks. She wore a sopping white t-shirt and loose jeans grayed with dust.

"I'm Felix, that's Marianne," the man said. "We've been here two days. We think. It's tough to tell. Time moves strangely here." A contemplating pause. "We were on our way to New Orleans for spring break when we stopped..."

"On Route 66," Luke said.

"Yes."

"In Malinko."

Felix gave him a confused look.

"What's that?"

"The town," Luke said. "The town where you stayed. Where they had a motel. Where you stayed, before they brought you here."

"I don't know about all that," Felix shook his head. "We'd picked up a hitchhiker."

"I told him not to stop!" Marianne shouted. "I told him, let's just go! Let's just go!"

"Oh, this is not the fucking time, Mary!" Felix said.

Luke waited for them to get it out of their systems before he introduced himself, then went through the events that led him there—at least, as best he could remember.

"So, that's where we are?" Felix said. "In the middle of the desert, in the middle of nowhere? In the middle of a meteor crater?"

"Seems like it," Luke said.

Luke explained, or tried to, what he remembered from last night, which wasn't much. A barbecue, then out to a bar, where he felt different

then usual. And then... a face he recognized, from somewhere deep in his past, but couldn't recall from where... a theater show?

"There was this woman," Luke said, "and she was onstage..."

"Was she an older woman?" Felix asked. "Long black hair? Pasty white skin?"

"Sure," Luke nodded. "Maybe?"

"She was in that cell before you," Felix said. "Before they took her."

Sharp footsteps rapped from down the hall. In the darkness beyond, Luke saw a steel door at the hallway's end. Some clanking mechanism twisted on the other side, and when the lock disengaged, the door opened inward to the cells.

Into the light walked the figure of a man with a flat-brimmed hat. He let the door shut behind him.

It was that priest they'd seen from the hotel balcony the day before.

"Hello, all," he said with a kind lilt. "Hope everyone is having a lovely morning like the lovely birds outside."

As he walked the narrow hallway outside the cells he paused to tilt his head up toward the window.

"Do you not hear that?" the priest asked. "Do you not hear the birds chirping outside, do you not sense God's glorious creatures just there beyond the walls? Out where they can fly freely? Where the energy of life, even way out here, can sustain their existence?"

No one responded.

"Well, my hearing is always a tad stronger this early in the day," the priest said. "Shame you can't hear them. They are quite lovely."

He walked to Luke's cell and tipped his hat.

"And how do you do again?" the priest said. "Hope you're feeling better."

"Where's Alicia?" Luke said.

The priest ignored the question and instead addressed the entire room.

"We brought you all a little breakfast, most important meal of the day and all," the priest said.

He stuck his fingers into his mouth and issued a whistle at a pitch that sent another sharp pain behind Luke's eyes. The steel door creaked again and in walked three figures, all dressed in black from head-to-toe, their faces covered in masks with eyeholes torn in ragged patterns. They carried trays adorned with covered plates, and each walked to one of the occupied cells.

One unlocked and opened Luke's cell, carried in the tray, and set it on the floor at the furthest end of his reach. They unlocked Luke's handcuffs, but kept on the ankle ones, then quickly stepped back out of the cell, relocked it, and silently grouped back with the other helpers.

Luke heard Marianne and Felix already devouring their meals.

He lifted the metal lid and saw eggs, toast, and hash browns next to a large portion of steak. Plastic silverware lay next to a plastic glass of water. He guzzled down the water in a flash.

Sharp footsteps approached. The priest again was outside his cell.

"Sorry about last night," the priest said. "You weren't supposed to see all that, but yours has been a special case for us."

A vision flowed into Luke's mind. The woman in spotlight on stage, the metal apparatus over her, then a grisly combination of exposed muscle and torn flesh. Screams.

Luke looked at his food, saw the river of pink steak juice curved at the plate's edge.

"What did you do to her?" uke said.

"Our way of life requires maintenance. You know how it is," the priest said. "Things used to run more smoothly, only an occasional check-up, maybe an oil change. But when a pipe cracks or a belt rusts, then you know it's only a matter of time before it's time for the junkyard. Unless, that is, you give it continuous overhauls. Continuous."

The priest leaned forward, boots squeaking on the concrete.

"We used to hold but one show a year," the priest said. "Used to be enough. Now, if we miss one night..."

He raised a finger and brought it to his nose, where he waved it back and forth with a disgusted look.

"Woo boy, you don't want to see the state of us if we miss a few days," he said, winking. "It simply will not stand. And as you can see," he presented the cells, "we are running low on stars. The motel used to be a fine enough pasture, but nowadays we have to do outreach ourselves wherever and whenever we can."

He gripped the bars of Luke's cell.

"And with tonight being the Fourth and all, well, we're going to need an extra special show," the priest said, then muttered to himself. "A double dose."

The priest looked out the high window, closed his eyes, and basked in the thin band of sunlight that was creeping in.

"But we find a way, we always do, we have our methods," the priest said. "Anyways. Please, eat."

The priest retraced his steps toward the exit, pausing outside of Felix's cell. Felix had foregone cutlery, simply tearing into the steak with his hands.

"How are you enjoying the meal, son?" the priest asked.

"Oh, thank you," Felix said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"You can thank Bessi for that," the priest said, then called out to the cow. "As fresh as ever, my girl!"

Luke turned to the cow, munching at the trough of hay, the bandage sopping red against her side.

"See, the thing that's special around here," the priest shouted as he exited through the metal door, "is you don't need but one cow to feed the whole town."

The steel door slammed. Luke heard the bolt screech into place.

Chapter Forty-Two

THE SUN PAINTED AUBURN on wooden crossbeams that, when finished, Alicia had been told would constitute her living room's ceiling.

"The fireplace will go here," Jeff said, circling his hand in the general direction of the skeletal frame, before walking to another vague section of the unfinished home. "And this is where the kitchen will be."

Sunlight struck Jeff's arm, tanned and muscular, smooth and unwrinkled.

"Here's where the countertop will go," he said, mid-air miming the action of a rub.

While the outside of this structure on Lavender Lane had long been complete and identical to the others she'd seen in New Malinko, it'd been gutted on the inside for a fresh overhaul. It didn't add up to much yet—only the basic outline of a floor plan, vertical beams to indicate a future hallway.

But Alicia could already picture how it might look. How it would.

She turned to a section of the wall that, when finished, would face the ridge. Beyond was a slab of concrete, then a dirt patch seeded with grass being watered on a continuous loop. She looked past, to where the ridge rose high and steep, and saw the last of the sun dip behind. Even at this early hour, the shadow line flowed like a flood of oil consuming the yard.

But, she imagined, with the window at just the perfect angle, she might get a tad more sunlight to aid any plants she'd want for meal preparations.

"Can we put in a window there?" she said, pointing high up into the wall. "Would that be okay?"

Jeff reached into his back pocket, pulled out a small leather notebook, scrawled a note.

"That's what I'm here for," Jeff said. "Make it however you want, within certain obvious limitations, of course."

Alicia waltzed through the rest of her home-to-be, her mind flooding with possibilities.

Jeff scurried to a corner and reached into a space behind loose pieces of wood and other detritus. He retrieved a basket filled with fruit and set it near Alicia's feet.

"Had them bring it in today, knowing you'd be viewing," he said, taking an apple from the basket and snapping off a fresh bite. "My finder's fee."

Alicia reached into the basket and ran her fingers over the bananas, apples, nectarines, then settled for an orange and peeled it.

