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Dirty laundry

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DIRTY LAUNDRY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Stacey Lynn Knapp

May 2009

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

DIRTY LAUNDRY

by

Stacey L. Knapp

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ABSTRACT

DIRTY LAUNDRY

By

Stacey Lynn Knapp

The mother of two children and wife of a successful Hollywood producer, Victory Anderson seemingly has it all, but after discovering a dildo on the top of her refrigerator, Vicky's grip on her idyllic life starts to slip. Certain that the dildo proves her husband has been unfaithful, Vicky retaliates by taking on a lover and a new job. After a multi-tasking snafu of epic proportions, Vicky agrees to a week at home with her mother.

Vicky soon discovers that life in the suburbs is no less complicated. Her Southern Baptist mother is conversing with the devil, and her sister, who has a reputation for hot and heavy house calls, is considering ending her career as a realtor, to marry a wealthy Texas businessman—as long as he agrees to the terms of her contract. The quiet desert community erupts into a war of conflicting values after her sister is arrested for prostitution, and her mother's covert pipeline between the church and the local abortion clinic is discovered. At odds with just about everyone and everything she has ever believed in, Vicky struggles to regain a connection with her family and herself.

Chapter One

"Is anybody there?" Victory Anderson asked of the dark.

There was a noise. A dull thud. Repeated.

Then the house went silent. The leather couch creaked as she lifted her head to listen.

Nothing.

She turned to the floor lamp. "On," she requested. Nothing happened. The sconces in the hall were also off.

The giant screen television loomed like a black hole across the room. Hadn't she been watching an infomercial about astronauts and ionized laundry soap?

The thud repeated. The channels of her mind switched rapidly to her children. Safe. Asleep. She reassured herself. Snug in beds crowded with stuffed animals. Her mind switched to her own location in the living room: Alone, in the dim light of dawn wearing yesterday's outfit—velour sweats, dinner-stained cotton t-shirt. Her bra clung to the arm of the chair across the room. She vaguely recalled the sleepy extraction through the armpit of her t-shirt at some point during the night. Two more thuds caused her to sit up right.

Her mind switched to the safe in her closet. The idea of the gun inside made her heart beat faster. The long hall separating the kids, and the gun loomed up like the scene in a horror movie. Should she run? Down the hall? Get the gun? Or to her children? Which room first? Which first? Gun? Children?

There was another sound—a distant whirring like driving through a tunnel.

"The wind," she whispered out loud. The big storm—forecasted with all the hype of a major league sporting event—had arrived. The power lines must be down, she reasoned. The sound—branches knocking against the house.

Reassured, she stood and padded across the limestone to the wall of glass in the dining room. Her eyes skipped across the dark canyon to the glittery skyscrapers of Los Angeles. She stretched her arm above her head. "Hello world," she said, waving.

At first Vicky had hated the house. The expansive walls of glass and 6,000 square feet made her feel like she was living inside a giant aquarium.

Her smile had strained whenever Manny toured guests through the rooms, pointing out the numerous keypads and computer screens along the way. “Ever see *A Space Odyssey*?” Manny asked every guest. “Kubrick at his finest.” He could never refrain from cinematic judgment. “This place is smarter than Hal,” Manny would confide with an amiable smile. Manny was an excellent host. “Everything is automated. We even have self-cleaning toilets!”

At this point, Vicky would roll her eyes and say, “That’s an oxymoron.” And the guests would laugh.

But the same capabilities that Manny bragged about had at first boggled Vicky to the point of tears.

“I can’t even turn on the lights!” she screamed one morning after frantically punching buttons in the bathroom. It wasn’t long before Manny had the systems converted to voice-activated and, after more than six years of constant communication between Vicky and the house, a bond had been forged. Vicky now considered her home more like a living fortress, bodyguard, protective friend.

The stone felt icy under her bare feet.

“Heat,” Vicky commanded, before remembering there was none. Without power, the house now felt like a cold, empty shell.

In the kitchen, she tossed the empty wine bottle into the recycling and stared at the shiny chrome espresso machine. The cheerful greeting, which could be programmed in five different languages, was silent. No gentle chime. No rich espresso smell and familiar chuff of steam. Her fingers traveled to the source of pain between her brows, but she remembered the injections of Botox yesterday, and opted not to rub. Despite regular treatments, Vicky still worried that the Botulism cells could be dislodged if she pressed too hard. What if the cells spread through her body, paralyzing other muscles along the way? This idea had come to her in the form of a dream. Sections of her body had become numb. Her thumb, but not her index finger. Her right leg, but not her left.

Shivering, she reached for the teapot, and looked out the window as the tap ran. The sky was the color of smoke. The gardens—usually plucked, snipped and blown clean—were piled with debris.

Her son’s fascination with fire, which led to a minor explosion in the garage last summer, had prompted Vicky to clear the house of all combustibles, except for the box of safety matches she kept hidden in the gap between the custom cherry cabinetry and the top of the Sub-Zero

refrigerator. She stretched up onto her toes, tapping her fingers where the matchbox should have been.

The kitchen, along with the rest of the spacious home, was swept clean of all clutter. In her own defense, Vicky routinely declared that the reason for such rigid order was that she was actually very disorganized. Only through great effort and discipline did she maintain order. No one believed this. Her mother loved to tell how, even as young as three, Vicky had been impressed with properly sorted socks. A psychotherapist, whom she'd since fired, had once hinted at OCD. Manny thought the idea preposterous.

"Since when is an appreciation for a clean house considered a disease?" His voice had come at her from behind a *Celebrity Hustle* magazine.

Vicky had waited for the magazine to lower and since it didn't, she went on about her business.

One fact no one disputed was that if Vicky was unable to find something—and this fact was especially true in recent years—she became obsessed. She could feel this obsession beating like an extra heart in her chest as her fingers tapped along the top of the refrigerator.

She reached as far she could, but aside from the accumulation of dust, found nothing. The matches were not there.

"It must be Elia," she whispered fiercely, but immediately doubted herself. She examined the fuzzy layer of dust coating her fingertips. Elia had obviously gone no where near the top of the refrigerator in quite some time. Vicky sighed heavily at the now familiar notion of hiring new help. The trouble, the worry, the effort, the guilt, the risk of someone new—the task seemed insurmountable, so huge that she had already resigned to the idea of Elia by her side, changing bed pans and linens during her final days.

The tree banged the side of the house again, and Vicky's eyes traveled to the moving landscape outside the window. How long would the power be off? Would the phones work? The alarm? What about the garage doors? Was there really no other way to light the stove? What if the power outage lasted? How would she light candles, cook dinner?

Tilting her head back, she stared up at the un-seeable top of the refrigerator, and inhaled sharply. There was no doubt in Vicky's mind that the matches should be there. The mental inventory she kept of each and every drawer and cupboard allowed her this confidence.

The matches had been moved. She exhaled in a huff. Manny hadn't been home in nearly two weeks. Besides he had no reason for matches. At least she didn't think Manny had any reason to move the matches, although what her husband did lately seemed more and more a mystery.

Vicky struggled to pull the stepladder from the pantry. Climbing to the top step, she bent and peered into the darkness above the refrigerator. There was something back there, just...a bit...further. Her arm bent awkwardly as she reached into the dark space. Instead of the rectangular box she had hoped for, her hand landed on an oddly shaped object. At first she thought it was an old carrot, partially decomposed, and she retracted her hand quickly. She cursed Elia under her breath, and considered leaving the object; but her curiosity was piqued: how would a carrot get on top of the refrigerator?

Vicky let her hand creep slowly toward the object. Her index finger prodded one end. Assured that the thing had never been alive, she let her fingers wrap around the object's wrinkly circumference. What a strange texture. She squeezed gently. Soft, but firm.

Holding the object in her hand, her balance shifted as she took a step down the ladder. She turned toward the light from the kitchen window, and stared at what looked strangely similar to a penis.

It *was* a penis. A fake penis with an on/off switch. What was a dildo doing on the top of her refrigerator?

"Mom," her son emerged from the still darkened hallway rubbing his eyes. "What's for breakfast?"

Vicky jumped to the floor and dropped the dildo into the breadbasket.

"Cereal," she replied rushing to the sink to wash her hands.

After breakfast Vicky cleared all the breakables from the living room, and let the kids bring blankets and sheets in to build a tent. She watched the chaos grow as they moved the furniture, and stacked couch pillows against the front window. Iris toted in the whole tub of My Little Ponies and set to work building a corral with the Lincoln Logs.

Vicky grabbed her coat out of the hall closet and stepped out the front door. Wind tugged at her clothes and hair. Her eyes stung as she walked down the driveway.

Why would Manny stash a dildo on top of the refrigerator? Maybe it was a gag gift? No. Her husband wasn't the type to actually go out and buy a sex toy. She had a hard enough time getting him to buy a box of tampons. No way.

Sharp edged oak leaves pelted her jacket as she neared the end of the driveway. She pulled up the hood of her jacket, and secured the laces underneath her chin. Tilting her head back she examined the boil of clouds overhead. A sweet smell of split pine had replaced the stagnant smell of traffic that usually drifted in on the breeze. Vicky remembered feeling alarmed by the lack of neighbors when Manny first brought her up to the look at the house. The lot was at the end of the cul-de-sac, but only two other houses shared the street. The modern design jutted out from the steep hillside, suspended over concrete pillars.

“What if there is an earthquake?” she asked.

“This house is built like Fort Knox,” Manny had reassured her. That was just after their two-year anniversary. They shared a bottle of wine on the back patio, and swam naked in the pool. Afterwards they made love as the sun glinted off the glass high-rises downtown.

“Do you think they can see us from down there?” she’d asked.

“Some exec’s probably got a high powered telescope trained on you right now,” Manny had joked. “I’ll bet he’s glad you moved in.”

Vicky walked to the end of the driveway and pushed the code into the keypad to open the electric gate. She laughed at her own surprise when the gate didn’t slide open. She tugged on the welded iron, but the wheels were locked in place on the track. There must be some source of auxiliary power— why hadn’t she ever asked? Vicky knelt down examining the black metal box at the base of the gate. Another gust hit the hillside and she grabbed the bars to keep herself steady. The steel box was locked.

Staring at the limb cluttered street, Vicky suddenly became aware of how much she wanted to leave. Ideas flooded her mind about what she could do if only she could get the gate opened. Take the kids to a movie, buy a set of battery operated flood lights. Or maybe just check into a hotel, spend the night, tomorrow they could take the downtown shuttle to the Getty.

Her eyes turned to the side gate. They weren’t really trapped; they could walk. But where? The canyon road was steep and more than three miles long. Vicky fought back a surge of panic. It’s not like they were stranded in the wilderness— they had plenty of food, water, blankets. So what if her son was terrified of the dark? She wasn’t afraid of the dark, was she? There was no logical reason to be so jumpy. Her cell phone still worked. She could call them a cab. That was it, she’d have the kids pack their bags and they’d take a cab to the Four Seasons downtown! Her heart jumped at the prospect.

Like a mirage Mr. Dooley appeared walking his Great Dane up the street.

"Some storm," Vicky called when he was within earshot.

Mr. Dooley looked startled. He offered her his usual cursory glance and nodded.

Vicky looked up at the dark clouds. "Strange that the rain hasn't come."

He cleared his throat roughly. "Not yet."

Shortly after moving in, Vicky had made the mistake of asking Mr. Dooley to clean up after his dog. The dog had taken to depositing large piles next to the New Zealand Flax planted on either side of the gate. The fecal matter of a Great Dane was unmistakable, or so Vicky thought, but Mr. Dooley had been adamant about the crap not belonging to Dukey, and Vicky had the feeling that even though they'd been neighbors for six years since, he still carried a grudge.

"Any news of when the power is coming back on?" Vicky suddenly remembered that the last time Mr. Dooley called the house complaining of noise the kids had been in the pool, and Vicky's efforts to quiet them had resulted in a loud chant: *Mr. Dooley is a big Pooley! Mr. Dooley is a big Pooley!*

"Two trees are down," Mr. Dooley answered. His fleshy mouth hung in a permanent scowl. "One big Oak. The road is blocked." He tugged on Dukey's leash.

"The road is closed?" Vicky blanched.

Mr. Dooley nodded. He pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose roughly before jamming the cloth back into his pocket. Vicky almost asked him if he had a lighter, but she reconsidered. Only a smoker would carry a lighter, and he might take offense. His jacket made a flapping sound like a flag in the breeze as he rounded the curve in the cul-de-sac and headed back up the street.

Thunder exploded overhead, a long bone, rattling grumble. Vicky looked up at the sky just as the lightening flashed across the sky. These kind of storms terrified the kids. Vicky turned and trotted back up the driveway. Thick steel girders seamed the glass along the front of the house making the building appear as solid and unaffected as the bedrock it was built on. She mentally listed the reasons she needed to stop worrying:

1. Her children were safe inside.
2. Thunder was as harmless as a special effect.
3. What could really happen?

It was a good adventure, she reassured herself. A gust of wind shook the cherry tree in the courtyard, bright new leaves rattled and blossoms spun through the air. White petals stuck to

the lady in the fountain like snow. Maybe they would come out of the experience with an appreciation for...something. Another blast of thunder hit just as she opened the door.

“Mommmyyy!” She heard Iris wail.

“I’m right here, honey.” Vicky called. “It’s just thunder, baby. Don’t worry!”

The news from Mr. Dooley had left Vicky feeling unusually jumpy. Panic surged and bobbed in her mind like turbulence on an airplane— an uncontrollable lurching, alternating with a sweat producing urge to run outside the door screaming. Was it the dildo? Manny’s unanswered phone? The storm? The power? The espresso beans she’d been eating since breakfast? Vicky opened the liquor cabinet on the far side of the dining room and considered pouring herself a shot of whiskey. Anything to calm her nerves. Iris came into the room and Vicky closed the doors.

“Mommy, I want to go to the Zoom Room.”

Vicky knelt down next to her daughter. “That would be fun, Sweetie. Maybe tomorrow.” Her daughter pressed against her, wrapping her arms tightly around her neck.

“We are going to just stay home today,” Vicky added trying to sound reassuring. “It’s so cold and windy outside, and it’s supposed to rain.”

“But everyone goes to the Zoom Room when it rains—” Iris whined.

“I know Honey, but not today,” Vicky said firmly.

“But Moooooommmmmmmmyyyyyyy. I want to go to the Zoom—”

“MooooM!” Ira hollered from underneath the tent, his voice slightly muffled by the blankets. “If you think I’m going to that baby play pen, you are W-R-O-N-G!”

Vicky picked up the cell phone and pushed send. Two rings later, the same answering service picked up. She ended the call and dialed Manny’s assistant.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Ashley, this is Mrs. Anderson. I’m sorry for interrupting you again. I know this is such a busy day for you.”

“Well, not yet, Mrs. Anderson. It’s only four in the morning here.”

“Oh Gosh! I’m so sorry. It’s just that I’m...I have a question for Manny. Do you know where I can reach him?”

“I’m sure he’s in his room. I gave you the number yesterday.”

“I’ve called that number. There’s no answer.”

“He probably has his DND button on. We are running a grueling schedule this week—”

“Are you by any chance near his room?”

“Uh...I’m just down the hall,” Ashley answered.

“Do you mind terribly...since I’ve already awakened you— Do you think...would it be possible for you to go down and tell him to call me? It’s urgent, or I... believe me, I would never ask you to go to so much trouble.”

“Uh...sure. I guess.”

Vicky could hear the muffled sound of movement coming across the line.

“Are you okay? Are the kids okay?” Ashley asked not quite sounding genuinely alarmed.

“Oh, we’re fine. There’s...well it’s big storm for here. I know we don’t get tsunami’s or anything, but there is a hurricane alert,” she lied, “and...and the power’s gone out and well I can’t...well I just need to ask Manny some operational questions. You know about the house. These damn smart houses...you know! I’m sorry Ashley. It’s just that our son...well, he has severe asthma,” she heard herself lying again. Ira hadn’t had an asthma attack since he started taking his medication three years ago. “....I can’t get the electric gate open, and I’m worried, you know, he might need to go to the hospital.” How could she admit that she needed to ask why there was a dildo instead of matches above the refrigerator? A film clip of her husband and a mystery woman wielding the dildo played in her mind. Okay, maybe she’d just ask about the matches for now. The last thing she wanted was for her kids to overhear—

“You must be so scared.” Ashley’s tone reflected a trifle of concern.

“I’ll go to his door and I’ll have him call you. At home?”

“No!” Vicky was aware of the panic in her voice and she took in a breath before answering. “The cell. Please. We don’t have any power at the house. The phones aren’t working. Or, at least, I have no idea how to get them to work.”

“Sure. No problem, Mrs. Anderson. I’ll go right now.”

At 4:30 Vicky no longer felt frantic about the batteries, or the matches, or the impending onslaught of darkness. Now her mind was consumed with the whereabouts of her husband. Why hadn’t Manny called? He must be sleeping with someone else—there was no other explanation. Her cell phone was dying, so she’d gone out to the car to charge it up, but she worried that the movie the kids had watched earlier might have drained the battery—could she run the car with the garage door closed? Would she die? This dilemma was solved after she turned the key and realized that the battery was already dead.

“Jesus!” she yelled. Her mother’s reprimand echoed somewhere in the chaos of her thoughts. Her chest felt like it was going to explode. Why wasn’t Manny here? Who was he sleeping with? Where were the goddamn matches! Vicky let her headrest on the steering wheel, no longer able to pretend that she didn’t want to cry.

“Mama?” She heard Iris’ slightly lispy voice coming at her through the car window. “Can we watch Power Puff Grils?”

Vicky waited for the kids to finish singing the Scooby Doo theme song before lifting up a corner of their refuge. They smiled up at her.

“You two are ready for the recording studio.” Vicky smiled back at them.

“Would they pay us?” Ira asked.

“Maybe,” Vicky nodded.

Ducking her head she crawled into the tent and sat next to her daughter. It was warm underneath the blankets. The fading light from the window filtered through the fabric creating a reassuring blue glow. Ira held onto a black flashlight.

“Are those batteries working?”

Ira clicked the button and a weak beam of light hit the down comforter overhead.

“I took them from my Hot Wheels track,” he said proudly.

“Wow. Nice job buddy.”

“You checked all the other toys like I asked you?”

“Yeah. These were the only ones.”

“Save them,” Vicky said firmly.

Ira flicked off the light. Iris held a compass and a *Book of Disasters* she’d insisted on buying at the bookstore. At least her children were prepared. The girl’s brown hair was secured in two piggy tails. Vicky removed her daughter’s glasses and carefully wiped them on her sweater before handing them back.

“Can I invite Zachary over?” Ira asked as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

“That’s a nice idea, Sweetie,” Vicky said absently. “But the roads are closed until they clear a tree that came down.”

Iris and Ira exchanged looks.

“You mean we can’t leave?”

Vicky shook her head. She hadn't allowed herself any more espresso beans, so the panicky surges had been replaced by a slightly tired, achy feeling.

"When's Dad coming back?"

"Not for a few more days," Vicky said trying to sound optimistic. In reality Manny wouldn't be home for another two weeks, but thankfully the kids operated on a different time standard—three days seemed like weeks to them—so surely her inaccuracies about Manny's timelines didn't count. Besides how often had the return date changed? So many that she no longer expected any accuracy in his calendaring. "Come on we don't need Dad every time a storm rolls in. We're having an adventure."

Ira's eyes squinted. Iris started biting her nails.

"Stop that!" Vicky snapped.

Iris moved her fingers from her mouth to her hair. She twisted a brown curl around her finger. Her eyes remained on Vicky, but they glazed over. Vicky wondered what she was thinking.

"I bet Zachary could get here even though that tree's down," Ira said smugly.

"Yeah," Iris agreed, "his Dad's got a Hummer. They could probably drive right over that tree."

"I don't think so," Vicky said. "Those things are just for show." The picture window formed one side of the tent. Vicky's gaze shifted back outside to the sculpture of the girl pouring water in the fountain. White blossoms fell in the water and stuck like snow to her dress.

"I'm going to call him," Ira announced producing a cell phone from his pajama pocket. He coughed a little as he dialed. Vicky detected a slight wheeze in his breathing.

"Did you take your medicine this morning?"

Ira nodded his head placing the cell phone to his ear. He coughed again.

"Maybe you should come out of there—all that dust from the blankets—"

"Mom," he interrupted, glaring at her. "I'm fine."

"Guess what dude?" She heard her son's voice change whenever he talked to Zachary. There was a certain 'man-to-man' tone that was missing when he talked with her or Iris.

Or maybe Zachary was just a bad influence. Only six months older, he seemed advanced for his years. Just last week she caught them text messaging girls. The girls had written: "I can make you cum." And they had responded: "Do ya like whppd creem?"

And then there was the incident with the fire in the garage. Zachary had been there for that too. His mom, Shannan, could be part of the problem. She didn't exactly keep a Kosher home like the other moms at the private Jewish school their kids attended. Not that they were Jewish either, but at least Vicky knew what kind of hot dogs to bring to school picnics. She'd never forget the look on the other women's faces when Shannan showed up with a nine packages of Ballparks for the school fundraiser barbecue.

Shannan wasn't the type to let these private blunders bother her. When it came to her own business, as Hollywood agent, she would never be so careless—unless there was money to be made. Twice she had ratted out her own clients to People magazine. Once the magazine featured the scandal on the cover and shortly thereafter Shannan traded her Volvo wagon in for a convertible. And then there was the constant coaching about plastic surgery. Vicky once overheard Shannan threaten to drop a client if she didn't get liposuction.

"Just try finding a new agent with those thunder thighs!" Shannan had blared.

Shannan viewed the body like a Beverly Hills realtor views a potential new listing: What sells?

"You should consider implants," Shannan had said to Vicky one day by the pool. Vicky's eyes had automatically shifted to where Shannan's perfectly perky size D breasts filled out her bikini with the smooth regularity only possible with silicon.

"I'll have them reconstructed after breast cancer," Vicky remembered replying without much thought.

"That's morose!" Shannan exclaimed.

"One in eight women get breast cancer," Vicky responded. Vicky was acutely aware that Shannan opted to spend time with her, only after she found out that Vicky had been a writer on a popular sitcom.

"You need to get back out there." Shannan often chided.

"I know." Vicky had at first chosen to placate her, but when Shannan walked in one day with a contract series of sink cleanser commercials—Vicky knew it was time for a new tactic.

"I'm not ready to go back to work." Vicky stated plainly.

"You are getting too old," Shannan glared. She tossed the contract on the poolside table and took a seat next to Vicky in the lounge.

Vicky felt her jaw tightening, but she said nothing.

“Very soon, you will no longer have the option,” Shannan continued. “What about when the kids leave? And it’s just you here? You and this stupid talking house. What then?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” Vicky said in straightforward manner, denying the internal lurch she felt whenever she contemplated the future. “You’ll be the first to know when I’m ready, okay?”

“Whatever,” Shannan sighed.

“Do you have a lighter?” Shannan had asked.

“You don’t smoke.”

Shannan reached into her Prada and pulled out a small embroidered bag. “It’s medicinal-grade. Just to take the edge off.”

“Are you going to roll a joint?” Vicky had asked incredulous.

Shannan laughed. “What do you think this is 1960?”

Vicky stared blankly. She had suspected Shannan was on some sort of prescription medication because she often repeated herself, but illegal drugs?

“I have a smoke free sneak-a-toke, Silly,” she said, opening her palm to reveal a bullet-shaped object.

Vicky eyed the shiny green metal cylinder. “How does it work?”

“Get me a lighter and I’ll show you.”

The kids were climbing the rope ladder on the tree house. “Where are you going to do it?” Vicky whispered.

“Over there,” Shannan pointed to where a thick vine of Bougainvillea covered the back of the pool house.

“Come on, Vic! Loosen up,” Shannan scoffed. “It’s not like you have a lot of challenging work to do today. Watching the kids play isn’t exactly demanding the full gamut of your mental capacities is it?”

“I’m *not* smoking marijuana, if that’s what you’re after,” Vicky hissed. “I’m merely considering how you are going to pull this off.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Shannan said holding out her hand. “Lighter, please?”

“I don’t have a lighter,” Vicky had stuttered, torn between being a polite host and enabling a drug addict. “I think I have some matches,” she remembered saying.

Vicky's eyes landed on her son. He held his purple cell phone in one hand, his lanky body stretched flat across the carpet.

"Let me speak to Zachary's mother," Vicky practically shrieked.

Ira held his hand over the mouthpiece, and shot her a disapproving look.

"Calm down, Mother," he said in a stern tone that closely resembled Manny's when she asked him to drive the speed limit. Vicky snatched the phone away from him.

"Zachary, I need to speak to your mother right away," she said clearly into the mouthpiece, suddenly consumed by the urgency of the impending dark, dying cell phones, crying children.

"Call her on her cell," Zachary said sounding as annoyed as her son.

"Now, please," Vicky said. Ignoring his rude tone had become a habit, but at that moment she decided to start limiting play dates.

Vicky crawled back out of the tent on all fours. "What's wrong Mama?" Iris asked looking up from her My Little Pony collection.

"Nothing Sweetie," Vicky said struggling to regain her composure, "everything's fine."

Vicky held the cell phone, listening to the sound of doors opening and closing, the television blaring, someone speaking Spanish, and finally the techno beat Shannan always listened to in her workout room.

Shannan answered breathless. "Can I call you back? I'm almost to the top of the Empire State building."

"Do you know where my box of matches is?"

"Uh, I don't think so," Shannan responded impatiently. Her online Building Climbing Team was in second place, and Shannan was compulsive about winning. "I've only got a hundred more steps—"

"This is serious Shannan. We have no power, and those are the only matches I have in this house." Vicky was aware that her voice was unusually high.

"Wow. I was just watching that on the news." The music volume dropped instantly. "I guess there's thousands without power right now. Some big lines came down in the canyon."

"Really? I only heard about the ones across our road."

"They said they are bringing in special equipment from Pasadena to fix the lines. Sure hope they don't start a fire up there."

Vicky felt impatient. "Listen, if you had borrowed the matches where would you have left them?"

"With my stash," Shannan answered without hesitation.

"You took them with you!" Vicky was aware of her hysteria, but no longer cared. "How could you just take them—

"My stash at your house." Shannan interrupted.

"What?" Vicky let all the polite slip out of her voice. "You keep your drugs at *my* house?"

"Zach is so noseey. I don't like keeping anything in my purse." Shannan huffed into the phone.

Vicky shook her head to keep from pursuing this line of reasoning. "Where."

"Under the eaves behind the pool house. I'm almost done here. You need me to come over?"

Vicky hung up the phone.

"I'm going to run out to the pool house and check on something, okay?" she called to the kids.

"Check on what?" Ira asked with a startled look. He motioned for her to return his cell phone.

Vicky shook her head. Ira dropped his jaw.

"Don't leave us alone Mommy!" Iris pleaded.

"You can't just take away my cell phone!" Ira yelled. "I was talking to my friend. Not that you would know anything about that. Since you don't have any friends."

Vicky glared at her son. Since when did her sweet child turn into such a little shit?

"I'll just be in the back yard for two minutes, then I'll be right back. Besides you have your brave brother right here to protect you."

"He's not brave. He's afraid of the dark."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Well, don't worry it's not dark yet."

Vicky trotted around the side of the pool house where the gladiolas grew. The blooms scattered the dirt, their stems snapped by the wind. The pungent smell of chlorine made her

sneeze. She looked up at the roof. Shannan's bright orange and pink embroidered pouch sat on the beam just below the eaves. Completely dry and still half full, the matchbox sat alongside.

Inside she lined up votives on a tray, and lit the wicks. Walking down the hall, she felt like she was carrying a birthday cake. A smile crossed her lips when she thought about how she would always remember this moment, carrying her grandmother's silver tray loaded with candles on the night the power was out. Just then a thunderous crash erupted in the living room. For an instant Vicky pictured the glass coffee table exploding, then another explosion as loud as a car crash followed. The shrill pitch of her children's terror triggered Vicky to drop the tray and run.

The first thing she saw in the dim light of the living room was the triangle shaped hole in the plate glass window. The branches of the tree reached into the room obscuring the furniture. As she moved towards the glass, Vicky could see that the trunk of the cherry tree dissected the courtyard where the stone fountain should have been. Stone lady lay in two pieces inside the room. A spray of broken glass covered the wreckage.

As Vicky moved toward the wreckage she could see Ira just to the right of where the stone girl lay broken in half surrounded by glass. Wind blew the long silk curtains horizontal in the room. Blood leaked from a cut on his cheek and as she reached him, she grabbed both shoulders to examine him before pulling him into her body.

"I'm okay," he yelled at her. "Where's Iris?"

Vicky's heartbeat filled her throat as she scanned the overturned chairs and leaf strewn blankets where Iris had been only few minutes before. "Iris!" she called.

Wind gusted outside the window and Vicky looked up at the cracked glass window. A long shard hung down like a stalactite from the window frame.

"Move away from the window!" Vicky yelled at Ira.

"Help me move this," He yelled back, bending to try and move one of the tree branches that rested on the back of an over turned chair. "She was under here!"

"Iris!" Vicky screamed. "Iris!" She stepped over the stone statue and struggled to yank on the branch with Ira, but the wood was thick and the branch didn't move. Vicky scanned the wreckage beneath the tree. Most of the light had faded from the room, but she could barely make out the shapes of Iris' My Little Pony collection beneath the over turned chair.

"Iris!" She screamed again.

"Why isn't she answering?" Ira demanded.

Vicky broke off the smaller branches and attempted to clear them out of the way. The large armchair had toppled forward and was holding up the tree and a large section of the window. Vicky moved carefully around the chair and pointed to a cluster of branches underneath.

"Help me move these," she called to Ira. He tore at the smaller limbs and Vicky struggled to pull back one of the larger branches to look underneath.

"I think I heard her!" Ira yelled. "I heard her!" He began tearing away branches and leaves, clawing at the debris.

"Iris!" Vicky yelled again. A section of the blanket was pinned between the chair and the trunk of the tree. She yanked at the fabric, pulling until it tore away.

"Mama!" She could hear Iris now and she moved faster to remove the limbs. Stepping inside where the tent had been, she crouched down. There was Iris, huddled underneath the back armchair clutching a pink My Little Pony.

"My arm hurts," she said in a whimpering voice.

Vicky looked at her daughter's arm. Instead of a straight line along her forearm, the bone protruded making the skin bulge at an awkward angle just below the elbow. A lurching, sinking feeling hit Vicky's stomach. "Okay, baby," Vicky answered. "I see. I'll be careful."

Ira bent down and stared at his sister. "Gross! Your arm is broken!"

Iris started to cry.

"Can you come toward me, honey?" Vicky struggled to stay calm. "Can you move at all, baby?"

Iris moved forward slowly on her knees, still struggling to hold the pink pony. Her right arm hung limp. "My arm hurts," Iris whined, sitting back down.

Vicky looked down at the glass all around them. She needed to lift Iris out of the small space, but she wasn't small enough to get in. "You need to come out a little further, honey. I can't reach you." Vicky held her arms out to her daughter. "Put down the Little Pony."

"No." Iris answered stubbornly.

"We can rescue him later, honey." Vicky looked up to where the trunk of the tree rested on the back of the chair. Would the chair hold? What if the whole thing collapsed? Her breath caught in her lungs. "Come on, Iris," Vicky said tightly. "You need to let go of the Pony."

"Come on you stupid!" Ira called with irritation in his voice.

"No." Iris shook her head.

"Just grab her!" Ira yelled at Vicky.

“Calm down!” Vicky yelled back as another gust of wind blew through the window. The hanging shard of glass wavered back and forth from the window frame. Vicky tried to push a limb out of the way, but the branch snapped back into place.

“Help me move this,” she said to her son.

After fifteen minutes they had extracted Iris from the wreckage. The house was dark and the wind gusted noisily in the halls. Vicky set the candles all around Iris’ bedroom and Ira set up his bedding in the corner.

Vicky removed as much blood as she could from both the kids. She carried the wastebasket of bloody tissues down the hall to kitchen. Inside the cabinet above the computer, she pulled out an old portable DVD player. She pushed the power button. The battery registered half full. With Sonic the Hedgehog playing full blast in Iris’ bedroom, Vicky ran down the driveway and unlocked the small gate on the side yard. Rain pelted her cheeks as she ran down the street to Mr. Dooley’s house. The forest closed in dark on either side, but after a couple of minutes she could see a blaze of lights coming from Mr. Dooley’s house. Vicky pounded on the front door, but the loud hum of Mr. Dooley’s generator blocked out the sound. Vicky scanned the windows to see if he was visible through the glass. The house looked empty. She ventured around the side of the house and through the gate into the back yard. Running across the patio, Vicky thought she saw movement through one of the windows along the far wing of the ranch style home. She rounded the patio table and pounded on the sliding glass door. The sound of a blaring television mixed with the thundering diesel engine. Vicky banged on the glass, but was sure that Mr. Dooley wouldn’t hear, so she pulled at the handle and the door slid open. Before she could yell his name a large form leapt up in front of her. Dukey’s paws slammed against her chest and knocked Vicky backwards onto the patio. The last thing she remembered was the long strands of saliva dangling from the dog’s black gums over her face.

Chapter Break

The hospital room smelled like the inside of a rubber glove. A nurse wheeled a cart full of tiny trays and vials into the room next door.

Vicky breathed through her mouth to avoid the hospital smell and let her eyes study the pattern of faint gray swirls on the white tile floor.

A doctor emerged from the Surgery door, and Vicky stood to greet him. "I'm Vicky Anderson, Iris' mother. Can I go in?"

"She's still coming out of anesthesia, Mrs. Anderson." His eyes looked tired and his face hung in a tired frown. "But the arm looks great."

"The surgery went okay?"

"We set the pin just above her elbow. When the cast comes off she will be as good as new."

"Thank you," Vicky said tears surfacing.

Vicky pulled a chair over to the side without the IV and gripped her daughter's hand. Wheeled equipment surrounded her daughter's bed.

"Mamma's here, honey." As soon as she said the words a steady calm filled her body. She reached up and stroked her daughter's brown hair. "You are going to be fine, Iris." Vicky said.

Iris opened her eyes and turned her head slightly. An oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth. She tried to lift her hand, but Vicky pressed it down. "Don't talk. Just rest. You are going to be fine," Vicky forced a smile. Iris closed her eyes again.

Vicky's cell phone rang and frowned as she looked at the numbers. It was her sister. Vicky considered letting the call go to voice mail, but on the last ring decided to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, I need you to go online and order your dress."

"What dress?"

"Duh."

"You mean for the wedding?"