"Let me guess," she said, "grown here in town?"

Jeff nodded with his mouth full, swallowed, took another bite.

"Come on," he said, deep dimples appearing in his cheeks, beckoning with a shoulder.

He led them out through the vertical beams that'd make up the back door and they walked onto the concrete, tip-toed over the sod, then up a stone staircase leading to the rim. At the top, they watched the last of the sun sweep over the expansive view. Miles of desert sand, rocks, cacti, and shrubs, all the way to the horizon.

Jeff took a step back, wound up his arm, and threw the apple core as far as he could. It cleared the cone's downward slope and landed with a puff.

"Always love that," he said, then turned to face a corner spot in her backyard. "Over there is probably the best spot for a garden. That's where Gertie had hers before…"

He paused, deeply inhaled, and left it at that. She let him.

From the top of the rise they took in New Malinko from on high. To the left, the dark tunnel dug into the slope. To their right, the theater at the end of the dark cul-de-sac.

"I realize this is a lot to take in," Jeff said. "But what you're getting in New Malinko is another chance. A place of your own. A community. Somewhere to thrive."

"And Luke?"

Jeff broke eye contact, looked down at the town.

"To show your commitment, a sacrifice must be made," Jeff said, nodding. "And he is the offering that makes the most sense in our current context."

"What do you mean, offering?"

"There's a system in place, and it works for us," he hesitated, then opened an arm to grab her in an inclusive hug. "For *us*. It works for us."

"What if I say no?" Alicia asked.

He nodded again, more quickly this time, as if trying to figure out what next to say.

"They gave me a choice with Kelsey," he said. "They told me if I didn't want it, then we'd both be able to go free, go back home. I didn't press them on it. I had no idea if it was a legitimate choice, but it didn't seem like a threat. They said it'd happened before, and they, we—we have ways so folks don't remember anything. Don't put everyone else in harm's way."

"And you still chose to stay here?" she asked. "To sacrifice Kelsey?"

He took in a breath.

"It was never much of a question for me, once I saw Olive again," he said. "But each of us is on our own journey."

Alicia waited a beat, then watched the sun cast its final beams across the desert, before it fell beyond the distant, actual horizon.

She followed Jeff down the stairs, and they walked through what would be her home, then to the stairwell and down onto Main. The sky purpled as stars clarified. When they emerged from the alleyway, the sidewalks were again bustling with townsfolk.

A few spotted the duo and tensed when they saw Alicia, but Jeff's look calmed their worries. They went back about their business.

The pair walked past the diner, empty now, then to Cobb's, where the interior echoed with faint conversation as another night of drinking got underway. They continued down the street.

They crossed the intersection to the hotel, then up the path to the entrance. Jeff held open the door as Alicia glided inside.

In the lobby, Curtis still rested his head against the grandfather clock, ticking away. Staring into distant space, he didn't notice that they'd entered.

"Like," Alicia whispered to Jeff, "what's his deal..."

"Oh, Curtis," Jeff said, then turned to the old man. "Hey Curtis! What's your deal!"

Curtis didn't move. Jeff turned to Alicia and tapped his ear.

"Deaf," he said. "Darlene told me he likes the vibrations of the clock."

They approached and Curtis's eyes lit as he rose. Before he got all the way up, Jeff gestured, as if to say that won't be necessary. Curtis bowed and sat back down, tipping his head back against the clock.

Jeff led Alicia up the grand staircase and to her room. He told her to get some rest—there was a big day ahead. He exited and the door closed behind him.

Alicia walked through the living room and flopped onto the bed. She retrieved a corner of the blanket, and within minutes, returned to her slumber.

Chapter Forty-Three

ALICIA WAS IN MOTION.

Two highway lanes sped up to greet her. Her hands gripped the wheel. A band of light from the rearview blinded her.

She looked into it and saw the globe of a bright sun above the shadows of tall and ragged mountain ridges. She blinked once, twice, and the sun disappeared entirely, leaving only blackness and the starry sky. The whites of her car's high beams bounced against the pavement ahead.

In the distance, faint hazard lights blinked from the shoulder of the road. She slowed to change lanes.

As she approached, her lights picked up a man who was leaning over an open hood, his jeans caked in dirt and soil and sweat. She passed by at a crawling pace and then looked back in her mirror and watched as he rose to glare at her, standing

straight as a scarecrow, waving to her, his hand swinging back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, backlit by the moon.

She drove on.

Further ahead there came more yellow hazard lights, brighter this time, again on the roadside. She shifted lanes then slowed to a crawl, and again there was a man in filthy and torn jeans leaning over the front of his car's hood. But this time, another figure stood next to him. Alicia only made out the female figure by her bob of hair. After Alicia had passed, the man stood straight and waved. Through the rearview, Alicia felt it appropriate to wave back to him in beat to the rhythm of his arm's sway.

Alicia drove on.

She passed a highway sign that read "Chicago – 2,000 miles." In the distance she again saw blinking hazards. Brighter this time, nearly blinding.

She swerved to the opposite lane to give her space, but then suddenly, another car's headlights appeared, accompanied by the loud blast of a horn.

Before impact, Alicia saw that the car was being driven by a woman, and that the woman's face was Alicia's own—but twice as big, growing as it approached. It stretched across the windows and sagged onto the steering wheel.

This woman, this other Alicia, now only feet away and closing fast, smiled back.

Alicia woke, thrashing and sweating. In front of her was a vague shape that became Darlene.

"Wakey, wakey," Darlene softly said with the caress of a mother. "It's time for get ready."

Alicia rolled over and mumbled into her pillow. Something about needing just one more minute, needing just one more dream.

Chapter Forty-Four

THE CAPTIVES DIGESTED in silence as they watched the setting sun shift shadows against the concrete floor.

From his cell at the end, Luke heard Marianne's soft voice gently whisper to Felix. The only words he made out were, "I'm sorry."

Luke gave the couple their privacy as he himself considered what would come next, when they came for him.

They'd transport him from this place, wherever it was, to the theater at the end of the cul-de-sac for the night's big show.

That meant any number of opportunities to break free from his chains and bash his captors over their heads. With something. He'd figure that out.

Then he'd grab a key from an incapacitated captor, or find some random piece of sharpened metal,

to unlock his cuffs. Never mind that was a move he'd never attempted before, but it couldn't be all that difficult, according to the movies. From there it was as simple as finding their car, wherever it'd been stashed, grabbing Alicia, then they'd drive through the tunnel, take the road out, and escape into the moonlit desert and back home to Los Angeles to begin the latest chapter of their lives together.

Luke let out a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Felix asked from across the jail.

"Nothing," Luke said. "Just making plans, is all."

The next hour was spent in the same warm quietude, save whispers between Felix and Marianne before their wet, desperate sobs. Luke heard Felix say that all they needed to do was get their cell phone, and Luke let them have their dangling hope rather than point out the dearth of service in town.

The talk of plotting was backgrounded by a simmering rustle from Bessi, who consumed from her pile of hay and now and then plopped shit onto the cement, the stench of which hit Luke before it wafted to the others.

The sun cast daubs of purple and pink against the clouds so that for a moment the sky through the high, small window looked like a kaleidoscopic funhouse, but then it slipped behind the ridge and the shadows on the floor became nothing but consumed darkness entire.

Echoing footsteps down the hall, the rattle of a lock being undone.

A moment later, a figure in all black walked in.

They ignored the three captives on their way to Bessi's cell. They unchained her from her restraints as they offered a soft, "Hey, girl," and ran a soothing hand across her back. They collected her harness and led her from the cell, the raps of her hooves clicking on the concrete on their way out. The door's lock clanked into place.

An hour of muffled sobs from the couple later, and footsteps returned. The steel door clanged open, and in walked three more wearing black, then the priest.

He snapped his fingers, pointed first to Felix, then to Luke.

The helpers separated from the pack and opened up the two cells, entering with extended metal poles and circular frames like medieval pool skimmers.

"Stop!" Marianne screamed as she watched Felix grit through the pain. "Please stop! I changed my mind!"

"It doesn't work like that, I'm afraid," the priest offered in consolation.

"It's okay," Felix whispered. "I'm going to get you out of here. It's okay."

The helpers draped the skimmers over the two male captives, as if performing a sneak attack on lions. When the frames landed on their shoulders, the helpers twisted bolts on all four sides until the cold metal hit neck flesh and the struggling stopped all at once. Luke felt a hot wetness trickle down the side of his neck and pool in the crook of his shoulder.

He tried to twist his neck to look at the couple, but the tightened bolt kept his eyeline straight ahead. There was a commotion around his ankles, and he felt chains being unlocked. Finally, he set a foot forward.

"Now, take it easy," the priest's raspy voice said. "Give it a moment."

He saw the priest in the hall, holding the bars as he surveyed the action.

Suddenly, a scuffle to Luke's left.

Metal dropped to the cement. All attention was on Felix, who took a desperate lunge at the helper, but before he got more than a step, he had crumpled to the ground. Luke felt fresh pain around his throat as his own chaperone had gripped the rod and shifted the bolt.

The priest returned to the midway point between cells.

"As I was saying," the priest said. "You both have been sitting for a while now, so your legs may be a bit numb."

Luke slowly got up, arms dangling in front, weighed down by heavy chains and wrist bracelets.

"Now, just be careful," the priest told Luke, and another helper approached with a folded pile of dark clothing.

It was a shirt and pants, both the same hue of deep black. The helper knelt and held open one of the pant legs in presentation, and Luke felt the metal noose tighten, so he stepped in. They draped a shirt over both arms then tied the strings on its separated open back.

He was now ready.

Luke shuffled forward as he was steered by the rod, out of the cell and into the hallway, where Felix had been similarly staged.

The priest circled the pair, checked his cargo. Marianne's screams—of sadness, or was it regret?—echoed in the cell.

"I'm sorry!" she was calling.

Satisfied with the inspection, the priest swung both arms high above his head like a maestro.

"Onward," he announced.

The helpers pushed the prisoners through the doorway into a dark hall that ended in a staircase. Luke was halfway up when he heard Marianne scream behind them, as if intentionally tearing her own vocal chords, before the metal door slammed shut and her scream was cut off. They heard only the scuffling of their shifting feet.

At the top of the stairs, they turned down another hallway—Felix and two helpers up front, Luke with two more, then the priest watching it all from behind. A glass door opened ahead and outside was an overhang hiding the moonlight. When Luke's eyes adjusted he saw twin gas pumps in front of him. He realized that they'd been in the basement of the garage.

"Let's go," the priest said, and the helpers pushed the cargo through the station's front door into the open night.

Across the way, Luke saw the town's hotel, its bank of second story windows lit in orange haze. He squirted to where their room had been. Curtains blew in evening breeze. Shadows in the window.

"Keep moving," Luke heard behind him, and realized he had paused.

The bolts twisted deeper, and he stepped with the rest of the group crossing the intersection to Main Street.

It was deserted this late at night, street lamps casting circles onto the road, storefront windows reflecting squares on empty sidewalks. On the ridges above, where rows of homes sat, Luke watched dark figures in the windows peer down towards them.

The priest sped now hustled the group until he was in front. He stopped abruptly, then spun.

"Never get tired of this sight," the priest said, hands clasped in front of him. "We must always remember what we have. We must always remember, it doesn't get any better than this."

The helpers all bowed at the priest's reflection before his footsteps began tapping on the Main Street sidewalk, leading the procession toward the end of town.

Chapter Forty-Five

ALICIA WAS IN A LIVING ROOM on Rose Road in the middle of a cocktail hour conversation with Darlene and Jeff, who both sat on the edge of the bed. She looked at herself in the mirror, at the deep red dress they told her was to be hers for the night.

They'd been talking about the uniqueness of the seasoning rub Bruce had used for his barbecue last night, or something in that general vicinity—her clouded mind couldn't take in all the details.

Alicia caught movement through the window. She investigated.

Down on Main Street there were six, maybe more, figures that were stalking through town. The debate behind her ceased as they discovered Alicia's gaze. The figures below crossed under the blinking yellow light, then disappeared behind the wall of shops.

"What's that?" Alicia asked.

"Oh, that's nothing," Darlene said, then sipped her mint julep. "A little show before the show. We must give them their time for preparations."

"Them?"

"The performers," Darlene said. "For tonight's show."

"It's best not to look," Jeff offered. "It's best."

"Of course," Alicia said.

She sipped her own cocktail.

"Of course," Alicia incanted again.

"That's smart, Gertie," Darlene said. "That's really smart of you."

Alicia took another sip from her drink. She was still getting used to her new name.

"Now let's make sure everything fits just right," Darlene said, stepping to the side. "It's your big night, after all."

My big night, Alicia thought.

A mirror was nailed into the bedroom wall. Alicia stared back at her own visage. She wore a scarlet dress they said had been made especially for her. Darlene came up behind her, placed her hands on Alicia's shoulders, then delicately set her chin upon one.

"What do you think?" Darlene whispered.

It fit great, perfectly in fact. Alicia spun and it flowed around her body as if she was royalty.

Through the mirror Darlene's eyes landed on the gold ouroboros that still rested against the front of Alicia's neck.

"Oh my, how could I forget," Alicia said, beginning to unclasp the necklace. "This is yours."

"I used to have my own, you know," Darlene said. "It was a set of two, made especially for us by our dad. I used to have my own."

She gently put her hands on top of Alicia's to stop their progress.

"And now you do as well," she said.

Darlene—or was it Olivia?—leaned to whisper in her ear.

"It's important to leave the past behind," Darlene said.

Alicia—or was it Gertie now? no matter—smiled back through the mirror.

Suddenly, her face was lit by bright white from the window. The evening's first firework had exploded in the sky.

Chapter Forty-Six

THE EXPLOSIONS LEFT WHITE SNAKES in the night's velvet that soon became gray ghosts and dispersed, leaving the stage for the twinkling stars alone, until the next batch of high-pitched squeals rocketed up toward their incendiary oblivion.

The black-clad helpers paused the procession to enjoy the spectacle. Luke tried to twist up as well, but only got an quarter of an inch before the bolts shot pain through his neck.

"Splendid," the priest said as a bright smile crossed his face, white gossamer trails reflecting off the blacks of his eyes. "It is simply a splendid sight to behold."

Luke caught faint movement up on the ridges. The townsfolk had exited their homes to watch the fireworks as well.

"Fuck your Fourth of July!" Felix shouted.

There was a loud, fleshy smack, followed by a painful groan.

"Simply elegant," the priest said.

The priest closed his eyes. His nostrils flared as he faced skyward, as though feeling warmth from the fireworks themselves. A tear streamed down the side of his cheek, carving a glowing path to the bottom of his chin.

"It's lovely," he said, "but we must be going. This is not for us."