"Look, if you don't want to be my maid of honor I can certainly get someone else."

Vicky rolled her eyes. "Of course, I want to be your—"

"I mean it. Don't do me any favors."

"Jen—I"

"You know Lola really wanted to be the Maid of Honor and I told her no because Mom thought it was really important that *you* were in my wedding."

"Jen, I—"

“I really didn’t want Lola there anyway. Did I tell you she’s got a new girlfriend? The biggest slut in Reno?”

“Jen?”

“I can’t believe after four years together she would stoop so low. Like, I don’t know she’s just trying to get back at me. It’s so immature.” Jen snapped her gum. “That skanky ho better not be at my wedding, is all I have to say.”

Vicky gave up trying to interrupt. She didn’t have the energy to explain anyway. She closed her eyes trying hard to follow what Jen was saying. The wedding. Nevada. Lola. It all seemed like an episode from some old television show. Petticoat Junction— something she watched as a kid.

“Anyway, just tell me now if you are going to flake—“

“You think I would flake out on my own sister’s wedding,” Vicky snapped.

“Well, I’ve asked you to order the dress like a million times and I just looked online and they said you still haven’t paid for it.”

“I’m sorry—I”

“I would just buy it for you, really, it’s only \$700—but after Lola I’m trying not to be co-dependent. You know, like, I don’t want to enable you to shit all over me.”

“I can’t talk right now,” Vicky said, her tone flat as she stared vacantly at the nurse checking Iris’ IV.

“Fine.” Jen snapped.

“Bye—“ Vicky started.

The line went dead.

Chapter Break

Vicky’s fingers drummed the steering wheel as she waited for the gate to open. She’d promised the Iris she’d be back at the hospital in an hour. Ira had stayed over at Shannan’s house—God knows what Shannan’s demon children had taught him by now.

Vicky pulled up next to the gardener’s truck in the driveway.

“It looks like we got hit by a cyclone up here,” Vicky said, surveying at the mess of branches and debris in the driveway.

He straightened, and nodded. Vicky nodded back. The gardener had come with the house. He arrived silently on Monday, Wednesday and Friday wearing the same blue jumpsuit and straw hat. Only the section of his face below the nose could be seen underneath the shadow of his hat, but once, when he had lifted his hat to wipe sweat from his forehead, Vicky had seen his entire face. Only then did she realize how old he was. His warm brown skin was as wrinkled as a raisin. Today he had brought his entire crew to help him, and the men had already cleared much of the debris from the courtyard. The gardener bent to help three men extract a tree limb from the wreckage. Shards of glass tinkled on the aggregate. An image of Iris pinned underneath the wreckage last night flashed in her mind, she and Ira desperately tugging on the heavy furniture. Glass everywhere. Vicky shook her head to clear the terrifying memory.

The phone rang as soon as she walked inside.

“Hello Mother,” Vicky said.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive out?” Jasmine sounded worried. “If I left right now, I could be there by bedtime.”

“I don’t want you driving across the desert all by yourself Mom.”

“I’d buy you a ticket, if you’d consider flying.”

“Oh, honey. You know I can’t do that.”

Vicky shook her head and felt her jaw tighten. Her mother had never flown on an airplane. She used to claim that it was Jesus’ fault. “If God had wanted us to fly, he would have given us wings.” She’d said on a number of occasions. More recently she’d at least attributed her fear to a combination of claustrophobia, vertigo and fear of terrorists.

“Shannan sounds nice. Is she a new friend?” Jasmine asked in her lets-change-the-subject tone.

“I’ve known her for awhile, Mother,” Vicky answered. “I’ve told you before. She’s Ira’s best friend’s mother.”

“Well, it was awfully nice of her to pick Ira up at the hospital and let him spend the night.”

“Uh huh.”

A flat, empty feeling had replaced the surge of panic alternating with hysteria that Vicky had felt yesterday. She stared at the torn drapes, soggy couch and chaos of toys and blankets—all

soaked by the rain and littered with leaves and debris from the cherry tree—in the living room. They were lucky Iris only suffered a broken collarbone. Vicky shivered at the recollection of snuggling Iris in her bed after she and Ira had finally dislodged her from the debris. All three of them had cuts from the glass. Thank God Mr. Dooley's phone worked. If he hadn't been home, Vicky would have had no choice but to hike down the canyon for help.

Her mother's voice interrupted her thoughts firmly. "I'm glad Manny is on his way home," Jasmine continued

"It will be nice to have his help," Vicky responded mechanically, staring through the kitchen window at the wreckage in the courtyard. She had already resigned herself to the fact that he must be sleeping with someone else. Why else would a man not be in his room at 4:30 in the morning?

Vicky placed her Blue tooth in her ear before moving into the laundry room. "Mom, do me a favor, can we talk about something else. This whole episode has been a little overwhelming okay?"

"Oh sure, Vicky. I understand. Let's see. Oh, I went to Yoga this morning."

"Yoga?"

"I go every morning now Vicky."

"What about bible study."

"I haven't gone to bible study in more than a year now."

"Don't you miss the church? What about the sewing club?"

"Oh, they still have gatherings," Jasmine's voice drifted off.

"I take an hour of Yoga and afterwards I've started taking a meditation session.

Everyone at the Institute swears by meditation—"

"I thought this put you in grave danger for being infiltrated by the devil."

Jasmine laughter tinkled across the line. "Oh, know, Vicky. I think meditation has brought me closer to the divine."

"Divine?"

"Jesus, Mother!" Vicky still found her mother's recent change from Baptist Christian to New Age Guru disconcerting. "You better not let Gladys hear you saying "Divine." They might try and perform an exorcism."

"No," Jasmine lowered her voice. "I don't they will, Vicky. I think they've all pretty much given up on me."

“Pastor Rick hasn’t.” Vicky stared at Manny’s surfboard in the corner of the garage.

“Oh, well, he’s part of the problem.”

“Really?”

“Gladys thinks his intentions are impure,” Jasmine said.

“What!”

“Gladys is such an old prude. What does she know about it?”

“Don’t forget who paid for you college, Vicky,” Jasmine reprimanded. “Gladys may have her faults, but she has always been there for this family.”

“I’m sorry,” Vicky gulped. In a way, she owed everything to Gladys. If she’d never escaped that town—God knows her life would be different. Employment opportunities for women ranged from casino to convenience store without much in between. She would have never worked in Hollywood. Never met Manny.

Vicky let her fingers run across the smooth surface of Manny’s surfboard. Her mind slipped to a conversation she had had with Manny last summer about why he had decided to take up surfing. He had been lying next to her in bed, his folded arms supporting his neck. His eyes were closed and his face glowed like a statue in the moonlight. “I think part of the draw is the balance I gain from a sport where the moon is in control.”

“What?”

“It’s not a sun sport, Vicky. It’s a moon sport.”

“You don’t surf at night.” Vicky remembered feeling startled because she had no idea what he was talking about.

“The moon controls the tides,” he explained.

“Tides?” Vicky’s eyes fell to where the *Pyracantha* branches bobbed in the wind. Shadows moved like a flock of doves across the bedroom wall. “What does tide have to do with surfing?”

She remembered her nervousness had turned to irritation at the sound of his soft laughter. Who was this man? Her husband was not a surfer. He was an overachieving frat boy with a passion for golf. He was a work-a-holic who held an appreciation for colored Izods and khaki Bermuda shorts. Flip flops had been her first clue. That was after his second trip to Indonesia. Now, more than seventeen trips later he’d come home with hair below his collar, wearing surf trunks and babbling about ‘moon sports’. What was happening? Who was responsible?

Vicky was vaguely aware that her mother had switched topics.

“Vicky—” Her mother’s voice in her ear interrupted her thoughts. “Vicky? Did you hear me?”

“I’m listening, Mother,” Vicky lied. She had worked her way through the house gathering objects along the way and arrived back in the kitchen. At her feet was the small suitcase. Inside, were a few books that she knew no one would read, rice cakes and carrots, a pink and green Magic Pony, and multiple sets of underwear for Iris whose potty training had taken a complete reversal lately. On the counter sat a tub of Cherry Garcia ice cream.

Her mother’s tone switched to the practiced patience that so often backed their conversations. “You promise you are okay. Not the kids, but you?”

“I promise,” Vicky answered sharply. “I’d tell you if there was a problem.”

“I know honey. It’s just...well...sometimes I get the impression that...ever since your dad died...you and your sister try to protect me. Neither one of you ever have any bad news to share.”

“Right. A tree falling on our house isn’t really *that* bad.” The loud drone of a chainsaw started up outside.

“It’s just that well....there are all sorts of terrible, horrible bad things going on and you and your sister, well, you are just blessed, I guess.”

“You just watch too much television, Mother.” Vicky glanced out into the courtyard where the gardener was now slicing the trunk of the cherry tree. She thought about her conversation that morning with Elia who had insisted she hire an outside company to clean up the mess.

“No my job to clean glass,” Elia had said with her brisk tone. “Can’t come today. Too busy.”

Vicky sighed heavily. “Should I complain about the fact that I get bossed around by my lazy housekeeper?”

“No,” Jasmine interjected. “Besides Elia is so kind.”

Anyone who went to church was deserving of her mother’s love—even if they were Catholic. Irritation rose in her chest. “Well, she *is* the maid, Mother. It is her responsibility to *clean*.”

Vicky shifted her weight and then set down the suitcase. The ice-cream container had started to sweat on the counter. “You do realize that she makes a small fortune? It’s not like she is starving, or anything. Last week I ran in to her down at the Gold Spa and do you know what she said?”

“What?”

“She handed me a half-off coupon and said I should treat myself more often.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“She owns the spa!” Vicky said. “She and her sister bought the Gold Spa. She also owns a car wash and a dry cleaning service.”

“Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called,” her mother admonished.

“1 Corinthians.” Vicky sighed again.

“She works hard, Vicky,” Jasmine continued. “She deserves success.”

“I don’t mind her success, I’d just like to get my chandelier cleaned once in awhile, that’s all.”

“You can’t expect her to clean like a teenager. Remember Vicky: Abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

“This isn’t charity Mother!” Vicky exploded. “This is her job!”

The line was silent, then Vicky sighed. “It’s just not easy finding help—I hate the idea of strangers in the house,” Vicky explained. She wanted to hang up the phone. “Corinthians 13,” she said after enduring nearly a minute of her mother’s silence.

“I think that is my favorite passage in the Good Book,” Jasmine said, her tone switching to the same joyful tone she used every time she thought about scripture. A huff of indignation filled Vicky as her mother recited the familiar passage.

“Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things...” Jasmine continued.

Vicky knew she knew she needed to hang up now, deliver the Magic Pony and the Cherry Garcia to Iris in the hospital and continue living with the fact that at any given moment something could go terribly wrong, and all there was nothing she could do about it. So what she slathered her face with cancer-causing creams and make-ups every day? So what that her kids spent their idle time electronically conducting murderous rampages on a giant screen television? So what that she no longer had a private bond with her husband, that suddenly everything they’d shared had gone public in such an awful, distant way? So what if the other woman was younger, with nicely manicured nails, knew how to surf and loved airplanes? So what? A broil of emotion flushed her face.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things,” her mother concluded.

“I am not going to play this game any more, Mother.” Vicky looked out the window feeling annoyed that the day was bright and sunny. “No one besides you even reads the bible nowadays. What is the point?”

“That’s not true,” Jasmine paused. “Vicky, are you okay?”

“No.” Vicky snapped. “In addition to my children nearly being killed by the impact of a falling tree, my microwave oven broke last week because Ira stuffed tin foil inside to see what would happen. There was a minor explosion.” Her eyes fell to the new microwave and then the breadbasket alongside. She continued, but her thoughts drifted. “Despite all of my efforts my son continues to be a pyro-maniac.”

“Ira is a good boy. He has a wonderful family—”

“His father has been traveling since he was two, that’s not so great, Mom.”

“And to know the love, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled.” Jasmine paused.

“Vicky?” she prompted.

“I told you mother, I am not playing, okay?” Vicky said, sighing again. Why was she sighing so much? Was her brain not getting enough oxygen? Jasmine continued, Vicky heard a few phrases like “fathers need to work” and “someone needs to support the family,” but her mind wandered back to the breadbasket. Moving the half eaten loaf of sour dough to the side, she stared down at the strange object inside.

“He’s so successful, Vicky,” Jasmine said.

“Yeah. He is Mom.”

“Praise Jesus!” Jasmine’s voice lifted suddenly sparking Vicky’s attention, “I hope you are expressing your gratitude to the Lord for all—”

“Mother—enough.” Vicky interrupted reaching for the dildo and pulling it gingerly out of the basket. At the sink, she held her hand under the faucet until the water ran warm. Carefully, she washed the rubbery skin admiring the shape and size.

Jasmine waited a full minute before continuing. “If Manny can’t be there, then you should call your sister. You two need to be there for each other.”

“You call her.” Vicky spread a dishtowel on the counter and placed the dildo there to dry. “I don’t have the energy.”

Vicky dabbed the towel along the dildo's length. Was Manny this big? No. She placed her hand alongside it. No, definitely not.

"I just worry about her," Jasmine continued even though Vicky wished she wouldn't. There wasn't much she wanted to hear about her sister.

"I think it would mean a lot to her if you called, you know, because of all this—"

"Since when does Jen care about my life?" Vicky glared at the carnage in her courtyard.

"How about some good news?" Jasmine's voice brightened.

Vicky recognized Jasmine's 'change-the-subject tone.'

"Thank God," Vicky said sarcastically.

"Vicky—"

"It's just a harmless figure of speech, Mother." She picked up the dildo, and wrapped her hand around the circumference.

"Using the lord's name in vain is not harmless."

Vicky dropped the dildo back onto the dishtowel and sighed heavily.

"Jett is coming home," Jasmine trilled.

The line was silent.

"Isn't that great?"

"Well, I'm glad to hear he is still alive, but I'm sure he won't be around for long."

"He's saying he's not going to go back."

"Once a Marine. Always a Marine."

"I think he really means it this time. I don't think he wants to go back."

"How many times has he gone back, Mother?" Vicky said looking at her watch. "Four? Five."

"I think he has changed."

"Oh, well, happy day then." The last thing she wanted to be doing right now was talking with her mother about Jett. When she left Sparks at 18 for UCLA, she left Jett, and that was the end of that. He went off to war. She went to college. Now, when she thought about him, she wondered how she had ever loved him. Even then, their relationship seemed strange. He was six years older, and dropped out of school in the seventh grade. Her father had loved him like a son, which was probably the whole reason they were together. He was the only boy she had been *allowed* to date.

“...I’m going to have him help me around the house with some odd jobs, you know gardening, and some minor repairs...if that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Mother why in the hell would I care whether or not Jett is pruning your shrubs?”

“I just wanted to let you know is all. He’s trying to get hired on at the fire station up here. He is volunteering...”

“Uh huh,” Vicky said vaguely. She’d always harbored resentment against her parents for loving Jett so much. Jasmine still talked about Jett as though he was the “chosen one.” Why would anyone want their daughter to run off and marry a Marine? If there was one profession worse for a marriage than movie producer, it was definitely a Marine.

“He was put on a reconnaissance team,” Jasmine continued. “Did I already tell you that? On the border of Pakistan? You should hear some of the stories. It is truly unbelievable...such bravery...”

Vicky refused to engage in any conversation about war. She’d even secretly wished they’d just go ahead and run out of oil. At least then her husband would be restricted to the distance allowable by a Segway, but she had learned long ago not to interrupt when the subject of Jett came up. So she simply made a habit of tuning out until the dark, dismal tale of soldiers’ battles abated.

Vicky poked at the rubbery surface of the dildo. In college, her roommate had showed her a white plastic plug in model that looked a little like a vibrating tampon. Not very inspiring. Vicky had never imagined a dildo with skin.

“What’s he going to do for work?”

“I just said that Vicky. He’s going to be a fireman—”

“A fireman...” Vicky pictured the fire truck pulling up to the locked gate last night. Three men jumping down from the side. Two climbing down the other. Heavy coats flapping in the wind.

“Listen, you’ve got a lot on your mind honey,” her mother said gently. “I’m going to let you go.”

The house phone rang. Vicky folded the dishtowel over the top of the dildo.

Her mother cleared her throat. “We are all praying for you.”

“Thanks, Mom. We’re fine.” The phone rang again. “I need to take this call. It might be Manny.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

“Hey, hon.” Manny’s voice retained the usual blend of casual control. “Sorry I couldn’t get back to you earlier. We had a crazy morning around here. One of the key grips quit and the lead stunt has some mysterious virus. Don’t know what that’s all about but I sure hope I don’t—”

“I called you twelve hours ago.” Vicky struggled to keep her voice calm. Relief and anxiety battled in her head. She listened carefully to his voice. Was there a hint of guilt hanging on his words? Was he making up too many excuses?

“Yeah. Ashley said she tried to knock on my door last night. You know I always sleep with earplugs.”

“I called you 30 times.”

“You okay?” His voice raised an octave in alarm.

Vicky wondered if Manny’s alarm stemmed from the possibility that she wasn’t okay, or from the possibility that he had been caught doing something he shouldn’t be doing.

“Were you even in your room?”

“Come on,” he snapped. “The phone in the room doesn’t even ring and it’s hard to see a flashing light when you’re out cold.”