Luke felt a tug on his neck as he was pushed forward. His feet took the cue, he stepped ahead.

Their path—lit by the flickering above, set off somewhere on the ridge, maybe on Rose Road—gave their tableau a sped-down quality, as if an ancient act caught on old film.

They reached the cul-de-sac. The darkened theater loomed.

Luke and Felix were dragged to a stop. The priest stepped between them, then disappeared into the shadows under the marquee. Another firework exploded and the priest appeared, holding open a door in the pale glow.

"What is this?" Felix asked the helper behind him. "Where are we going?"

Only heaving breaths through masks in response.

"It's nothing," Luke said. "Just some silly show they put on."

The captives felt the neck bolts push them forward and as they passed into the theater the priest bounced where he stood, nearly vibrating, dancing to some tune only he could hear.

They entered into a stairwell and were led down into an unlit basement. The sound of a switch, then a hum. A lone halogen flickered once, twice, then flooded the room.

It had a low ceiling with exposed steel support beams marked with faint scratches. Beige concrete sloped to a drain in the floor's middle. Two metal folding chairs were set against a far wall.

The helpers steered them to the chairs, and used the rods to set them down. They cuffed their ankles to rings that had been bolted to the floor. The priest walked to a desk in the corner and picked up a red plastic phone that hung on the wall, then spoke a few quiet words before replacing the receiver.

"We are set," the priest said, mostly to himself. "Nearly show time."

The priest closed his eyes and Luke watched his lips move as if reciting scripture, as if in great contemplation. His eyes then suddenly shot open and locked with Luke's.

"You'll go last," he said.

The priest crossed into a hallway that expanded into dark. New light came and fanned across the concrete, then went black as a door shut.

"What's happening here?" Felix hissed. "What are they going to do to us?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid," Luke said, trying to examine his surroundings further. "Things are quite out of our hands right now."

Two helpers stood against the wall and kept an eye on the captives behind their masks. A third sat to a desk, cracked their knuckles, and put on

a headset with a microphone attachment, then hovered their hands over a control board with fading bars and adjustable knobs, some dotted with yellow Post-Its where cues had been jotted down. The helper pulled a stack of pages off the panel and rustled them in their grip.

"Bet that's the script," Luke said, memories from the previous night now flooding back.

The helper nodded back.

"Script for what?" Felix asked, but was ignored.

The helper hovered a finger on a switch in the middle of the control deck, a red circle painted around it, and waited for Luke's reply.

"And that's got to be the microphone," Luke nodded. "Why we're all here."

The helper nodded as well, then retrieved his hand and used it to make the sign of the cross. The other helpers standing guard all mimicked the move, heaving deeply with hot breaths filling the room, muttering prayers too soft to be heard.

"When I fucking get out of here—" Felix began. But the helper at the controls simply twisted away as they quietly spoke into the headset.

White light fanned from down the hall, then narrowed. Out of the pitch black came the priest, wearing a gown of deep scarlet color that hung loosely over his arms and down to his shins.

He looked over his captives.

"Hear that?" the priest asked.

The constant drone of the halogens. Not even the pops from fireworks outside.

"Wait for it," he said, then raised his other hand above his head and brought it down forcefully.

Luke felt a rumbling vibration through the ceiling. Then muddled conversations, words obscured as the audience above filed into their seats.

"The great anticipation," the priest said. "Gets me every time."

The sound of a muted horn blasted down the stairwell, soon accompanied by the rest of the band. The show's opening theme.

The priest tapped his toe and nodded to himself, finding the beat. He whispered final preparations to the two nearby helpers. One nodded, the other walked to a closed door in the basement, opened it, and reached inside to flick a switch. The newly lit space was populated by rows of massive objects with sharp edges that had all been cloaked in black fabric. The priest lifted one covering to reveal a large wooden booth.

The helper at the controls spun in their chair and caught Luke peeking through the open door. They hopped from their station and took two broad steps to slam the door, wagging their finger in disappointment at Luke as they returned to their post.

Through the ceiling and walls there came deep beating drums like a war party, and then a throbbing bassline flowed through Luke's body, creating new painful aches behind his eyes.

"What's that noise?" Felix said.

"It means they're ready for us," Luke replied.

Chapter Forty-Seven

AFTER THE FINAL GOSSAMER TRAIL floated away and the procession disappeared into the theater, the rest of the town stirred up from their viewing perches on Rose Road or Lavender Lane and trickled down the twin alleyways into the scarlet neon of Cobb's Bar.

Among the simmering dialogues revolving around that evening's 4th of July spectacle—"as wondrous as ever," was the grand consensus—there was Alicia, sitting in a back booth and wearing the long dress of burgundy red that'd been stitched especially for her. Her matching purse dangled from her shoulder as she sipped from a glass of water.

At one of her sides, Leigh sat and casually inspected the rest of the bar. At her other, the white-haired twins snuck away peeks toward the two-seater near the bar, where Jeff and

Darlene—or was it Luther and Olivia?—held hands and stared deeply into each others' smiling eyes.

Watching the two rekindled lovers reminded Alicia of the beginnings of her own relationship with Luke, way back when. Although now, as she pressed deeper into her memory, she couldn't quite pinpoint when these moments would have occurred, but they must be in there somewhere, she told herself.

"Don't fret about all the looks, Gertie," Leigh said, speaking into Alicia's shoulder.

"About what?" Alicia said, and turned to the rest of the room.

A scattering of glances were aimed in her direction. When she caught their eyes, they fluttered off, clumsily attempting silent fibs that they were, in fact, examining the ceiling or some other fascinating part of the back wall.

"Like any small town, changes take a little getting used to, that's all," Leigh said, taking another sip. "But after tonight, you'll be a true Malinkite."

Under the table Leigh placed a balmy hand onto Alicia's and gave it a firm squeeze. Leigh let go, and there was Jeff, now hovering at the booth's edge, Darlene grasping the crook of his elbow. He carried a shot glass containing a drink clouded a hazy light purple.

"Thought this could be of assistance," he said.

Jeff slid the glass across the table. Strong alcohol wafted from it. Alicia faintly remembered her piercing hangover from the night before, and she shook her head.

"Thanks, but—" she slid the glass back.

"You're going to want this, hun," Leigh said. "Trust me on this."

"I think I want to keep a clear head tonight," Alicia said. "A lot of eyes will be on me."

Leigh nodded, but as she did, she again pushed the glass toward Alicia—this time more forcefully.

Alicia scanned the booth. Leigh, Jeff, Darlene, the twins, their eyes all locked on her. Outside, the rest of the bar looked on intently as well. Finally, she lifted the shot and poured it into her mouth. It burned with an intensity that made her eyes water.

All at once, the great interest everyone had in her actions evaporated, nearly ignoring her now. She softly brought a palmed napkin up to her lips and let the booze trickle out.

"Heard a rumor that we're getting a double bill tonight," Leigh began.

The bar band shifted its beat to a rising sharp waltz, and Alicia's legs bounced along with it as the conversations continued without her participation. She felt her face flush as she anticipated what was to come, what they had told her she must do when it was her time to perform.

In what felt like only a minute, the band closed their set down to respectful applause, then scurried offstage as the curtains drew shut to prepare for the night's big gig.

"It's time," Leigh said, squeezing Alicia's hand again. "You're gonna do great."

Leigh and the twins stood from the booth and Alicia was dragged by the gravity of their movements. They exited past the girthy Al Cobb,

wiping down the drops of liquid that had spilled onto his bartop, and out onto the moonlit Main Street, where some smoked, others gossiped, some told jokes, others laughed.