Vicky couldn’t think of anything to say. How could she describe what a 20-foot wall of glass looks like with a tree through the center? How the cut on Ira’s forehead refused to stop soaking the bandages with blood? The terror of seeing Iris pinned beneath the wreckage?

“Ashley said the power was out—you okay? The kids okay?” he asked using a softer tone.

“We are fine, but we had quite a scare last night and I need you to come home.” While they waited for the paramedics she had read comic books by candlelight, sang songs, she’d even managed to come up with few jokes, but now hearing her husband’s mocking voice, she could feel the calm control convert to a heavy quake of emotion.

The paramedics had to cut through the electric gate. Who was this man on the other end of the line making excuses about schedules and weather, and troubles with his camera crew? Did he have any idea what her life was like? Did he even care? Her mind moved dangerously close to the question that most haunted her: Who did he care about now?

“You need to come home,” she repeated.

“What do you need exactly, Vic? You know I’m busting my ass to keep this crazy schedule so I can get home—”

“There was an accident,” she started weakly.

“Tell me what happened,” he demanded. “The kids okay?”

“We had a big storm,” Vicky started. “The front window broke. The kids got all cut up in the glass—“

“What were they doing playing around the front window—”

“They were building a fort, with blankets.” She felt instantly defensive like she often did when she was trying to explain the details of her life to Manny. “The cherry tree came down and knocked over the fountain, which smashed through the window.”

“That sounds crazy!” He almost laughed and she hated him at that moment. “Did you call 911?”

“The road was blocked.” She took in a deep breath. She owed him an explanation even though at the moment she didn’t think he deserved one. “The power was out. It was dark. All we had were candles—Iris was pinned underneath the debris. I didn’t know if —” She hated herself for sobbing. “Iris’ arm was broken. She’s still in the hospital, but she is going to be fine. Just some cuts and a cast.” Sobs took over and she stopped trying to speak. She knew he thought she was weak. She knew part of the reason he hadn’t called back was because of her tendency to overreact. They had such a different vantage point on life. To Vicky there was always the lurking possibility of what could happen. To Manny there was only what was happening, and usually what was happening was a fantastic blend of good luck and hard work paying off. To her the broken window signified how fragile life was; to him how fortunate they were.

She heard his voice now trying to calm her down, but what she really wanted was strong arms to wrap around her, fingers to stroke her hair, a voice whispering ‘You’re okay, everything is going to be okay’ into her ear. She wanted her smart, glass house to feel like a fortress again. She looked at the dildo sitting on the green-striped dishtowel. All she wanted was to feel happy again. Had she been happy before? When was the last time? She picked up the dildo. Loved. Her hand squeezed the rubbery flesh. She wanted to feel loved.

“I’ll come home,” he said finally.

Vicky let her forehead lower and rest on the counter. Sobs came faster and harder until she could no longer hear him reassuring her, and all the while she hated herself more because she knew how pathetic she was, and in contrast whomever he had shared the night with seemed even more carefree, younger, less inhibited and so much happier than she could ever be.

Chapter Break

Manny returned from the hall where he had been talking with one of the nurses. He pulled up chair next to Vicky. “What did they say?”

“The doctor is pretty confident that we can take her home tonight.” Manny said.

“What about the stitches in her cheek?” Vicky’s voice wavered high and light “Can she take a bath.”

“No.”

Vicky stared at the tubes and wires surrounding her daughter.

“I wonder if we had gone to Indonesia with you, if none of this would have happened.”

“Who knows?”

“Why didn’t you make me go?”

“Was I supposed to muscle you into going?” Manny’s voice was stern — rare but always startling.

Vicky was silent.

“Is that what you want?” He grabbed her arm at the bicep. His grip was tight. “Should I muscle the mother of my children? My wife?”

“Stop.” Vicky whined. His grip tightened, she yanked her arm away. “That hurt.”

“Sorry.”

Vicky thought about the cold black air the night of the storm. How the wind had rattled through the house.

“I’m afraid of losing everything,” she whispered.

Manny put his hand on the back of his neck. He rolled his head across the back of his palm. Vicky could hear the familiar snaps of his vertebrae. “It was just an accident, Vicky. You aren’t going to lose anything.”

She said nothing, just watched until he straightened. “I just want you to tell me everything is going to be all right.”

Manny put his arm around her shoulder. “Everything is going to be alright. We’ll get the glass fixed. Iris will recover. Ira may have some residual damage from staying with Shannan, but he’ll get over it.”

“And who know what sordid affect Dr. Penis has had on the poor child,” Manny said rolling his shoulders forward and flexing his imaginary six pack.

Vicky closed her mouth tight. A pressure built in her throat threatening to make her laugh. Like a steam train the chuff of laughter burst forward. Manny stared at her deadpan. Just as she had feared her laughter took over and she was completely at its mercy.

“Devil laughter,” Jasmine said whenever she and her sister broke out into fits as kids.

Manny too had seen the fits, and he recognized the signs immediately. “Here we go,” he said looking up at the sky. “Vicky this really isn’t funny,” but the sternness had faded from his voice.

“It could have been so much worse,” Vicky’s laughter turned into tears and she put her head on his shoulder sobbing.

He puffed out his cheeks and blew air out like he was blowing out a candle. Then rolled his eyes.

“You are a good mother,” he said, finally. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why did all of this happen?” Vicky answered, regaining control.

“Come on,” Manny responded. “You really think you can have that kind of control? Give up, Vicky. It’s a losing battle. You just need to roll with the punches, okay?”

Vicky stared at Manny’s toes in his flip flops. The tops of his feet were burned. Vicky reached over and touched Iris. She placed her fingers on Iris’ arm and stroked her skin. A large white patch covered the deep laceration on her cheek. Her right arm was suspended from wires that hooked to a contraption over the bed.

Vicky sunk back into her chair. The image of the dildo appeared in her head.

“Where were you?”

“What?”

“When I tried to call?”

“I told you already, I was asleep,” Manny’s face looked frozen.

Vicky studied his face. He was lying. She could see it now. There was no doubt in her mind.

Iris stirred on the bed. “Mommy?”

Vicky pressed her fingers on the bare skin above Iris’ cast. “I’m right here, honey.”

“Yeah,” Manny said reaching out to touch Iris’s cheek. “Daddy’s here too, honey. Everything is going to be all right now, okay. You are going to be okay.”

Chapter Break

Manny took a red-eye back to Singapore the following Sunday. There had been no convenient time to discuss anything to do with his whereabouts, or the dildo. Vicky decided to save that discussion for his next trip home, but on the morning that he was scheduled to arrive, the bringing everything back up again, seemed impossible. Maybe she would never bring it up. The past month she'd at least had an excuse. With all of the extra demands of caring for Iris and shuttling Ira here and there, who had the energy to deal with Manny's sexual antics?

Iris was back at school now and Vicky knew there was no more procrastinating. This time, she was going to confront him. Vicky propped the pillows up against the walnut bed frame. Her legs stretched out underneath the imported sheets supported by the special order Galaxy mattress. Overhead the lights emitted the rosy glow of "dawn," and across the speakers came the gentle wash of waves over sand. Vicky's mind drifted back to the scene of the emergency crew coming up the street the night of the storm. She had run out the side door and watched their approach from the driveway. Lights flashing, engine roaring, tires barreling over the debris strewn asphalt until Vicky worried they might just crash right through the gate. At the last moment the enormous white truck stopped, idling a few inches from the locked gate. Gold letters read Paramedics across the hood. Six men, wearing black coats and boots, emerged from all sides. Vicky remembered how the unbuckled straps on their coats and boots slapped loudly as they jumped to the asphalt. They stood around the truck for a few minutes buckling and gathering equipment. One talked into a microphone fastened to his ear.

She pictured one of them—a big, hulking, dark-haired, paramedic—who had helped with Ira's bandage, and made sure Iris had blanket. Vicky let her eyes close. He had been so kind...what if he had just knocked on her front door...what if it was a hot, sunny day, no wind and she had just enjoyed a long bath. She is in the sewing room, trying on one of her purchases: a pink silk corset and panty set. She is admiring the tiny white bows that decorate the bikini bottoms when the doorbell rings. She wraps herself in a bathrobe— short, crème-colored silk,

loosely tied—and opens the door. The corset is laced in front, but as she pulls open the door, she is vaguely aware that the stays are undone, the ribbons dangling loose against her thighs.

“Mrs. Anderson,” the fireman begins. Vicky’s eyes linger on his wide, smooth lips. His face rugged but strong. “I came back to see you because...” He is humble, and hesitant. His whole demeanor is as sweet and loveable and as a teddy bear. He looks down at his boots without saying anything and Vicky automatically resists the urge to draw him into her arms and comfort him.

“It’s okay,” she says softly. “What is it?”

Vicky gasps when the paramedic reaches up to cup her chin.

He steps closer. “You are so beautiful,” the paramedic whispers into her ear. His nametag says Rex. “I thought we could make each other happy for a few hours. I just want to make you feel good.” His hand lowers to a hump in his trousers, “but I understand if—“

Vicky’s eyes flicked open and land on the halogen can lights above the bed. Do firemen wear nametags or have their names been embroidered on their jackets? She couldn’t recall. Either way, Rex sounds too much like a dog. The image collapsed in Vicky’s mind as she struggled to come up with the paramedic’s name. Jake? No couldn’t have been. Too soap opera. Jonathon. Too sensitive. Steve? Humm, more syllables would be better, she considered suddenly aware of the glow of excitement, the heaviness between her legs. Impatience wells in her chest. Jacob! Fine. She closes her eyes again.

“Excuse me?” she asks Jacob—Jake licking her lips. His red helmet is shiny in the bright sun.

“Are you lonely?” he asks. His deep voice is set to little more than a throbbing whisper. His hand lifts, she can feel the heat radiating off his heavy coat, hear the creak of the stiff fabric, as his fingers move from her chin, to her hair. He runs his thumb across her cheekbone.

Of course she doesn’t need to answer. Doesn’t need to *say* anything. Talking would be too real. Too much like herself. If a fireman really came to her door, she would surely blather on about some ridiculous topic like the care and maintenance of fire sprinklers, ask questions about how to disarm the system, request tips for extinguishing is a grease fire.

With her eyes closed lying on the bed, Vicky squinted suddenly. Her brow furrowed as she struggled to push this invasion of herself, of her *real* self out of the picture. *Well, what would she do if there were grease fire? How would she shut down the system?* Her conscious mind invaded the scene like a SWAT team. A merge of Cal OSHA and bible thumpers took over. ‘*This*

is sinful!' The Christian Coalition chanted. *'The bible says this is sin! You are a dirty, sinful woman!'* Vicky struggled to see Jake through the chaos. Her mind flashes to the vibrator still hidden in the kitchen. Should she try the vibrator?

"Tools of the devil!" Shrieks the Christian Coalition.

A voice of reason interrupts. *You can't possibly be considering using the same device that Manny and his girlfriend used.*

'You should have asked the firemen about the shut off valve, think of all that water flooding the imported carpets!' chanted the Cal Osha crew. Some of them were holding hand-painted signs that read "Safety First!"

"Leave me alone! Oh god, please, just let me get off!" Vicky's fist clenched the sheets, and she stared at the swirls of 'Old World' texture smeared across the sheetrock ceiling. They really did an excellent job of imitating plaster, she thought, and then sighed heavily at this observation. Admiring the careful design of the house was a tired method of distraction. She lifted her head to look at the alarm clock. 6:15. Only 10 minutes until she needed to be in the kitchen drinking coffee. 20 minutes until both kids would be awakened in their rooms. Vicky squeezed her eyes shut, and yanked down her pajama pants. She rubbed through her underwear vigorously. Her fingers move up and down across the flowery, cotton fabric. The SWAT team stares blankly before fading away.

Vicky pulls Jake into her house, and kicks the door closed with her foot.

She can feel his thick calluses and the softness of his palm as his hand runs down her throat to the front of her robe. His lips are thick and moist on her mouth. His mouth presses, soft and then harder on her lips. She arches her back and groans. His hands slip across the silk covering her ass before he grabs and pulls her even harder against him. She steps away from the cold press of buckles. His fingers move clumsily over the buckles. A minute later his jacket falls with a thump to the floor.

"No one will know," he says, reading her thoughts. He moves closer, pressing against her. His breath is sweet; the faint hint of peppermint lingers in the air between them.

Her knees give away and she drops to the stairs, one hand still resting, futile, on the handrail.

Was this cheating? Shouldn't she be picturing Manny? Why the fireman and not her husband? Was she even attracted to her husband anymore?

Jake/Jacob tugs at the silk tie and her robe drops away. She looks down at the tan skin on her belly. The smooth tone of her gym-taunt muscles. *Pilates really seems to be working. Maybe she should add a second class this week.*

“I’m married,” she says, scooting away from him, up the stairs, pulling the silky robe across her chest. Her legs are splayed and her chest heaves, a mix of anticipation and fear. She stares at the fireman in her fantasy, his helmet pushed back revealing a lock of thick black hair, and Romanesque forehead. He is moving towards her again his shirt untucked and open, her fingers push against his hairless brawny chest.

“Then what do you want me so bad for?” he asks.

She ignores the errors of syntax, and whispers, “Because I am lonely.”

With one swipe of his hand he catches hold of the strings of her silk bikini. The tiny bows disappear in his grip. His body smothers her. Their mouths tangle in a wet, hot kiss. He straightens and her eyes trace the pattern of his muscles as he pulls off his shirt. His thighs flex as he kicks off his pants. The smell of wood smoke rises from the heap of clothes on the staircase.

The firemen in her fantasy varied in their coloring and race— African, Latino, Irish— over the course of the next few weeks. Vicky found such relief at finally discovering a reliable fantasy. Always they had big hands, big legs and monstrously strong asses. The pecker was, of course, smooth, hard, and huge. The frightening size and her subsequent hesitation was always part of the fantasy. In the end, however, the size never turned out to be a problem.

At 7 a.m. Vicky showered and dressed before waking the kids and heading to the kitchen. She put the pan on the stove and turned the burner to medium, before breaking four eggs into the metal bowl and turning on the mixer. Vicky pulled the loaf of bread from the breadbasket and noticed the bag of bagels underneath. She pulled out the bag and squeezed. Hard as rocks. She looked down into the basket, and was surprised by the sight of the dildo, coated with breadcrumbs lying at the bottom of the basket. Oh my God. How could she have forgotten it there? What if one of the kids found it? What about Elia? Vicky looked around the kitchen. Elia was due any minute and one could never predict when to expect the rest of the Garcia clan. The whole family showed up once a month for the deep clean— including the children. Vicky almost sat on a baby they had tucked between pillows on the living room sofa last time they arrived.

“I’m hungry,” Ira complained from the kitchen table.

Vicky stared at the cupboards and drawers circling the kitchen. Was the pantry safe? Vicky had already accepted the fact that entire Garcia family snooped through every drawer and cupboard in the house. The worst was when the two-year old discovered the media cabinet. Every button and knob had been pushed 15 times by the time Vicky came home and discovered him. Repairing the system took Manny's tech specialist two days.

"Mooom, I said I'm hungry." Ira insisted.

Opening the refrigerator, Vicky reached for the eggs. The jars on the top shelf lined up in straight rows, sorted by type. The kids might pillage the cupboards for cookies, crackers and snacks, and the freezer drawers for frozen dinners, but rarely did anyone venture to the top shelf of the refrigerator. None of them were tall enough to reach. Besides cleaning the refrigerator was one the many jobs Elia refused to do.

Vicky glanced quickly over her shoulder to make sure the kids were distracted before grabbing the dildo out of the breadbasket. Ira had a pile of Tinker Toys in front of him that he was busy assembling into weaponry and Iris was entertaining herself by hosting a My Little Ponies tea party. Shoving aside the jars, Vicky laid the dildo lengthwise behind the jars of specialty sauces. The Thai Peanut sauce was large enough to hide behind. On second thought she pulled out the peanut sauce and placed a jar of Aioli in its place. Even if they infiltrated the top shelf, no one would want Aioli.

After collecting the milk, and orange juice, Vicky turned and shut the door with her hip. Vicky broke the eggs, measured the flour and poured the milk into the mixer on the counter. Turning the mixer to on, she filled two glasses with juice and set them on the table. At the sink she ran her fingers underneath the water and then flicked them over the pan on the stove. The droplets of water sizzled and disappeared. Turning off the mixer, Vicky used a small measuring cup to pour a circle of batter into the middle of the griddle and returned to the sink to wash the mixing bowl. In the place where the cherry tree had been there was only a large hole. Round logs stacked neatly against one wall. The lady in the fountain had already been carted off to the dump. Vicky sighed heavily.

"Say your prayers," Ira said in a low voice at the table.

"Mama! Ira's trying to kill me!"

The front legs of Ira's chair suspended in the air. "Ira! All four legs on the floor," Vicky said turning her attention back to the kitchen. She brought the juice glasses and jam to the table. "No fighting."

Iris galloped the green Little Pony over to the juice glass. Vicky returned to the stove, carefully lifting the edges to see if the crepe was ready to turn. Flipping the crepe in the air, she slid the pan back on the burner.

“Sharing Day on Wednesday,” trilled the electronic calendar. “Sharing day on Wednesday. Don’t forget Iris’ Sharing Day on Wednesday. Sharing Day. Sharing Day. Ir—“ Vicky jabbed at the flashing icon on the wall screen. The high-pitched female tone irritated her. Every time Manny came home he selected new voices on all the house systems. She had yet to determine which celebrity the calendar mimicked this time, but she suspected this one was Doris Day.