The temperature in Alicia's neck continued to rise.

Her distracted gaze scanned the crowd and caught the eyes of Sam Waterson, the motelier from Route 66. He turned to her with a wide grin and presented himself broad-shouldered. He lifted his glass of amber in a warm toast, then returned to the small circle of townsfolk he was hovering nearby.

"It's weird, I know," she heard Jeff's voice next to her. "Trust me, I do. But after tonight, it'll all make sense."

Alicia felt the crowd's momentum begin to mobilize down Main. The street lamps blinked out, placing her in a huddle of star-lit shadows. The silhouette of Jeff's hand hovered in front of her. She took it, and he led her into the crowd, where they joined the great shuffle, crossing the intersection into the cul-de-sac, then gathering at the theater doors. They buzzed with anticipation until the marquee glowed bright on everyone's faces, the same as last night. As every night.

The doors opened, they all filtered in, through the lobby, into the gaudy theater.

Along the way, Alicia had lost Jeff's grip and was falling into the crowd's slipstream. She found the twins and followed them down the ramp to a center row, but before she could step in, a hard grip clutched her arm.

It was Leigh.

"Not with the plebes tonight, my dear," she said. "You have a seat of honor."

Leigh pulled Alicia to the carpeted staircase, then to the front row, where two identical wooden seats were positioned precisely at stage-center. They were decorated by ornate carvings and soft velvet cushions. Leigh sat in one, Alicia took the other. Jeff and Darlene took seats next to Alicia.

"Nervous?" Leigh asked.

Alicia nodded, then spun to the lively crowd behind her.

There was Al Cobb in a bowler hat seated a few rows back. Behind him was "BBQ Bruce," as she'd begun to think of him. In the middle section sat Frankie and Margaret, and nearby was Doris the waitress and her bob of black hair, seated next to the adulterer Jimmy Reynolds, who bit his fingernails as he waited.

"Of course, why wouldn't you be. I remember my own offering," Leigh said in consolation, then reminiscence. "His name was Jack. He was a beautiful man."

Up above, in one of the balcony suites, Alicia spotted Sam Waterson, now wearing a wild grin on his face. He twiddled his thumbs and licked his lips as he watched the stage curtains billow, mysterious movements behind them.

There was a shift to the band's music. The tempo sped up and the song gained volume. The dimming of the lights quieted the crowd's conversation.

Leigh stood up and leaned to Alicia.

"Break a leg," Leigh said, hustling through the darkness toward the side stairs that led up the stage.

A shuffle came from Alicia's left, a set of figures approached. Two people wearing all black, their faces shielded by masks with torn eyeholes, leading a young woman who wore a dress colored a similar red as her own. She had long blonde hair and rosy, bulging cheeks, and a look of tittering confusion down her face as they ushered her into the empty seat next to Alicia.

The lights went out.

Alicia slipped her fingers in her purse, and searched for what she'd taped onto the lining inside. She stuck them clandestinely in the palm of her hand, waiting for the proper time to put them in.

The muted horn, the staccato drumbeat. The curtains opened.

A spotlight blazed on stage-left. A silver microphone on a stand. Into the light stepped Leigh, wearing her white dress.

"It is time for another midnight tale of The Confessional," her elegant voice spoke over the music. "Tonight's episode, our Fourth of July celebration, is brought to you by simply all of us, here, in New Malinko. Come find us. We need the business."

A snicker passed through the audience as her spotlight flicked off. A new one gleamed onto the center of the stage, revealing the host—the priest, dressed in cardinal red.

He raised his hands to the buzzing crowd, they

silenced.

"For a member of the clergy to listen to a parishioner's sins, the first act in the sacrament of confession and then absolution, there needs to be an ideal location for the dialogue," he declared into his microphone. "A mixture of the public arena, where sinners know where to find the forgiver, and one for private concerns, where the confession can be had without the leering ears of others. To solve this problem, a simple structure was created."

A creak rattled through the auditorium. Figures clad in black emerged from the rear and rolled out a heavy, tall object. When it was brought into the light, Alicia saw that it was a wooden booth with meticulous carvings scattered throughout.

"The confessional booth from our church in Old Malinko," the priest's voice boomed. "Its features were hand-carved by a husband and wife couple from Illinois, and they brought it west on their move. It's stayed with us ever since."

The helpers twirled the booth so the seated audience could view its entirety.

There was a solid wall in front, decorated with reliefs of Biblical plagues. When it was twirled, Alicia saw that on its back contained two spaces separated by a vertical partition, a square of light fabric acting as a screen between them. One side had a built-in bench, the other held a kneeler placed below a contraption of leather straps and gnarled metal that glistened in spotlight.

The helpers completed the rotation so the wall hid the back again from the audience. The priest

slowly walked around the booth, as if a magician proving there weren't any hidden wires, the sharp clips of his bootheels echoing as he made his presentation.

"Imagine the sins this confessional booth has heard," the priest said, rapping knuckles against its side. "The pain, torment, lies. The regrets. The awful regrets. Those that torture you when you're all alone in the middle of the night." He paused. "And imagine what it's next about to hear."

With a crisp snap from his fingers, the back curtains parted. From the darkness, two helpers pulled forward a man. They approached the front of the stage and displayed him. He had a long beard and a shaved head covered in black tattoos.

His confused eyes scanned the audience. Alicia heard a slight whimper next to her.

"This is Felix," the priest announced. "He came to us from Riverside, on his way to New Orleans for spring break to partake in a week of debauchery and drunkenness with his girlfriend. That was before he saw a hitchhiker thumbing for a ride on the side of the road. Well done, my child."

The audience applauded and the helpers forced him into a bow, then brought him to the rear of the booth, obscuring him behind the wall with the kneeler and odd machinery. Alicia heard sounds of belts being tightened, gears being wound.

"And with us tonight is someone very special," the priest narrated. "His companion on this aforementioned trip of chaos and vice. Miss Marianne."

A spotlight blasted Alicia's face. It took her a moment to realize that it'd been aimed at the seat

next to her.

"Please," the priest quietly said, now close to them at the edge of the stage. "Perform your role. Perform your duty."

He offered a dainty hand to Miss Marianne, who glanced at Alicia for any solace, found none, and stood from her velvet cushion. He brought her around to the staircase, then up to the stage.

He led her to the booth's rear, on the opposite side where Felix had been strapped in. Alicia heard a grating, clicking sound from above. The golden microphone was lowering from the rafters. It disappeared into the open top of the confessional.

"As is our custom," the priest said, walking to the front of the stage, "we will now let our night's participants, the nominee and their offering, speak to one another."

The priest let his microphone fall as he stepped from the center. Only the booth itself, under the spotlight, held the audience's gaze.

Alicia heard faint whispers from the theater speakers.

"I'm sorry," the woman, Marianne, whispered.

"What is going on?" the man named Felix said. "What did they do to you?"

Silence, and then.

"Did you ever cheat on me?" the woman said.

"What?"

"Did you ever cheat on me."

"Mary, I..."

The priest's voice boomed through the speakers.

"It would be best to answer the question, my son," he said.

"Why were we going to New Orleans?"

Silence.

"Were we going to meet April?"

"Mary, I..."

"Were you ever going to marry me?"

"Marianne, stop!"

"Did you really want a child?"

"What?"

"Did you ever love me?"

"Mary, don't do this," he said. "What is this?"

Bootheels clicked on the floorboards as the priest approached the booth.

"Do you show mercy?" the priest asked into the microphone.

Silence. A light sob. He tried again, more softly this time.

"Do you forgive, my dear?"

"Yes," Marianne whispered.

The priest snapped his fingers.

"Wait, wai—" Felix shouted, then all at once a loud cracking sound as the booth's contraption snapped like a mousetrap.

Alicia saw spurts of blood and other viscera splatter from the side, a vision quickly overtaken by faint purple. She pulled the plugs from her palm and stuck them into her ears. The color faded.

She felt creaks and groans around her, saw townsfolk writhing and stuttering. The twins shivered in sync, Darlene and Jeff embraced as ecstatic pain rolled through their eyes. Leigh was on the stage's side, holding the wall as her knees buckled. The priest had collapsed into a penitent downward dog, his fingernails clawing the boards.

Alicia merely felt a slight wooziness that quickly dissipated.

After a moment, the color faded and the priest staggered to his feet. He wiped sweat from the side of his face and straightened an errant strand of hair, then flattened the ripples in his scarlet robe. He strode to the back of the confessional booth, stretched out a hand and pulled out Marianne.

The blonde woman stood with wobbly knees that, as she walked to the front of the stage, found strength. The spotlight highlighted her boisterous eyes, a new radiant glow.

"Brothers and sisters, New Malinko's latest resident," the priest announced, "Once Marianne, now Christine!"

"Welcome, Christine!" the crowd shouted back before raucous applause.

Alicia stood with them and through her earplugs heard stormy claps that felt more desperate than the rest. She followed them to Sam Waterson in his balcony suite, hooting and hollering, tears streamed down his cheeks.

Two crowd quieted as two helpers came from the back to lead Marianne, or was it Christine, offstage. Others went to the booth's rear with wet rags and sloshing buckets.

The priest again took the spotlight.

"And now, for our night's finale," he spoke into the microphone.

He snapped his fingers, and Alicia watched as the helpers appeared from the back again, now steering a captive Luke to center stage.

Chapter Forty-Eight

ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT, in addition to those sitting in the seats of the old theater in the mysterious town, the broadcast held an audience in the hundreds, mostly truck drivers roaming the dial as they traveled the highways of the great American Southwest, during that stretch of night when decisions were being made between pulling over or fighting sleep for a few more miles, but it was also listened by those in lone outposts scattered throughout the desert, who'd stumbled upon the transmission in one way or another and fitted their homes with customized set-ups, trying to keep the secret all to themselves.

Those tuning in for this show as the 4th of July became the 5th, would have heard the intro music then the announcer's graceful voice, followed by different, raspy proclamation that spoke with the authority of god.

It explained how that night's show would be special, it would take place inside of an old confessional booth. Knuckles rapped against wood as the speaker detailed historic context, then urged the home audience to imagine its ghosts, its memories.

He described the booth's first guest. A man named Felix, from Riverside on the way to New Orleans, who'd picked up a stranger thumbing for a ride. The host introduced someone else, a woman named Marianne who'd been traveling with him. She was placed on the booth's other side.

Through their radios, they heard the conversation between the woman and man, then the host asking if she forgave. The sob, a whispered "yes," then a grotesque snapping squish.

The listeners would have felt strange for a moment, a new energy within them. The odd violet in their eyes cleared as the second act began.

The host started anew.

The audience heard a slight scuffle and muffled voices, the sounds of straps and a locking mechanism, as the host introduced another man then a woman to similarly be placed on the confessional's twin sides.

The host described her walk from her seat in the front row onto the stage in play-by-play, how she wore a vibrant red dress with a matching purse, how it gave her the appearance of a fallen angel, how she had fair skin, wide blue eyes, and long dark hair pulled down in front of her shoulders, hiding her ears.

Her steps crossed the floor, the chair creaked under her weight. The host told them to begin.

"Hey, Leash," the audience at home heard over their radios.

"We had fun, didn't we?" the woman asked.

"Sure, Leash," the man responded. "But do what you need to. I won't stand in your way."

"You're not getting off that easy," the woman said.

There came a loud tear through fabric, vague shuffling in the booth, dead air. Suddenly, a single shout from far away, a great murmur from the audience, then a patter. If you were riding on the highway, or if the signal was passing through the mountains, one could have easily mistaken this all for interference.

"What was that?" the host asked, footsteps approaching.

A strange new sound on the airwaves. First in the distance, then close and frantic, screaming new voices piercing the broadcast.

"What is she doing in there?"

"What's going on?"

"Wait, stop!"

"Oh no. No."

"Stop her!"

Scratches on the microphone. Terrible scratches, dreadful sounds.

And then the audience, in the theater or at home, was subjected to the worst sound they'd ever heard.

Chapter Forty-Nine

BESSI STOOD IN THE SAME DARKNESS within which she'd stood every night, her long tail flat against her haunches, her large brown eyes staring into nothing. She was oblivious to how the walls were covered in loudspeakers, bolted side by side, all aimed to where she stood.

A sharp click in the room. Bessi's ears flicked up.

The music began. Soon that purple hue pulsed from the speaker wall. Bessi felt familiar warmth in her side, where the red bandage now turned white. The heat always brought with it pain—then energy, regeneration, fresh strength to her steps. Her tail whiplashed, swatting the air.

But then, suddenly, the warmth in her side took on new intensity. Strong heat from where the bandage was held, then intense burning from her other side, on her back, face, her hooves.

Bessi quickly realized that she had become engulfed in fire.

It singed her fur, then consumed her body, bubbling fat, blackening bones.

But she held no fear, no pain. Only gracious peace, then nothing at all.

*

Miles and miles away, a trailer near the Salton Sea went up in flames at an astonishing speed. The hulking nearby antenna caught as well and fell into the sand. ATF agents who arrived the next evening on a hot tip from a local would find no traces of meth or accelerants, only tangled wiring and the DNA of a person whose age could not be determined.

This case would remain disconnected from the astonishing number of single-driver truck crashes that had taken place throughout the American southwest that night. All would be blamed on elevated blood alcohol levels or late night drowsiness, and insurance would end up covering the losses, for the trucking companies at least.

Nor would those incidents be linked to the mysterious fire that came from nowhere to tear through the office of a vacant motel on Route 66, in some forgotten town out there. That would later be blamed on teenagers who'd been fucking around, or maybe vagrants trying to stay warm on a cold desert night, it didn't quite matter, there was no further inspection.

Around this time, a reading from a government satellite caught a brief shockwave that seemed to emanate from the middle of a dormant desert crater near the California and Arizona border, but with recent cuts to the budget, there would be no investigation.

Chapter Fifty

ALICIA SAW WAVES OF PURPLE and then it felt as if her brain was being dissected by a scalpel.

She forced her hand from the hardened clutch that it had spastically formed into and achingly straightened out a fingertip. She brought it up to her ear, pushed the plug back into place, and the purple pain lessened into a simmering fog of nuisance.

Through the torn screen of the confessional booth, she saw Luke.

He was strapped to the kneeler, wincing and shaking his head, his eyes slammed shut. Blood had begun to drip from his ears.

She leaned forward and her head brushed against the golden microphone that still hung from above—but now with the plush headphones from her portable CD player attached, blasting

heavy distortion from the blue disc spinning inside, the theater's speakers spewing the raised volume back into the microphone, amplifying it all in a feedback digital screech. She reached through and stuck the two extra earplugs that she'd hidden in her purse into Luke's ears.