“What would you like to bring this month, honey?” Vicky asked, lifting the crepe from the pan and placing it on a plate in the oven.

“The machine gun Ira got from Uncle Jimmy,” Iris answered immediately. She placed all three purple My Little Ponies around the juice glass.

Lately Vicky had become suspicious that her children purposely tried to annoy her. Her fingers lifted the space between her brow and pressed lightly making sure the angry creases hadn’t appeared. She held up the knife and attempted to see her reflection through the streaks of butter. Despite the regular Botox injections, Vicky remained unconvinced that the muscles were sufficiently paralyzed. Reassured, she set the knife back on the counter.

“Honey, you can’t bring a gun to pre-school even if it is a plastic toy.” Vicky lifted another scoop of batter and poured it onto the pan. Using a wide, flat spatula she smoothed the batter into a circle.

“Besides even Uncle Jimmy wouldn’t want you to take the gun to school. It’s just not safe, honey.”

Jimmy was the source of much of Vicky’s frustration whenever Manny was home—mainly due to the fact that whenever Manny was home, Jimmy was equally present. Manny’s film school buddy whose adolescent growth spurt had never ended had no wife, girlfriend or children and so, of course, could be counted on to supply her children with every inappropriate gift imaginable. Guns, firecrackers, violent video games and movies. She could hardly believe the day she walked in and Ira, Manny and Jimmy were in the living room playing Grand Theft Auto on the big screen.

“They are paying for prostitutes!” Vicky had hollered at Manny later that day.

“Those were the bad guys,” Manny responded giving her a look that implied she was missing the point.

“I don’t mind if she borrows it.” Ira smirked at his sister.

“Dad said it was the same kind of gun they used in Year of the Dragon II.” Iris looked up from her Ponies, her eyes wide. Her mouth dipped down slightly in the corners. Vicky knew this was the look of innocence that preceded all out war.

“Year of the Dragon II had over 30,000 copies sold world wide, Mom.” Ira loved to spout Manny’s movie facts and statistics. She wasn’t sure if he knew the names of the cast members, but the special effects details were one of his favorite topics. Just yesterday Vicky had learned that they used 150 tons of dynamite in the tanker truck wreck.

“Seventeenth biggest blast in action film history,” Ira had proclaimed.

Vicky looked sternly at her daughter. “What do you think Teacher Kelly would say if you brought a weapon like that—“ Vicky moved quickly back to the stove. Smoke spewed from the pan. She pulled the griddle to the back burner and turned down the flame.

“I could help her come up with the answers to the Three Friend Questions,” Ira interjected, with an unusually helpful tone. “I’ll even write down the answers,” Ira said gaining enthusiasm. Pushing back his chair, he dropped his Tinker Toy contraption on the table and moved across the room to the drawer underneath the phone. “Like: Do more people die in the Dragon I or II?” he asked pulling out a pen and a tablet. “The answer is 2. Or: Which weapon is more effective at long range target: A) the hand held rocket launcher B) the tank mounted Howitzer or C) the—“

“That’s enough!” Vicky snapped, pulling the griddle back to the front burner after lowering the flame.

“Come on, Mom. Kids might need to have this information—“

“Ira!” Vicky picked up the wide metal spatula and carefully loosened the edges of the crepe and attempting to flip the crepe in the air, but this time the crepe landed in a crumpled heap on the side of the pan.

“We really should invest in a semi-automatic rifle. Maybe a Smith and Wesson or a Remington 597. That stupid 357 isn’t going to do any harm. You’ll never hit anyone with it.”

“I don’t want to hit anyone!” Vicky said, trying to spread the broken crepe back out in the pan.

“Then what do we even have it for?”

Vicky stared at Ira. What was the appropriate response? Vicky scanned the possibilities.

1. It's an antique
2. It's your fathers
3. To kill intruders
4. I have never even tried to use that gun even though I insisted your father buy it for me.

"What are we going to do if some weirdo breaks in when Dad is gone?" Ira insisted.

"No one is going to break in here, Ira. That's why we have an alarm. If they do then, we are going to call 911."

"Are the paramedics going to come, Momma?" Iris looked up from her Ponies.

"Only for an emergency," Vicky smiled at her daughter.

"We had an emergency, didn't we Momma?" Iris' eyes opened wide. "When I broke my arm?"

Vicky nodded. "We did, and see the paramedics came and now your arm is all better, isn't it, honey."

Iris nodded.

"I'm going to make Dad teach me how to use the gun," Ira interrupted.

Vicky pulled the plates from the cupboard.

"Pilates 10:30 a.m.!" Doris chimed. "Pilates Class this morning!"

Pilates was the latest addition to Vicky's gym schedule. Recommended by the trainer, she had taken just a few classes, but the focus on deep breathing interested her. Once the instructor had pointed out the importance of steady, deep breathing in the class, Vicky had become acutely aware of how shallow and irregular her daily breathing tended to be. She forced in a deep breath.

Vicky placed a spoonful of strawberry jam in the center and folded both crepes.

"Bringing a gun to sharing is inappropriate," she said, placing the plates on the table.

"I think the teacher likes guns," Iris responded, casting her dark gaze on to Vicky.

"Why do you say that?" Vicky removed the small white pitcher from the microwave, and drizzled maple syrup across each slice. Vicky watched Elia pulling into the driveway on the security screen just as the phone rang. "Mount Holy Oak Calling," Doris Day announced in her annoyingly chipper tone. "Mount Holy Oak Calling."

Ira wielded his knife like a through the air in front of his sister.

“Hey!” Iris complained, jabbing the knife with her fork. Maple syrup splattered the floor and table.

Vicky finished pouring another circle of batter on the pan, and then grabbed for the phone. “Hello?”

Ira got up, loudly scooted his chair back and left the room. Iris banged her fork on the table loudly as Vicky reached for the phone.

“Ira!” Iris yelled. “Ira!”

Vicky covered the mouthpiece with her hand. “Honey, I can’t hear.”

“Get me down!” Iris yelled again dropping the fork, which clattered off the table and onto the floor.

“Just one moment please, I can’t hear you.” Vicky pushed the hold button. “Ira get back in here right now! Or you are going to be in BIG trouble.”

Ira reappeared in the doorway with a comic book.

“Mrs. Anderson?” Vicky stared at the screen, realizing she must have missed the hold button all together. “Sorry,” she said, grimacing. “Yes, this is Vicky Anderson.” Ira pointed and laughed at her.

“I’m calling from Dr. Yancey’s office.”

Vicky recognized the perpetually annoyed tone of the school secretary and her stomach clenched. “How are you?”

“Dr. Yancey would like to speak with you today, if that is at all possible.” In addition to annoyance, the he secretary’s voice was also infused with an authority designed to deflect any lack of cooperation.

“Is there a problem?”

The voice on the line tightened harshly. “Dr. Yancey will explain.”

Vicky swallowed, looking over at her son, who shook his head and mouthed, “Not me.”

“I don’t know the details, Mrs. Anderson, but let me see—“ The sound of a distant bell ringing came across the speaker. Vicky smoothed the batter to the edged of the pan with a wide spatula. “Looks like the referral came over from the pre-school.”

“Oh. That’s odd.” Vicky’s eyes traveled to her daughter.

“I don’t want juice,” Iris said loudly. Why couldn’t Elia arrive at 7 a.m. like she asked? This morning chaos was exhausting.

“Dr. Yancey would like to see you at 10 a.m.”

“Just one moment.” Vicky tried her hardest to keep an even tone to her voice. “Let me check the calendar.” Filling a cup with milk, she set it on the table in front of Iris before moving over to the wall calendar. She waved her hand in front of the screen. “Good Morning, Vicky,” the calendar responded revealing the time, temperature and tightly packed schedule. Out of the corner of her eye Vicky noticed Iris was circling the green Little Pony’s around the milk.

9 a.m. eyebrow appointment and waxing. Dry cleaning! Flashed in red. Pilates at 10:30. Then PriceCo with the notation “*before traffic*”. Fish market (Ahi) and Trader Vics “Don’t forget apricots!”. Trainer glowed in green letters at 11:30. Damn! She’d already rescheduled the trainer twice. Shannan would kill her if she missed this one. Maybe she could reschedule for the afternoon. Dentist 30-minute whitening blocked the move. Besides traffic would add at least 20 minutes to the drive and she’d promised Manny that she’d pick up his custom fit teeth trays. He’d called last night just to remind her. Vicky punched in Dr. Yancey at 10 a.m. knowing the idea would be rejected.

“Impossible!” Doris Day responded. “I suggest you reschedule eyebrow appointment and fish market.”

Iris lifted the pink Little Pony onto its rear legs attempting to share her juice. Vicky fought the urge to tell her to put the Pony down, and instead moved the eyebrow appointment to the next day, pushing back the trainer to 1 o’clock. Who knows if this was even possible? Fish had to be done today.

The computer responded by moving Dr. Yancey/School to 9. “Suggest moving Dr. Yancey—”

“I don’t want to do that!” Vicky muttered, pushing the mute button on the screen.

“Excuse me?” The secretary sounded confused. “Are you speaking to me?”

“Uh, would it be possible to come in a little earlier, say, 9?” Vicky responded, “After I drop the kids off?” Iris tilted the glass toward the Pony.

“Dr. Yancey is booked all day, Mrs. Anderson. She made special arrangements to see you at 10.”

“I see, well, then I’ll be there.” Vicky watched as Iris attempted to tilt the glass for the Pony to drink, and the glass tumbled over. Milk ran off the table onto the floor.

“Mom!” Ira yelled. “Iris spilled!”

The crepe started to smoke on the pan.

“Hello, Mrs. Anderson,” Elia called, letting herself in the side door.

“Hi Elia.” Vicky attempted to sound upbeat, and succeeded only in sounding angry. Her therapist had recently alerted her to this tendency. She had even defined the root cause of this tonal tendency: suppressed anger. Now every time Vicky talked with Elia, she felt the need to make some sort of ‘tonal’ adjustment to her voice. Lately, or maybe it had always been this way and she just never noticed, no matter the tone she intended to deliver—kind, funny, understanding—the outcome sounded stern. Vicky flipped the crepe and reached for her cappuccino.

Elia surveyed the mess on the table blandly before moving around Vicky to grab the paper towels from the cupboard below the kitchen sink. Elia’s mother shuffled through the front door. Elia’s mother started showing up about a month after Vicky hired Elia. ‘How sweet!’ Vicky thought upon first meeting Elia’s mother. (She’d never learned her name. Elia had just said “My mother.” Waving her hand in her general direction). Vicky would have been happier if Elia had brought her wrinkled and bent mother to sit on the living room sofa and watch daytime television, but instead Elia’s mother stashed things.

Her technique was to circle each room, removing everything from the counter and the floors, so that Elia could more quickly clean these surfaces. After several polite attempts Vicky had given up trying to convey to Elia the problems with ‘stashing.’ She tried to explain how annoying it was to discover things like her toaster in the clothes hamper after three days of searching. Elia nodded in agreement, but Vicky soon realized that, although, she could speak English fairly well, her comprehension was limited. Recently, Vicky suspected “the stashing” might also be a way of getting Vicky to permanently remove the items that fell victim to The Stasher. Vicky stubbornly restored order every week after the surface cleaning. Hunting down the stand-up mixer in the broom closet and placing it back to the counter had become part of her chore list.

Vicky placed the burned crepe on a plate. “I just got a call from the school,” she said acutely aware that her forced tonal shift combined with the stress of the secretary’s call had resulted in a high-caliber shriek. Vicky thought she saw Elia noticeably grimace. “I need to meet with the headmaster.”

Elia recited a few lines of Spanish as she approached the mess on the kitchen table.

“*Stay Calm*,” Vicky told herself despite the spike of irritation as the kids answered in Spanish. Elia’s mother passed silently into one of the other rooms in the house. A couple of younger girls followed. Vicky had stopped trying to remember their names, and no longer even

attempted to say Hello. Elia had eight children and 19 grandchildren. It was impossible to keep them all straight.

Patting Iris on the head, Elia dragged her palm along her daughter's hair to smooth the stray wisps of curl. More Spanish filled the air at the table, mostly Elia, but both her children chimed "Buenos Dias!" as if on cue. Why hadn't she paid more attention in her high school Spanish class? Her children had already surpassed her limited ability. Iris galloped the Little Ponies out of the way as Elia used the paper towels to soak up the puddle on the table.

Vicky cut a charred section off of the crepe and folding the remaining section neatly into a square. She flipped the crepe over and frowned at the visible traces of dark brown on the yellow skin of the crepe. "I need to meet with the principal this morning," Vicky said, after slathering the crepe with strawberry jam. She set the plate in front of her son.

"It's burned!" he yelled at her.

Vicky felt the blood rush into her face coloring her forehead and cheeks.

"I'll make you better one," Elia said, shoving the soggy towels into the compactor. She walked briskly over to the table where Vicky stood poised to argue. The crepe was not *that* burned.

"Vamanos," Elia said to Vicky, with a wave of her wide brown hands. "You are too busy."

"Vamanos," Iris chanted, waving her small hands at Vicky.

"Yeah. I want Elia to make my breakfast," Ira said sullenly poking at his crepe.

Vicky looked from Ira to Elia and back to Ira again. Rage percolated just below her skin. "Give me that!" Vicky picked up the plate and tilted the plate over the compactor. When the crepe refused to slide, Vicky released her grip letting the whole plate fall into the garbage. She let the garbage can lid drop with a loud bang and left the room.

Dr. Yancey's secretary sat across the room stapling papers. Her cropped, bleached hair stood up in a stiff bristle around her head. She had one of those husky builds that looked out of place in a dress. Loose pink flesh hung down underneath her meaty arms like undeveloped wings. Bright pink lipstick matched the circles of blush on each cheek. Presently her eyeglasses were perched on her nose, but as she looked up at Vicky she knocked them down and the blue plastic frames recoiled from the gold chain around her neck, bouncing lightly on the great pillows of

flesh protruding from her chest. On the wall behind her desk hung a sign that read: *Your poor planning does not constitute an emergency on my part.*

Vicky glanced at the business and golf magazines displayed on the coffee table in the waiting room. Paging through the Economist, she scanned the combination of grim economic headlines and photographs of mostly white, balding men in unfashionable suits. A minute later, she dropped the magazine back on the table. The clock on the wall buzzed, then clicked. If this appointment had started on time and had taken 10 minutes, (Doris Day had ultimately approved the day's schedule with the familiar warning, "You are going to be busy today! Drive carefully!") then Vicky would have made it to the trainer on time. Vicky's eyes fell to the framed sign behind the secretary's bristly head, and she sighed heavily. It had been Shannan's idea she hire the trainer in the first place, she thought angrily. Now she was faced with the difficult task of calling the trainer to reschedule, canceling altogether, or deciding to blow off the trainer completely, a tact for which she would most certainly pay dearly when she received the monthly statement. Vicky vaguely recalled skimming over a clause regarding "missed appointment fees" in the contract.

Besides, Shannan would also be annoyed with her if she missed the appointment because it was *her* trainer. She had been going to him for nearly *two* years, *three* times a week. The clock buzzed, then clicked. Vicky sighed again. How did Shannan fit in the gym so much? Vicky let her head press against the seat cushion. Closing her eyes, she imagined how Shannan would have handled the conversation with the secretary this morning:

"Sorry, I can't make it this morning," Shannan would have said confidently.

"Mrs. Howard, we depend on your commitment to your child's future," The bristled-haired secretary would respond.

"Isn't that what I'm paying you for?" Shannan would retort.

"Well...Ah...er..." the secretary would stutter.

Vicky imagined Shannan's voice: strong, clear, no hint of weariness or frustration, business-like. "If you can't bloody well handle them," she would continue, "then maybe we need to pull out our three children and recommend another school to all of our friends." And she wouldn't end there, with only an idle threat hanging. She would back it up with some useful numeric-based factoid like: "I hear Braynard in The Hills scored a 995 on the API, and we could just pocket the \$36,000 grand per kid—"

"Mrs. Anderson?" Dr. Yancey appeared in the doorway.

Vicky straightened abruptly and walked across the room.

"Your purse, Ms. Anderson," the secretary advised.

"Oh, sorry. Thanks," Vicky mumbled turning back and grabbing her purse from the floor.

Always stylish, today Dr. Yancey wore a white suit with a pleated hemline, and crème colored blouse. She wore no jewelry other than a large white pearl in each ear. Vicky moved quickly to catch Dr. Yancey's extended hand. Her own hand felt warm and soggy against the doctor's cool, dry grip. Dr. Yancey quickly withdrew, and moved into the spacious office. She seated herself behind a large egg-shaped glass desk.

Vicky sat down in one of two high-backed chairs facing the desk. Rows of framed pictures hung along one wall and Vicky examined the portraits of famous Hollywood personalities and their children. Dr. Yancey sat silently at her desk. Vicky concluded that Dr. Yancey's silence stemmed from the fact that she was studying her daughter's file, so she continued her close study of the photographs trying to see if she recognized any of the kids' faces. Everyone knew a number of celebrity children attended, but the first-name-only basis insured that their identities remained secret. Never had Vicky seen any famous parents idling in the 20 minute zone after school, or at any of the parent committee meetings.

One of the girls in the photograph, who looked about Iris' age, seemed familiar and Vicky squinted to bring the portrait into view. The girl was holding hands with Carrie Fisher. Oh no, that couldn't be a current student—Carrie Fisher was far too old to still have a 5-year old. Vicky was surprised when she looked up to see Dr. Yancey calmly sitting, watching her, as if waiting for her full attention to speak.

"Oh, sorry," Vicky said, blushing.

Dr. Yancey pulled her red lips back to reveal a freshly bleached row of oversized teeth. "See someone you know?"

From a distance, Vicky had always thought Dr. Yancey resembled Jerry Hall, with the hollowed cheek bones, red-slicked lips and smooth, ivory skin, but now, up close, the doctor's white blonde hair looked thin where it pulled across her skull and the tight, low bun looked severe, bringing the image of Nurse Ratchet to mind.

"Uh, no, no..." Vicky shook her head slightly.

"Shall we begin?" Dr. Yancey asked picking up a file on her desk, and turning to the second page, making it clear that no further response was required. "Are you still living with Mr. Anderson?"

“Yes.” Vicky reached in her bag for a breath mint.

“Would you say your marriage was... Happy?” Dr Yancey continued looking through the papers in the file on her desk.

“Yes.”

“Do you fight?”

“No.” Vicky placed two mints in her mouth, and despite her intention to suck on them, found herself immediately crushing them between her back teeth.

Dr. Yancey looked up at Vicky. “There is no shame in fighting, Mrs. Anderson. Many couples fight.”

“We don’t.” The burn of peppermint erupted in her mouth, and for a moment Vicky was distracted from the steady gaze of Dr. Yancey. Her eyes dropped to her lap, and then, just as quickly, she met Dr. Yancey’s eyes again, and fought to keep both eyes steadily in position. “Never in front of the children.” She corrected herself.

A minute passed. Vicky blinked, then looked back over at the photographs. “Sometimes I get unreasonably angry when he leaves.” Her eyes fell back to her lap. This was another reality pointed out by her therapist. A detail of their lives that had once seemed normal and was now enlarged, bulbous, protruding like a nose mole. Admittedly, yelling at Manny in the driveway was ridiculous. Surely, Mr. Dooley had heard her out of control ranting. What did he think? And what purpose did it serve? Who wouldn’t want to leave a shrieking maniac? Yelling was not attractive. The irrationality of it all did not make it any easier for her to stop.

Dr. Yancey lowered her glasses and smiled. “Are you a religious person, Vicky?”

“I was raised Baptist.” Vicky watched a slight shadow fall across the film in Dr. Yancey’s eyes, but even this subtle, minute, almost invisible sign, was quickly erased. “Southern Baptist,” Vicky added, her eyes involuntarily dropped to the wedding portrait on Dr. Yancey’s desk, the rabbi and the yarmulke firmly perched on her husband’s head. “But I’m not a practicing Baptist, I mean, my mother, I... We don’t—except holidays,” Vicky began, and then, gave up.

Dr. Yancey’s hand fluttered above the stack of papers. “Don’t worry Mrs. Anderson. We don’t discriminate.”

“Of course not,” Vicky nodded.

Another minute passed between them during which Vicky became aware of the quiet tick of the wall clock.

“You get frustrated with the kids, don’t you, Mrs. Anderson? Your husband is a producer, is that correct?” Dr. Yancey’s eyes visibly, softened and she tilted her head to the side.

Vicky nodded, not sure which question she was expected to answer. Her stomach burned. The peppermint vapors continued to pierce her nasal cavities. She inhaled sharply.

“Do you have help? A nanny?”

Vicky shook her head.

“You are practically raising your children all alone aren’t you?”

Vicky turned her head back to the photographs. A film of tears glazed her eyes.

“It’s hard these days... on families, I mean.” Dr. Yancey closed the file and straightened up the papers on her desk.

Vicky managed to blink away the tears and turned back to face the doctor.

“On Friday, Iris hit a young boy because,” Dr. Yancey paused and wagged her fingers in the air to indicate quotations, “he wouldn’t follow her rules.” Dr. Yancey picked up the file folder, stood, and pulled out her top drawer. She slipped the folder in between the others.

“Mrs. Anderson, we’ve called you in today because Iris’ teacher has complained of frequent violent outbursts. Iris has told us that you hit her when she doesn’t follow the rules. We have a photograph documenting, what she claimed to be, a scratch that you gave her on her arm, here.” Dr. Yancey’s finger tapped a 5 by 7 color photograph of Iris’ arm.

“What!” Vicky clutched the scrawny arms of the chair. “I do not hurt my children. That...that...that was a bike injury!” Vicky said, not quite sure what exactly had caused the scratch, but certain that it had not been her.

“Calm down,” Dr. Yancey said quietly. Her hand waved through the air. “It’s alright. We cannot take the word of a five-year-old and place it in the same context as an adult.”

Vicky released her grip on the chair, slightly.

“This is not something you need to defend yourself against, Mrs. Anderson.”

Vicky wanted to reach across the desk and smack Dr. Yancey in the mouth. She pictured herself lunging at the woman, pulling her forward by the lapels of her starched white designer lapels and slamming her clenched fist into that gleaming row of white teeth. Vicky felt her heart race, and she lowered her eyes in shame. What the hell was wrong with her? Had she hit her kids? Yes. She had spanked them both, but only on the bottom and only after many, many warnings. Oh my god! Was she abusing her children? And now this, this violent thought against a Jewish woman! Lord help her! Her hands flew up to her mouth, her fingers pressed against her lips.

Dr. Yancey's eyes traveled across Vicky's hair and then down the front of her shirt. She leaned forward slightly in her chair and asked, "Mrs. Anderson, who is in charge of discipline in your family? Is it Mr. Anderson?"

"When he is home," Vicky lied. Manny never reprimanded the kids. She always took over when they misbehaved. Manny simply refused to get involved.

"Are you satisfied with the way you are handling your children's discipline, then?" Dr. Yancey shook her head slightly. "I mean when Mr. Anderson is away, that is."

Vicky shrugged. "I try my best."

Dr. Yancey stood up from her desk and walked over to a small table by the door. On the table there was a bamboo plant in a red pot. Next to the pot was a stack of fliers. "I'd like you to consider taking this class." She placed a flier in Vicky's lap.

"I've recommended it to many of the mothers here. It is very good."

"Positive Discipline." Vicky read out loud.

"It gives us a new outlook on bad behavior."

"I'd like to go," Vicky said immediately.

"There are several locations," Dr. Yancey continued scanning the page. "It looks like there is even one at a church downtown—I believe this is a Baptist church," Dr. Yancey smiled warmly. "Seems like it was meant to be."

"Whatever you think." Vicky stood up awkwardly from her seat and Dr. Yancey came around her desk. Vicky watched her approach nervously, just as she started to move her hand forward, Dr. Yancey drew her in to a tight embrace. The smell of Windex enveloped her causing Vicky to hold her breath. "We want Iris to succeed here."

"This school means so much to us," Vicky muttered into Dr. Yancey's bun. Dr. Yancey's arms felt hard like sticks.

Dr. Yancey moved her body away, and patted Vicky's arm gently, before she walked her toward the door. "We are happy to help Mrs. Anderson. If there is ever something you feel you need, just let me know. Remember," her hand moved back to Vicky's arm, "Even if you are just lonely. I am here for you." Dr. Yancey reached up and brushed a lock of Vicky's hair back from her face. "I get lonely too. This job is very hard on me."

Vicky tried to swallow, but her throat was so dry it refused to cooperate, so she coughed a little. She reassured herself with the idea that the interrogation alternating with hugging was just a regular Jewish custom, she had been around plenty of Jewish mothers by now and feeling

breathless and red-faced from Dr. Yancey's grip, Vicky yanked the doorknob and pulled open the door.

"There is just one more thing," Dr. Yancey said.

"Yes?"

Dr. Yancey nodded to the secretary, who stood up behind her desk. "We would like your husband to call."

Vicky stammered, "He's in Indonesia."

The secretary emitted a laugh that sounded similar to a cough. "I believe they have phones there."

Dr. Yancey and Vicky smiled at the joke.

"Of, course." Vicky forced another chuckle at her own expense. "It's just that, well, I, I always, of course, I do talk with him—all the time—but his schedule is very irregular, and what with the time change...it...it might be difficult."

"Just have him call—it will only be for a few moments."

"Sure." Vicky regained her composure. "I will have him call right away—actually he is coming home tonight." Vicky looked quickly toward the window and back again. She could feel a warm glow envelope her face. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Thank you for coming in Mrs. Anderson." Dr. Yancey stepped back from the door.

The secretary nodded as Vicky passed. In the narrow hallway, the historic building suddenly felt like a labyrinth, and Vicky could no longer remember which way she had come in. She poked her head back through the door. "Sorry. Which way?"

The secretary pointed with a pen down one of the narrow halls. "Thanks."

Vicky felt her breath re-enter her lungs when she reached the high-ceilings of the rotunda. A deliveryman carrying a huge bouquet of roses approached rapidly. Vicky tensed at the sight of the fragrant blooms. Freesia and roses were the worst of all! Sneezing almost immediately, she held her sleeve over her nose, and dashed toward the door. Still holding up her sleeve, she struggled with the handle before realizing that someone else was pulling on it from the outside. As soon as she let go, the door swung open.

"Sorry!" An attractive man wearing a black shirt and blue jeans stepped through the door.

Vicky sneezed again.

"I guess I was trying to go in as you were trying to go out." The man smiled at her.

Vicky recognized him immediately, and the memory of their acquaintance startled her. He was from the studio, and that whole world seemed so far away from her now it was like looking at a grown second cousin or the face of a distant relative at an open casket funeral. Vicky dug in her bag for a tissue, sneezed again, and then once more before managing to step around him and out of the building. Outside, she blew her nose loudly and didn't hear the door re-open behind her.

“Hey, you are Vicky Bell!”

Vicky straightened in surprise and quickly finished wiping her nose. “Victory Anderson.” She responded, holding up her ring finger feeling slightly embarrassed. They'd had lunch together several times. Years ago now. Before she and Manny were married. Nothing special, just a few times when the writers had met on the set to watch the filming. And a few more times just the two of them. Still, his name wasn't immediately coming to mind and she looked away awkwardly. He was one of the cameramen. An Australian. With dark hair that was cut short now, but she remembered his hair used to be shoulder length. “Mark!” She said suddenly.

He laughed. “You forgot my name?” He said shaking his head. “I can't believe you could forget me.”

“Mark Anton,” he held out his hand.

Vicky dropped the dirty Kleenex back in her purse and held out her hand. “Mark Anton,” she repeated feeling the tightening of his warm grip. “That's right.”

Their eyes met, and they both started laughing.

“It's been a long time.” Still holding her hand he took a step back and scanned her body. “Wow! You look great. Are you still working?”

“No,” Vicky said, desperately wanting to take her hand back, but he held on. “I...I had kids.” Annoyed by the rush of memories flooding her brain, she gently retracted her hand. She had always had a crush on Mark— not that she had been the only one. She imagined that every woman who came in contact with him felt the same burning distraction. His eyes were the sort that seemed unfairly blue, with thick black lashes. Born and raised in Australia he had a manliness about him that invaded the senses. The longer she talked, the more she imagined what he was capable of. Things like: splintering wood with an ax, diving from an ocean cliff only to resurface with an abalone pressed between his large hands. Vague, lustful thoughts emerged from the now darkened past—there had been one time in the equipment room, she recalled, but quickly stifled the memory.

"I have two children." She said awkwardly, after too much time had passed between them.

He nodded with an air of finality, and she knew there was nothing more she needed to say.

"You've been busy at home, then." He said, this time his Australian accent sounded heavy. He nodded his head towards the front of the school. "They both here?"

"Kindergarten and second grade." Her face felt flushed, her heart beat rapid.

"That's why I've never seen you before. Our kids are older. 4th grade."

"Just 4th?"

"Twins." His expression looked like he was ready to laugh.

Vicky nodded. Nothing had really happened, she reminded herself. Once she got in the closet, she had chickened out. She and Manny had already been dating by then. "Well, it was nice seeing you Mark," Vicky smiled and waved.

"Take care." He called as she turned and walked across the courtyard. Passing the mosaic fountain she let her eyes fall to the pennies glistening under the water. Her chest felt like a balloon. How had she worked beside that man, lunched with him, lingered for hours back stage with him, and not allowed herself to have sex with him in that closet was no longer comprehensible. He had flirted with her so many times, and she had always been the one to walk away. Now that it was too late for such things, she could see clearly how stupid she had been. God knows he would have used a condom, so that couldn't have been the trouble. What held her back? Sin? Christian guilt? Wasn't that her mother's curse? She tried hard to remember her life as a career woman working in the industry, but it just didn't seem to connect anymore. The memory of who she had been was too distant. One thing she knew for sure in retrospect was that she could have had sex with him, repeatedly. She probably still could. The fierceness of the idea caught her off guard.

What was stopping her now? Couldn't she even the score in her own marriage? Didn't she have freedom again, at least in some sense of the word? Laughter welled up and erupted so suddenly that Vicky stopped walking. She pretended to dig in her purse for a coin. The pressure of uncontrollable laughter rose like a demon in her chest.

The school bell rang. Vicky feigned hiccups as a solemn line of teenagers filed past her to the front of the school. Three charter busses pulled up to the curb and a woman wearing a safety vest yelled "line up!" into a microphone. When Vicky reached the car, she let herself in

quickly, but instead of driving away, she leaned her head back and waited for the sunroof to slide all the way open. As the teenagers filled the busses, Vicky studied the wide blue chunk of sky overhead and wished she were still laughing. She wanted to laugh louder, harder than she had ever laughed before.

In the car, Vicky calculated there was barely enough to stop by O'Shays Deli on the Westside. Next door was a bookstore. She popped in quickly to buy a copy of the *Positive Discipline* book Dr. Yancey had recommended she get before her first meeting. Inside O'Shay's Vicky drew up Manny's favorite olives from the musty smelling barrels at the front of the store. After filling three containers, she headed over to the display case to get a pound of Muenster for Iris' grilled cheese sandwiches. She stared at the sign posted on the glass. No Muenster Today. This was a problem.

"We out." Danny O'Shay, the son of the owner had said gruffly after she inquired. Danny, who took over the store after his father suffered a stroke, was not very polite. He grunted and shrugged making clear he didn't care much about the missing Muenster.

"Oh no," Vicky's voice dropped. "I really need that cheese. I—"

"Try this," he said gruffly carving off a chunk of white cheese and holding out his knife with it perched on the end. "This is better. German."

She leaned forward slightly, but shook her head and held up her hand. She was already struggling with the strong mix of smells in the store. The muscles in the back of her neck tightened. "You might have some more in the back?" She asked hopefully.

"Naa. All out." He dumped the cheese in the trash and wiped the gleaming blade on his apron.

"Take the Gloucester. Good." He shaved a thin slice off another large wheel of cheese and held the knife up close to her face.

The smell of dirty socks slammed into her. "No, too strong," she swallowed hard at the prospect of returning home without the soft, creamy white cheese. Manny and the kids loved grilled cheese with Muenster. Iris would refuse to eat a grilled cheese without it, and since Manny always made the grilled cheese when he was home, he would be stuck dealing with Iris' fit when she discovered Gloucester instead of Muenster. Then there would be the fight over how she

‘spoiled the kids’ and how they should try eating ‘rice three meals a day’ for few weeks to see how the rest of the world lived. She glanced at her watch. There was no time to go to another store.

Danny cut from another wheel, a nameless white cheese perched on the end of his extended knife.

“No smell.” He grunted.

Her eyes narrowed. She never ate samples—too many germs. She leaned forward and sniffed the slice. Her stomach turned at the stench, and she took a step back waving her hand in the air.

Danny retracted his knife and let the slice of cheese fall into the trash. “What you need is some of our Sicilian sausage,” he set the knife on the counter and crossed his arms. Vicky’s eyes dropped to the tattoo of a shapely woman on his bicep. Was he flexing his muscle?

“I got just what you need in back,” he closed the cheese case. “Hot links ready to eat. Just heat and eat.” Danny looked at her, his eyes unblinking.

Vicky scanned the case. There was no visible sausage. “I thought this was a cheese shop.” She glanced through the murky interior. No one else was in the store.

“I got the best sausage in town, Ms. Anderson. Special for you. You like sausage?” He moved out from behind the glass case and placed his hands on the low counter next to the register.

“I...I...like sausage.” Vicky blanched trying to determine if he was making a pass at her, or offering her sausage.

A smile pressed up the ends of his thin lips as he watched her move down the case. She imagined the life of Danny O’Shay: growing up in the store, overshadowed by the high deli cases, finally growing tall and strong, his own hands permanently scented by cheese, wielding the thick bladed knives just like his father, and now the cheese empire was all his. There was some power in knowing that you had the finest selection of cheese in the city, that you were the only source of imported Danish Havarti, French Camembert and Italian Taleggio.

Vicky hesitated, grappling with the realization that she did feel some satisfaction in Danny’s continual gaze. He was much younger than her and still it was obvious by his half-smile, those leering eyes, the way he wiped his knife with his apron, slow and deliberate, that he thought she was attractive. Lately, she had felt so old. Like her ‘use by’ date had long since expired. She had

been overwhelmed with this feeling when she had seen Mark at the school. Like she wanted to hide because she didn't want him noticing that she was a completely different person.

"You want to see it? It's right back here. Special for you today." Danny was moving around the edge of the counter. His doughy face, meaty arms, short, stalky body was approaching her.