His face calmed, his eyes opened. He breathed in deeply and found her face across from his, then he leaned his forehead against hers.

"Just buy me dinner later," she said, and he heard the deep tones of her voice.

"Deal," he said.

Alicia ran around the back of the booth's separation to Luke's side and undid the leather straps that contained him in the grisly, blood-stained contraption. When he was free, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and they breathed into each other's necks.

Into the sanctity of their embrace there came odd groans from beyond the booth's front wall.

"What's going on, Leash?" Luke asked, as if waking from a turbulent dream.

"I think it worked," she whispered.

Strange, ghastly sounds. Tortured screams. Banshee yells. A cacophony of madness.

They stepped to the side of the booth's front wall and there they saw it all.

In the theater, bodies of the Malinkites were sprawling in the aisles, contorted in odd positions over seat backs, limbs bent at peculiar angles, writhing in continuing anguish, screams from their open mouths faint enough so they couldn't be heard over the harsh unceasing feedback screech,

hands blurred at their ears as they tried to scratch out the terrible sound that had lodged within.

On the stage itself, the black-clad helpers lay on the boards—some twitching, most already still. In the wing Alicia saw Leigh's legs twitching on the ground, leaving curved marks of deep black as the back of her high heels dragged against the wood. In the center of the stage there lay the priest, face down, his scarlet robe spread like spilt blood from a gutshot.

Alicia stepped to him with a fist raised in preparation, as if he might still put up a fight, then saw the red liquid pouring out from his ears.

Movement from the balcony. They watched Sam Waterson stand with a snarl on his face as he found them onstage, and then his eyes rolled back and he fell forward from his suite, his neck striking a seat's top edge and cracking at a sharp slant. And then, the balcony itself became alit with flame. The twins were in the front row, holding hands and shivering and otherwise silent. Darlene and Jeff were crumpled together in the footwell of the front row. Doris the waitress was holding onto the stage, bashing her forehead into its edge, coming back up with a brighter shade of red, a skull with further dents, none accomplishing yet what she had hoped. Al Cobb held one gnarled, detached ear in his hand, to no seeming effect, then his seat erupted in flames and he was consumed. The squat, sinewy man was on the ground, ponytail untethered and yellow bandana nearby, shirtless and screaming with legs twisted and knees shattered after a fall from somewhere above.

Luke stared slack-jawed at the chaos in the auditorium. New fire had burst to life in the rows. The flickering motions of the dying audience made it appear as if they were dancing.

Alicia took his hand and led him down the staircase into the aisles. With her in the lead, they passed through a gauntlet of failing bodies, each clutching helplessly at the legs of the departing newcomers.

And then Alicia felt herself trip forward, floating through the air.

She slammed hard against the armrest of a chair, pain inflicted on her brow. Hot blood ran down her face. She looked back and saw the crooked fist that had grabbed and now twisting her ankle. A stab of fresh pain.

The hand was attached to that woman in identical red, Miss Marianne, her face now contorted in a strange grimace. Her eyes clamped shut and her mouth stretched wide open, as if in the midst of a seizure. She pulled herself up Alicia's legs and yanked the hem of her dress.

As Marianne rose, Alicia saw that her ears had gone missing. In their place were gaping holes of fleshy red that trailed blood down her cheeks.

Marianne's arms, with a strength that belied her stature, held Alicia down. Clammy hands found her neck, then her chin, then her nose. Her thumbs reached into Alicia's mouth, hooked into its corners, and began to stretch until the flesh of her cheeks started to tear.

"What did you do?" Marianne hissed. "What did you d—"

Luke's bare foot came barreling from above. Marianne's thumbs were torn from Alicia's mouth, and she tumbled head over heels down the aisle into a writhing mess of confused and injured townsfolk, all still trying to make their escapes. As the woman in red fell into them, they all grabbed onto her, scratching and clawing blindly, and she disappeared within their blurred scarlet frenzy.

Luke helped Alicia up. Holding a hand to her bleeding mouth, she tested her twisted ankle and felt a sharp pain. It felt broken. Luke wrapped an arm around her body.

They hobbled up into the empty lobby then through the theater's front doors and out into the moonlit cul-de-sac.

Outside, the marquee's bulbs had all exploded, glass shards scattered across the pavement, reflecting flames from the burning theater, its skeletal beams already exposed.

But the couple was more focused on what lie ahead of them—the rest of the town was burning as well.

Every storefront on New Malinko's Main Street was engulfed, the road itself now bracketed by twin walls of flames. They licked the air as gray ash and particulates floated in the night. The rows of homes on Rose and Lavender burned as well, lighting the ridges high up of the crater walls. Alicia looked to her left and found her home-to-be burning up as well.

"What now?" Luke said, hobbling down the road, shaking his head every few steps as if trying to get water out of his ear.

"Now?" Alicia winced through the ankle pain. "Now, let's get the fuck out of here."

"Do you know our way out?"

Alicia nodded forward, directing him forward down Main Street.

Luke registered the pain from Alicia's step and took her weight on his shoulder, then stepped forward past the intersection. They approached the heat, baking on all sides, already wearing a thin sheen of sweat.

Smoke from storefront windows poured out. Through the bike shop's window frames bent and they caught the whiff of burnt rubber. The front door of Betty's had shattered, the bell above melted. The cube of glass brick from Cobb's Bar cast a kaleidoscope of orange and red that danced inside, then the red neon sign suddenly burst.

Luke pressed forward and Alicia turned to look back toward the theater. Its facade was nothing but fire, but in front of it now stood a tall silhouette, backlit by flames.

It was a man. He was tall and wore a hat. He carried a briefcase at its side. Or was it a shovel? She thought she was him wave.

Luke felt her tense up.

"What is it?" he asked.

All at once the theater crashed into a pile of smoke and debris that jettisoned dust down the funnel of the road. The figure disappeared.

They moved forward still, covering their faces but hacking up dust. Luke grimaced and grunted as he carried Alicia's weight under the blinking yellow stoplight that swayed in the cross-wind

from the beckoning tunnel.

From the roof of the town's hotel came wisps of fire that reached into the night, its curtains billowing in flames. In the open front door stood another figure.

Curtis.

He waved an arm gingerly and smiled as the fire raged behind him. Then he turned around and slowly ambled back into the flames just before the structure itself collapsed as well.

Luke huffed, lifted Alicia further up his side, and began to lead them up the hill toward the tunnel.

"Wait," Alicia said. "That's not the way out of here."

She nodded to the mechanic's garage across the street, that replica of Luther's. The building was on fire, but the flames were contained to the office, where smoke billowed from a single cracked window.

He lifted her up again on his shoulder and they hustled past the chrome gas pumps to the garage door. He set her down and they both reached their fingers beneath the crack under the door and strained as they lifted it up. A plume of smoke escaped and floated in their faces, and on their hands and knees they crawled into the sauna-like heat.

The garage was empty.

The Elantra was gone.

"Fuck!" Luke said, and sat down on the ground, his head in his hands as he tried to think, tried to figure it all out, but fresh pressure came against

his temples, tears formed in his eyes.

Alicia came over to him and gathered him in her arms.

"Champ, that's not the way I was talking about," Alicia whispered. "We're taking a different path."