Stunned, she watched as he untied his stained apron. Wadding it up, he threw it in the corner. Her stomach tightened. He couldn't possibly be inviting her to the backroom to...to...to what? She let the absurdity of the image of her and Danny O'Shay alone in the backroom together pass through her mind. Making love to Danny O'Shay, the son of the cheese man flashed before her eyes. She'd practically watched him grow up in this store.

"I know just what you need," his voice lowered to a throaty whisper. "I got just what you need in the back. On the table, in the back," his hand was lifting, reaching. "Come see."

Vicky took an abrupt step backward and pulled her Louis Vuitton bag to the front of her chest. "I'll take a quarter pound of white Tillamook, please," she snapped.

Danny O'Shay's arm dropped abruptly to his side. His face crinkled around the eyes. "You sure about that? Seems like you need—"

"Just the cheese, Mr. O'Shay."

He looked up at the lights, then turned and disappeared back behind the giant refrigerator. A minute later, he reappeared with a stack of sliced cheese. He held it up for her over the counter.

"Okay?" He asked, cocking his head to the side.

"Fine." She said, handing him her credit card.

"You decide you want to try my sausage, you let me know, okay?"

"You should put it on the sign," Vicky said nervously still unsure of what exactly she had gotten herself in to. "More people would probably be interested if you advertised."

Danny slid her card through the machine and handed it back. "I told you, this is special sausage. Not for everyone. Secret family recipe. Only those who look like they really need it." He rubbed his hand over his tattoo and flexed his muscle again. "I make it with love."

"Thanks." Vicky grabbed the package, still fumbling to put her wallet back in her purse and turned making her way quickly towards the door. She stumbled on the rug just before yanking open the glass door and thought she heard him laughing from where he stood behind the counter.

“Freak,” Vicky whispered harshly as the closed behind. What a weirdo. That’s It! Vicky thought, as she stomped down the sidewalk towards the car. She jammed her fingers onto the keypad. The car chirped twice in response. I’m bringing the gun from now on! Ira was right, she should at least know how to use it. What if something did happen? Sliding into the seat Vicky considered how different she would feel if she was carrying the gun in her purse right now. Her fingers wrapped around the steering wheel as she listened to the motor idle. An elderly woman toddled up the sidewalk leaning heavily on her cane. A man approached on the sidewalk carrying a brief case.

“Seat belt please,” said the European woman.

Closing her eyes, she imagines the scenes in the backroom of The Cheese Shop unfold. Would she have taken her clothes off? Or would he have undressed her? She could have insisted that she keep her purse with her—or maybe just the gun. Vicky thought of herself sprawled across the stainless steel, legs splayed, the little black handled pistol clenched in her hand. Danny was just the right age to appreciate the threat of violence. No matter what she would insist on condoms—that much she knew for sure. A smile spread across her lips. Heat pulsed between her legs and she opened her eyes and looked around. A car sat in the street behind her waiting for her parking spot. Vicky blushed and turned the key in the ignition. Had she really just had a fantasy about the Cheese Man? What the hell was wrong with her?

“Seat bell—“ Vicky yanked on the strap, pulling the belt around her. The car flashed its lights. Signaling her to hurry. Vicky flicked on her signal and pulled away from the curb.

Vicky sat in the line up of cars in the front of the school. The kids were already out waiting on the grass. She opened the sunroof and waved. Ira glared. Was it the sun? She hoped he wasn’t in one of his mood. The boy hadn’t officially hit puberty, but it certainly seemed like he was already experiencing hormonal mood swings. She heard Iris yelling good-bye to her friends

“Hi guys!” Vicky turned around in her seat as they climbed into the car. She blew them both kisses.

“Where are we going?” Ira demanded.

Iris scooted across the seat and pulled her safety belt into place before opening up her pink cell phone.

“Iris?” Vicky flashed a stern look at her daughter. “Who are you calling? You just got out of school.”

“Shaydan got to go to aftercare today and I want to find out what Ms. Jenkins put out on the table.”

“More like what movie she’s going to get to watch,” Ira intoned.

“Shut up!” Iris whispered.

“Stop,” Vicky said firmly.

Ira pulled out his video game.

“They don’t watch movies in after-care, do they?” Vicky asked.

“No Mom.” Iris said quickly. “Ira doesn’t know what he is talking about.”

“Ira?” Vicky asked, but he was already punching keys and she knew expecting a response was futile.

“Mom how come I never get to go to after care? It’s not fair,” Iris whined. “Hello,” she said into the phone. Vicky turned back around and inched forward behind the car ahead of her. She flipped on the radio. “Mom!” Iris and Ira yelled at her in unison. Sighing heavily, she punched the off button.

“Where are we going?” Ira repeated.

“Soccer,” Vicky replied cheerfully.

“Oh my God. I hate soccer!” Ira howled.

“Ira, you love soccer!” Vicky studied her son in the rear view mirror.

“Do not!” Ira yanked his DS out of his backpack. Vicky listened to the familiar bleating as he daughter relayed every detail of the last I Carly episode to Shaydon.

After soccer, Vicky needed to make one last stop at the corner store at the base of the canyon. Her tire struck the curb hard as she attempted to pull into the loading zone out front. Struggling to straighten out the wheel, Vicky put the car in reverse and checked her rear view mirror. A car pulled up behind her in the street. Vicky waved the car around. The motorist stared at her through the glass, unmoving.

“You’re blocking my spot!”

The car remained stationary. The car behind it went around, flooring the accelerator and glaring at Vicky.

“I’m not leaving!” Vicky stuck her head out the window and yelled. Waving again impatiently, she yelled. “Move out of the way!”

The woman behind the wheel blared the horn at her, but finally went around. Backing up, Vicky attempted to straighten out the car, but only succeeded in parking at a slightly less awkward angle in the yellow zone.

“Okay we need to run in and get back out in five minutes, or we are going to be late.” The words shot out of her mouth high speed as if the faster she ordered, the faster the response, but her children had long ago become immune to this psychology, or perhaps it had never worked. The electronic bleeping from her son’s Gameboy continued uninterrupted from the backseat.

Vicky unhooked her seatbelt and glanced in the visor mirror to check her lipstick.

“Now!” She added turning in her seat to punctuate the order with a menacing glare. The authority in her tone, the fierce look— had zero impact.

“No,” Ira said matter-of-factly without looking up from his game. Vicky noticed Iris was sleeping.

Anger flared inside her and she fought back the desire to raise her voice. Vicky had read the first six chapters of the *Positive Discipline* book while she waited for the kids at school. The book made very clear that everything Vicky had been doing as a parent was wrong.

“Stay calm,” the book had advised. “No matter what the situation, you will always retain the upper hand if you are calm.”

Wouldn’t pounding her fist and screaming be a more effective way of reaching them? Vicky thought. The book sat on the black leather seat. The bright red and blue cover looked so patriotic.

“Ira, let’s go.” She repeated, turning back around, she knocked her elbow into the steering wheel causing the turn signal to come on.

“You go. We’re staying in the car.” Ira said without looking up.

“Left turn signal on,” the car dash yammered. Followed by “Please fasten your seat belt. Please fasten your seat belt...”

Just a simple stop at the store, that’s all this was. Just to pick up few of her husband’s favorites that couldn’t be had at the three specialty stores where she’d already shopped this week. Why so difficult? Her breath sat heavy in her lungs.

“Breathe,” her trainer’s voice whispered in her ear. The frenzied circle of her thoughts slowed, surprisingly. Was that the Xanax working? Why not just leave them? They are old

enough now. Vicky glanced over to where Iris had her head back against the seat. Eyes closed, her tiny, rose pink lips slightly parted.

Cal Osha quickly chimed in, “You can’t just leave them in the car—not in this neighborhood.”

But it would be so easy to just run in....

NEVER LEAVE YOUR CHILDREN UNATTENDED IN A VEHICLE, bull horned through her thoughts.

“We’ll be fine, Mom.” Ira said in his new voice of authority. Vicky had noticed this voice ever since Manny’s last departure. It was as if there had been some kind of hand off between them. Vicky forced air into her lungs. She looked in the mirror again. Her mouth was set in a stern frown. She opened her mouth wide and closed it again, forcing her face into a calm expression. She would need to ask the dermatologist about Botox around her mouth. The last thing she wanted cemented onto her face was these horrible frown lines.

“Ira, please cooperate. Daddy’s coming home tonight and I just need to get him a few things. I don’t want to argue.” She watched her lips move and studied the space between her eyebrows. This was great, she thought. She *could* do this.

“I’m not going.” Ira’s fingers pressed rhythmically on the game pad.

“I can’t leave you in the car,” Vicky pleaded. The clock glowed green from the dash. She really had no time left. “This is a busy street,” she said more to herself than anyone else.

Outdated cars and beige, two-story apartment buildings lined the sidewalk. The store’s location at the base of the canyon had become a regular stop for canyon residents. Over the years, Afshin, the owner, had cleared out all of the cheap malt liquor and cartons of generic cigarettes to make room for bins of fresh roasted coffee, imported chocolates and three shelves of wine.

“Just go, Mom,” Ira answered impatiently. “I’m almost to level 5. Besides it’s not like this is the first time you’ve left us in the car. Iris is asleep.”

“It’s not safe.” Vicky repeated. Her eyes shifted back on the store. There were only two bunches of Shasta daisies left in the bucket outside the door. Vicky’s allergies had become terrible over the last five years. Ever since she’d had the children, nearly every scent made feel itchy and sneeze repeatedly. The cheerful white flower with the button of yellow in the center had become the only flower she could still tolerate in the house. They had a delicate scent of honey, and had never made her sneeze.

A woman walked rapidly up the sidewalk. Vicky thought she saw the woman's eyes land on the bucket of flowers. She needed to move fast if she was still going to get both bunches.

"Okay, keep the doors locked." Vicky jumped out, locked the doors, and sprinted over to the flowers. The woman was only a few feet from the bucket, so Vicky dashed in front and swerved, only slightly, to miss her before swooping down. Achieving neither grace nor efficiency, Vicky snatched both bunches from the water at the same time her foot kicked the bucket and sloshed water all over her shoes. Aware that her movement fit the description of "fluid" only when pertaining to tides or jostled fishbowls, Vicky glanced and muttered an apology. Tall and thin and perfectly coifed, the woman —probably an actress, since all statuesque blonde women in LA were "actresses"— looked startled and sidestepped suddenly, an obviously overdramatic attempt to get out of her way. Holding the dripping stems away from her skirt, Vicky darted through the doorway, immediately switching her complete attention to the list of supplies that ticked off in her brain.

Coffee

Wine

Swiss Chocolate

Half and half

On the counter next to the register, Vicky stacked one pound of Organic Sumatra ground to espresso strength, a pint of Jersey John cream from the cooler, a bag of spiral noodles, two bottles of Pinot Grigio and a package of Paul Newman's Mint Oreos. The idea of the children sitting on the busy street made it hard for her to breathe. Parking in this neighborhood could easily take twenty minutes, she reminded herself. She glanced at her wristwatch. There just wasn't quite enough time, she thought. The car was locked, she reminded herself. Other than a car accident—her heart raced at the thought—they would surely be okay for one more minute—unless there was a resident pedophile waiting for a perfect opportunity to entice them to open their windows. Once they had followed a man with a metal detector all the way down the beach. She hadn't even finished one article in *Cosmo*, when she looked up and they were gone. That was before the tree house. Now, with the tree house the pool, and the gated driveway for basketball and bike riding, her children rarely played anywhere but home.

The clerk lowered his newspaper. "Good Afternoon." His heavy eyebrows lifted up and down as his fingers moved slowly across the keys on the cash register.

Vicky handed him a hundred dollar bill, cursing the woman at the bank under her breath. Why hadn't she insisted on smaller bills? The clerk nodded with an absent look on his face and held the bill up to the light, scrutinizing its quality. His thick fingers reached into the drawer, fishing around.

Vicky glanced out at the street. She could only see the hood. She strained to catch a glimpse of the car through the windows, but posters blocked her view. Once she had locked the keys in the car with the car running. Iris was still a baby. Ira not even three. Locked in his car seat. Not really understanding her signals, but wanting to help. When he started to unlock his car seat, terror had filled Vicky's heart when she realized he could accidentally move the gear shift if he attempted to crawl in the seat. Worse he could pretend he was on the 25-cent car in front of the supermarket. He loved that car because he could move the steering wheel and the gearshift and when he did the car changed sounds. The paramedics had rescued her then too. The floor of the parking lot was empty. Her cell phone and purse were also in the car. Vicky remembered the rush of adrenaline after she made the decision to leave them.

By the time she'd run back to the car, there had been a man wearing sweats and a baseball cap staring in one of the windows. It was the combination of her anxiety over leaving the kids and the idea that his outfit was standard attire for all pedophiles, that prompted her to start screaming, "Get away from my children!" as she sprinted toward the car.

There had been an argument upon her approach. He was supposedly an attorney, at the mall buying a new pair of Nikes for his workout, the father of two young children angry that she would leave her kids in the car. He used the words "horrified" and "unattended."

Afshin counted the money out slowly. Placing the bills face up on the counter. Then he reached for a paper bag from underneath the counter.

"I don't need a bag."

"You can't carry all of that." He said picking up the coffee and placing it carefully into the bag. Vicky moved away from the counter toward the door.

"You want the cream in a separate bag?"

Vicky marched back to the counter. "I'll just take it like this. I'm late." She grabbed the carton of cream and the package from Afshin. "Thanks! I'm so late." She said again turning towards the door.

"Your change!" Afshin called.

Vicky turned. She brushed the stack of bills into her purse, and left the coins.

“Thanks!” as she headed back toward the door.

A group of high school girls clogged the doorway. After she pushed through them, Vicky was surprised to see the sidewalk was empty. The car was still parked crookedly against the curb and Vicky inhaled sharply. The rear passenger door was open. Maybe Ira had just been hot. She moved quickly over to the driver’s side, opened the door and threw the bag inside. Still holding the half and half, she waited for a car to pass before pulling the door all the way open. First, she bent down and looked into the back seat.

They weren’t there. Her children were not in the back seat. Vicky’s heart leaped. Slamming her door, she yanked open the back door. Were they playing a joke? Hiding behind the seats? The space behind the seats was empty.

Vicky felt her heart jump inside her chest. A warm flush enveloped her head and neck. A man who had been in the store walked out and headed up the street. Tossing the milk and flowers on the back seat. Vicky turned and looked both ways up the street. Two cars sat at the stoplight on the corner.

“Stay calm.” She tried to tell herself. “Stay calm.” But the mantra had no effect on the sick feeling in her stomach, the instantaneous heat that pounded on her forehead. A cyclone of thoughts spun in her head. Had they gone inside the store? Had they been kidnapped? She fought the urge to sprint up the street. Which direction? Why did they leave the door open? Ira knew better than that, didn’t he?

The noise of the car passing swelled in her ears. Maybe they were in someone’s car. Her eyes scanned the rear window of the passing vehicle, but there was only the driver in the car. Oh my god! Vicky’s hands felt hot and cold. Oh my god! Panic trilled through her body like and electric shock.

She forced her eyes to move systematically up and down each side of the street. The worst thing to do was to run in the wrong direction.

Vicky remembered when she’d had that feeling on the day she and her sister got lost on Mt. Rubicon. Mt. Rubicon proved to be the last journey during the hiking phase of their childhood. The colonel was away, of course, and they had forgotten to tell Jasmine where they had gone. A snowstorm came in out of nowhere. The warm October day had transformed almost instantly into a blizzard. Before they even had time to realize it, the trail was covered up by the fast falling snow. The wind erased every trace of where they had been. That same terror glued Vicky’s feet to the pavement now. What if she went the wrong way?

A shrill noise caught in her ear. Her eyes darted across the street. She listened. There it was again. A shrill squealing sound like...she couldn't name the source, but she knew the sound was familiar. She had heard it before. There it was again! Vicky crossed the street. A UPS truck driver darted across the sidewalk, and jumped in his truck. Grinding gears preceded the truck's lurching advance. Behind where the truck was parked, Vicky saw a cluster of people on the sidewalk. Panic drummed a steady beat in her head.

Vicky ran up the dirty sidewalk. With clarity she saw the whole scene pan before her eyes. The Amber Alert signs on the freeway, her pleas to the news stations answered with a maelstrom of media. Her teary plea on the 6 o'clock news. The telephone call to her therapist requesting heavy sedatives, possibly for the rest of her life. An overview of her emaciated form slumped across the sitting room divan, drool pooling in the corners of her mouth. And then, finally the call from the kidnapper, the ransom drop, the terrified look on her children's faces.

Her eyes zeroed in on a tall black man wearing a felt hat. The people were all little—kids. A cluster of kids surrounding a man with a cart of some kind. As she approached, she could see now that the man was black, but his face was painted white, and he was tying balloons. Cracking red paint colored in an oversized smile around his mouth. In one hand he held a long, skinny red balloon. The other hand held a blue balloon over a hose attached to a tank on wheels. The blue balloon sprung to life, dancing back and forth as it filled. The shrill noise erupted as the balloon filled.

A high tinkle of laughter made Vicky's stomach jump. Was that Iris? The balloon man's hands worked rapidly, bending and twisting, turning and tying, the red and blue balloon began to take shape. As Vicky reached the circle of kids, she tapped her fingers on top of one of a tall boy in the back. He moved unquestioningly to the side. Her eyes skipped across the collection of black heads in front of him. The balloons squeaked in the balloon man's rapidly moving hands. Twisting and spinning, the man worked the balloons furiously while the bodies of the kids jumped and bobbed with excitement around him. The movement revealed Iris, standing right in front of the man with the balloons.