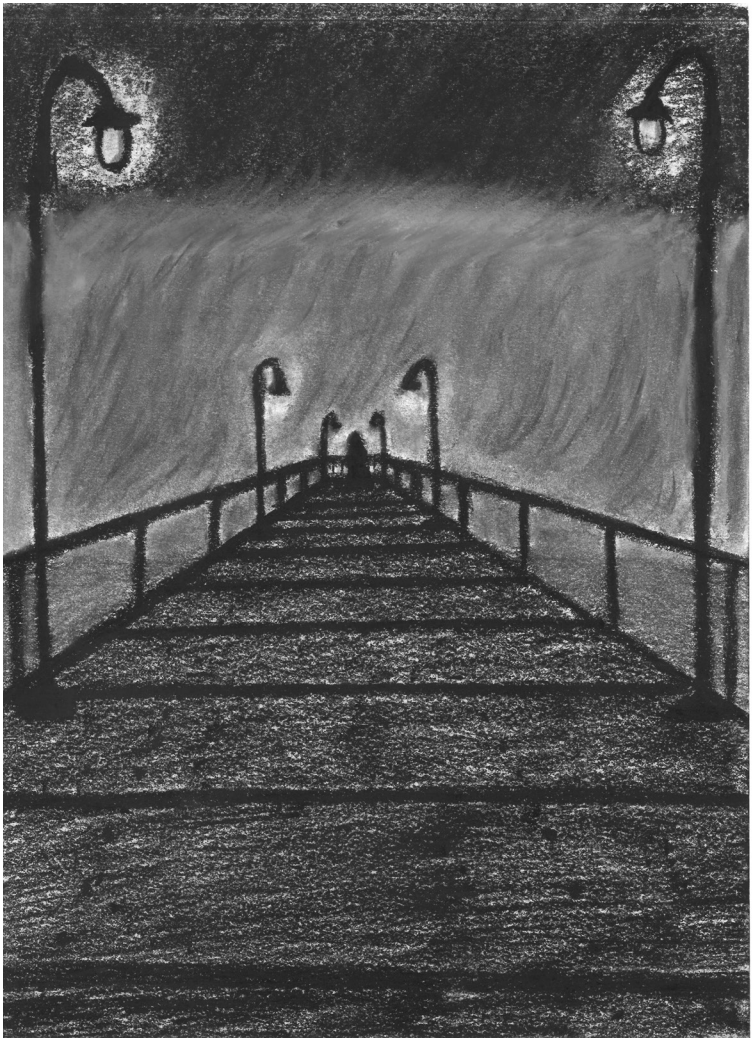
He lifted his head and she thumbed over her shoulder to the center of the garage floor, that darkened space where a pit had been dug so a mechanic could slide beneath.

She rose into a stance and helped lift him up, and they peered down into the hole together.

Inside was a metal cart with a vertical bar rising from its base. It was set on rail tracks that led down a dark tunnel.

One by one they took their steps down the ladder into the cart, and when they were nestled inside, she pulled back the handle. Deep in the distant darkness they could hear the sound of a machine sputter for a moment and then catch. Gears began to spin.

Alicia pulled the handle further, and the cart began to rumble down the tracks into the black.



Epilogue

ALICIA ERUPTED FROM HER DREAM and saw pale moonlight laid in strips across her bedroom ceiling. She reached an arm across the bed and felt its cool side.

She looked at her clock to confirm that it was indeed midnight again. No matter how many different methods she tried, her body still kept getting waking at this hour every night, like a new mother set to a feeding schedule.

She shifted off the bed and stepped on the hardfloor, the sweat from the bottoms of her feet audibly unsticking with each step. She pulled open the bedroom door and walked through the hallway into the kitchen, then tilted her lips under the running faucet to wet her dry throat.

She took full gulps until her stomach bulged, then stood up with moisture running down her lips, and gazed out the window to the green ivy

that clung to the rising walls of the apartment complex's courtyard.

That's when she heard the sound coming from the other room.

A strained sound. A high-pitched whine.

He was having that nightmare again.

Luke hadn't been the same since Malinko.

After they made it back to Los Angeles—a nightmare journey in itself—Luke's daytime mind had normalized. But whenever he tried to sleep, he was never able to find the rhythm of calming breath to alight his path. He'd toss and turn, and whenever he fell into some state resembling sleep, that's when the real terror began.

He'd call out in words without meaning, sounds that hadn't existed before they exited his throat. Sometimes he'd claw and kick like a dog dreaming that it was fending off some pack attack, then whimpering at having failed. He had tried sleeping pills, every type of therapy, drugs, gadgets for sleep apnea, hypnosis, a shift in diet, harder drugs. Nothing worked.

When he was no longer able to function during his day-to-day, he finally called Alicia in desperation, and she cleared the walls of the home office that she had set up, removed the duct tape from the floor, and brought in a bed. She said she'd help out however she could, for however long.

His groans grew louder through the door. It would only get worse over the course of the night, she knew by now.

She turned off the faucet and hustled back into her own room, then put on her jogging shorts and

a tank top for the balmy summer Santa Monica night. She took her earbuds from the drawer, stuck the twin pieces in, and heard their powering-up sound before his moans through their shared wall were cut off by their noise cancellation. She laced up her tennis shoes.

If the past was any indication, she had about an hour left. She grabbed her keys and walked out the door.

After a half-hour jogging down Wilshire at a brisk six-minute mile pace, she hung a left on 4th Street, then a right onto Colorado. She crossed onto the Santa Monica Pier, her heart racing as the rubber under her shoes struck the wood. She slowed into a walk to get a much-needed rest at this halfway point.

She stretched out her calf on a bench and watched the silver-painted street entertainer with a hat on the ground pack up his wares for the night. The sharp, robotic motions that'd previously been used to collect his wage then smoothly began counting the coins and bills that'd been thrown in during his shift. He poured them all into a small leather pouch, pulled close the zipper, and tucked it into the inside of his pants for safe keeping.

She'd seen him before. On nights like these.

She took out her earbuds and called out to him.

"Have a good night?" she asked.

"Could be worse," the man said, and through the make-up Alicia saw deep dimples and a chiseled jawline. "But you know, the show's all about making people laugh," he said, sarcastically. "That's reward enough for me."

He hefted up his plastic crate into his hands and walked off the pier back into the city night.

Alicia heard the ocean breeze approach. It chilled the layer of sweat she had collected on her skin. Her ankle throbbed, even now. She finally got to the sign:

SANTA MONICA

66

END OF THE TRAIL

She put the white buds back into her ears.

She looked out to the sea and her fingers found her phone screen. They unlocked her passcode, and she scrolled to the link that she had saved. She clicked it, and the browser took her to a livestream. It had already begun to play.

She heard the moans and the guttural aches from Luke, still caught in his nightmares.

The sound of the ocean went silent. Ahead of her, rising on the horizon past the swell, she found that mist of purple rise and approach. She felt familiar pain then the sudden vibrancy. Her bones ached, her skin tightened, the pain in her ankle went away.

It was nothing like she'd felt in New Malinko, but still, it was close enough.

She'd tried a few experiments after he had moved in, as he was in the throes of those nightmares, but it wasn't until after she started broadcasting it, to be listened from somewhere

else, that it had begun to work. She wasn't sure why, she couldn't figure it out. The stream would begin, it would be live on the web, to be played for her and her alone.

It seemed to work that way, somehow.

Alicia heard a loud beep in her phone and suddenly all that pleasurable pain doubled in strength. It was more powerful than she'd ever experienced outside of Malinko. She held onto the railing to keep from collapsing into the sea.

She pried open her eyes to look at her phone, and she squinted through vibrant violet. She found that she was no longer all alone on the stream.

She found that someone else was now listening as well.