Vicky's hand reached through to Iris' shoulder. She squeezed her daughter, and Iris turned.

"Mommy, the man is making me a race car!" she gleamed with excitement.

"Where is your brother?" Iris pointed toward the sidewalk, and then turned her attention back to the balloon man.

Vicky stood in the circle of children for a few seconds, her eyes drifting from black head to black head before she gripped her daughter's shoulder again. This time she clutched the fragile bones through the t-shirt and skin.

Iris immediately wriggled underneath Vicky's clutch. "OWWWW!" she whined. Several of the children turned their heads and stared up at her. Vicky's cheeks burned hot.

The balloon man's drooping red mouth lifted at both ends. His eyes and teeth looked yellow next to the white paint. "She's okay, Momma," he said revealing a gold-framed front tooth. "Don't worry now."

Vicky glared at him and leaned down and whispered fiercely in Iris' ear. "You have one minute."

Iris nodded, but did not move.

Vicky lowered her head and let her hand fall back to her side. Two more kids approached, throwing their scooters to the sidewalk and yelling "Charlie! Charlie! I want a pirate sword Charlie!" Thankful for the distraction, Vicky forced her feet to move her body back out of the circle. Behind the balloon man, sitting on the stoop next door, Vicky found Ira still playing his Game boy.

"She got out." He said immediately when Vicky approached. "I didn't want to go, but I knew you would be mad if I let her go alone."

"You should have come in to the store."

"She would have crossed the street without me!" His voice rose to a high whine. "You know how she is Mom, she gets something in her head and she starts making a huge scene, and, well she's like a crazy person. There is no way to argue her out of it."

Gang tags marred the wall on the house behind where her son was sitting. Inside the window a woman with gray hair sat watching television. A collection of soggy garbage collected between the building and concrete stairs. Worry passed distantly through her mind at the thought of her car, parked in the loading zone, unlocked. Vicky let her legs bend and sat next to Ira on one of the steps. Her eyes lingered on the children crowded around the clown. Most of them already held folded balloons, but still stood watching the fast art of the balloon man. The speed of his fingers worked the balloons together, occasionally dipping into one of his deep pockets, producing another colored balloon which he tucked onto the air hose and a second later, inflated, joining the collage to become a wheel, or fender, or some other necessary part of the whole. Two of the boys stepped back from the circle battering balloon swords against each other. Vicky

scanned the dirty line up of cars along the street. Up the street a cluster of boys wearing oversized jackets gathered. More than once she had watched the camera pan this very street on the news. A dead boy shot by another boy because of the color of his shirt. Violence lurked like a monster around every corner. She never should have left them in the car. What if something had happened? How could she have explained to Manny, that it had been her fault? Her eyes swept back to the circle of children. Her daughter was right up front now. Tears surged into Vicky's eyes, and she batted them away with the back of her hand. More flooded and filled, overflowed.

"Nothing happened, mother," Ira said without looking up from the Gameboy. "You don't have to be so *dramatic*."

After dropping the kids off at the house with Elia, Vicky drove to her therapy appointment. Today, more than ever, she was determined to get a prescription. This was ridiculous! she had told herself after paying last month's bills. She had been seeing the same therapist for nearly a year now, and she still didn't have even one prescription. Not even for sleeping pills. She had asked for Ambien three times. "Everyone has Ambien," Shannan told her one day at the pool after Vicky had complained about a hangover from Tylonel p.m. "No one takes Tylonel p.m." Shannan had laughed out loud. "I don't even give that to my kids!"

Vicky wanted more than just Ambien, she wanted Valium. Or Vicoden. Or Xanax or Zoloft. Or Wellbutrin. Anything to erase the flood of anxiety that seemed as regular as the tides ever since the storm. Maybe she'd even be able to watch the news again, if she had some sedative. And the anger and frustration. If only she could stay calm. Deep breathing went out the window in times of crisis. What did her Pilates coach say? "Breathe through the trouble." Or some other nonsense. Lately, just breathing seemed difficult, and sleeping, and eating. She had always tended toward the nervous side, but this was getting ridiculous. Jasmine had given her a Valium once in high school. The night before a test. What a relief that pill had been. Instead of chewing on her sheets all night, she had imagined herself floating next to twinkling stars before dropping off into the first deep sleep she'd had in months.

Months ago, Shannan had advised her to throw an enormous fit right there in the therapists' office, but Vicky had no such talent for acting. Until today, she hadn't even considered such a drastic act. But after the incident with the balloon man, Vicky felt like she could throw a fit. In fact, she felt like throwing a fit would come rather easily today.

Even as she walked through the glass doors and took a seat against the atrium, Vicky dismissed the idea. She couldn't really yell at her therapist—was that what Shannan meant by fit throwing? To yell and scream and carry on? Vicky dug in her purse to retrieve her cell phone. She stared at the screen wondering if she should really call Shannan for advice. Why didn't Shannan just get her a prescription from Sherman? Surely, Shannan didn't get meds through her therapist. Her husband was a plastic surgeon for Christ's sakes! That was the thing about Shannan—you never know which advice she was qualified to give. Vicky breathed in deeply.

"No fits," she whispered to herself just as the therapist's door swung open. Without looking up a middle-aged man with glasses walked quickly through the waiting room and out the door. Vicky stood and went inside.

"How did you feel when you found Iris with the balloon man?"

Vicky crossed her legs. Varicose Veins! an alarmed voice cried. Vicky placed her feet side by side on the Mohawk carpet. She knew it was Mohawk because they had installed the same pattern in the theater room at home.

"Terror," Vicky said meeting the therapist's gaze.

"You felt terror when you saw her with the balloon man?" the therapist repeated.

Vicky instantly realized her mistake. "No, I mean. I felt terrified when I came out of the market and saw that the kids weren't in the backseat." The image of the back door left open, the back seat empty pushed up Vicky's heart rate. "I was terrified," she repeated. "I felt like my heart was lodged in a vice grip." Yes, that was a good description, the editor in her commented. A visual image of metal plates squeezing the spongy muscle from both sides filled her head. Vicky suddenly remembered the rush of adrenaline that had pumped through her veins when she ran across the street. "I felt like I had super human strength." She moved to the edge of her seat, but kept her hands clasped in her lap. "I remember looking up and down the street for them and I remember thinking, *'If I see them in the car, I am going to run and stop it.'* Like I could just grab onto the frame, yank open the door and pull them both to safety. I remember there was a car driving down the street when I looked, and for a split second I thought about running out in front of it."

"You wanted to run in front of the car?" The therapist lifted her pencil from the tablet and looked at Vicky thoughtfully.

“No.” Even as she said it, Vicky knew the idea of deflecting a speeding car was crazy, but at the time, she had felt like, if that’s what needed to happen to get her kids back, that’s what she would have done. “I mean if they were inside. I would have done anything I could to stop the car.” Vicky scooted back on the couch and tried to relax her shoulders. The muscles in her neck felt tense.

“This is all very interesting, but I was trying to get at what you were feeling when you first saw Iris?”

The therapist had a kind voice. Still, Vicky never felt they were close friends. Even after all these months, there was no real camaraderie. No hug hello or good-bye. Vicky gave her a gift certificate to a spa last Christmas, and she’d never told her whether or not she liked spa visits. Or if she even celebrated Christmas. Vicky had many moment of panic during the weeks afterward because she had decided the therapist was opposed to Christmas and probably didn’t like other people rubbing her body either—after all this was common enough. Why hadn’t she thought of this before giving her the gift? A gift certificate at a bookstore, or something, would have been much more appropriate. They had never discussed *her* personal details. Only Vicky’s life was subjected to micro-examination. Did *she* go to a massage therapist? Did *she* get her nails done? Did *she* like the seaweed mud wraps? Did she *read*? Fiction or non-fiction? These were all things Vicky imagined normal women discussed. In fact, after 11 months Vicky still didn’t discovered whether this woman had children. Was she even married? What if she had abandoned her family and spent her weekends drinking at the ‘W’ every Saturday night?

“Vicky?” The therapist leaned forward slightly. Her head tilted to the right. “What did you feel when you first saw Iris with the African-American Clown?”

“A-A-African-American?” Vicky stumbled over the word. What did African-American have to do with it? she wondered. Oh my god! Did this woman think she was a racist? She said she had felt ‘terror’ and now was she trying to figure out whether or not Vicky was a racist?

“You said the man was black, right?”

“Correct.” Vicky nodded diplomatically. “But that had nothing to do with the terror—“

“There is no shame in honesty here,” the therapist warned. “I am not going to judge you for an honest portrait of your emotions—“

“No! I—“ Vicky grabbed another Kleenex from the box. “I didn’t feel terror when I saw the African-American balloon man. Not at all.”

“What did you feel?”

The noise of those kids laughing and bickering over the shape forming from the balloons flooded her ears. The colorful flower protruding from his chest pocket, his wrists twisting in the air, the squeak and thump of the rubber underneath his wide fingers.

Thirty minutes passed and Vicky was still unable to name the emotion she felt at that moment. She could hardly meet the therapist's eye knowing she was a dismal failure—that the whole discussion had been. At \$5 a minute she felt shamefully wasteful and unproductive. She could have fed a village in Africa, for Christ's Sakes! She knew what she should have felt: relief. She had said relief, of course. But the therapist seemed dissatisfied with this answer, and the truth was the answer felt dissatisfying to Vicky. She hadn't felt relief—it wasn't relief.

"Did you feel angry?" the therapist asked, looking up suddenly.

Vicky remembered the death grip she placed on her daughter's shoulder. The tight clamp that caused her to wiggle to the side and say "Ouch."

"I was furious," Vicky said finally, her eyes dry now. A small pile of Kleenex took up the space on her lap. Fury. That's what she had felt. She remembered the clown man trying to reassure her. He must have seen the look in her eye. "Don't worry, Mama," he had said, and this only made her feel more furious. What did he know? How did he know that she shouldn't worry? What the fuck did a black clown really know about being a white mother?

Vicky felt the fury rising like a red tide inside her. Finding them so happy and free, so full of fun and life and completely ignorant of all the dangers that Vicky was so utterly and completely aware—pedophiles, serial killers, terrorists, car jackers, mudslides, fires, disease!

"These kids have no idea how terrifying it is to be a parent!" She exclaimed. But the therapist sat quietly, unresponsive. "I have to watch out for absolutely everything. It's completely absurd!"

Vicky remembered the day Iris picked brought a large white feather she found in the yard into the kitchen. At the sight of the bird feather in her house, Vicky nearly had a coronary. Iris might as well have been holding up a juice glass of Avian Flu.

"Two dead birds were found in the park only one mile away from our house," Vicky said. "West Nile Virus." She shook her head. "This was just last summer, so of course, I've had to add mosquitoes to the list of life threatening pests."

The therapist smiled. The potted plant in the corner bobbed in the breeze from the air conditioner.

“Christ! It’s gotten to the point where I’m not even sure I want them to leave the house!” Even the house had failed her, she thought, remembering the sight of the broken cherry tree in her living room.

A swell of emotion engulfed her. “There are so many wackos. Not to mention earthquakes! As if fires and mud slides aren’t bad enough. Tall buildings could fall! Bridges and overpasses could collapse. Thank God, we don’t ride the trains,” she said, pulling another tissue from the wooden holder on the table. Certain the organic mascara had smudged, she looked up at the ceiling and ran the edge of the tissue underneath her eyes. “Those poor people in that train wreck.” She wadded up the tissue and held her fist up to her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears. “Dead people lying strewn all over those tracks. It was so horrible. You know kids ride that train home from school.” Vicky unwadded the tissue and sopped up the spilled tears before they could run down her cheeks. “The freeways are bad enough. It has gotten so that it is practically your responsibility to drive 90 m.p.h otherwise you might trigger road rage from the idiot behind you.”

Vicky reached for another tissue, deciding to blow rather than to continue sniffing. “They say, ‘statistically’ airplanes are safer. Do you think the people on Alaska flight 409 from LAX to SFO cared about that statistic? Do you think that offered them comfort as they free fell into the Pacific from 35,000 feet!” Vicky wiped her nose with another tissue. “And that’s a short flight. My husband flies for nearly 24 hours to get home!”

“And how does that make me feel? I drive my children down the freeway every day!” At this point, Vicky wanted the therapist to interrupt her. To quiet her down. Surely, she was speaking too loud for this shared office setting, but the therapist said nothing. Only continued to take notes on her pad. Vicky let her voice raise another octave, “‘Statistically’ then by taking them to soccer practice I am increasing our odds of being involved in a disastrous car crash! Every day on the A.M. Traffic I hear the listing of fatal crashes—three lanes blocked here. Oil tanker down over there.”

“That’s always my favorite,” Helen, Vicky’s therapist interjected. “The oil tanker accident with the burning cars.”

Vicky stared at Helen. Her body felt heavy all over. Her limbs felt like she might need a crane to lift them.

“Did you hear the one yesterday?” Helen continued in her pleasant tone. “The one with three burning cars. Only the tanker driver survived.”

Vicky became aware that her mouth was open. Her teeth clicked when she forced her lips together.

"Makes sense," Helen continued, tapping the eraser end of her pencil on the yellow notepaper. "He was the highest up. He probably had time to jump down and run to safety."

Vicky blew her nose again. One of the used Kleenex slipped off her skirt to the floor.

"The trash can is over there." Helen said, nodding toward the door.

Vicky rose, holding up the ends of her skirt to carry the tissues to the trash. "All I'm saying is: Why don't my children know enough not to wander up the street without me?" Vicky said after dumping the Kleenex's and returning to the house. "Are they really that clueless?"

The therapist stared at Vicky with a blank look on her face. Whatever method of therapy this was, she never had understood the rationale. Wasn't this when she was supposed to offer her guidance? Wasn't this the point when she earned her \$300-dollars-an-hour price tag by telling her what she was doing wrong? How she should be feeling? How to be normal, healthy and well-adjusted? She wanted some damn advice! And if she couldn't get any advice, then she damn well better prescribe her some drugs. This silence was not helping anything.

"They don't get it!" Vicky practically screamed. "Of course, not!" She stood up and looked at her self in the mirror above the couch. Her hair needed brushing. The slightly frizzy ends made her look so disheveled. God damn Shannan for taking away her Aveda hair products!

"Because I don't want them to!" She pounded her palm with her fist. "I don't want them growing up worrying about everything. That is my job!" Vicky paced the room. Why didn't Helen interject, she thought furiously. She was ranting! Sounding half-crazed, and still there was no interruption.

"I'm supposed to be the great protector, their shield!" She raised her fist in the air, shaking it at the acoustic ceiling. This was the closest she would ever come to a performance, she thought wildly, letting her head shake her hair like a mane. "The impenetrable fortress that keeps them safe and happy and healthy." She clenched both fists this time and brought them up near her shoulders in the air like a boxer. "I am the great protector!" she shouted. Hunching her shoulders forward Vicky growled loudly, shaking her fists at the mirror. Almost bursting into furious laughter, Vicky forced herself back under control. If this was to be her only acting experience, she thought, she wanted it to be a command performance!

Vicky forced her face into a somber expression. She allowed herself only the tiniest glance at Helen, whose face was ashen now, but still, she kept writing. The pencil moving steadily across the paper as her eyes followed Vicky's every movement.

I really have her attention, Vicky thought, gleefully. For once, shock replaced Helen's ho-hum expression. Vicky looked back down at her hands. "I was furious. When I first saw Iris there, smiling, just standing their patiently waiting for her balloon, I had to fight off the compulsion to grab her and shake her, to slap her face and yell, "Wake up! This world is a dark and dangerous place!"

The room was quiet except for the soft gurgle of the table top water feature, the hum of the pump almost louder than the trickle of water.

"And Manny has no clue about what I go through," she let herself fall back onto the couch. "In the middle of all this his contribution is to call and tell me that 'he's riding the wave' now, but that it's all going die soon. He's made 5 movies in three years, but 'this might be it' he says. 'the last one.' That's how it is in 'Hollywood, babe' he says." Vicky stood up again and walked across the room. "Babe!" There should be a window in here, she thought. Something to look out of. "He started calling me 'babe' recently. He's never called me such a thing before. 'Hon, Sweetie, Darling,' but never "babe." I think he is seeing someone—have I told you that!" Vicky glared at the therapist.

"No."

"Oh yeah. "Babe" is just a habit he's formed over there with someone else. He can't help himself. He's a completely different man, you know, since he's been to Indonesia. A surfer! What a joke. He's a golfer! Not a surfer. So I guess I have that to look forward to: unemployed ex-husband chasing the 'endless wave' around the planet."

Vicky looked up at the ceiling, listening to the hard scratch of the pencil on the pad. The crease between Helen's brow remained. She would be a perfect candidate for Botox, Vicky thought.

"It's seems so hopeless," Vicky said dropping back down to the couch. "I sometimes think it's all someone's idea of a cruel joke. Like I'll wake up one day and my beautiful kids, my gigantic house, my fancy car, my closet full of amazing outfits will all be gone, and I'll be alone. That is the joy of motherhood, you know, knowing it won't be long before they think you are old and stupid—that's already happening—but then knowing they will be gone." If this didn't get her some anti-anxiety meds, Helen was fired.

Vicky looked down at her hands. She thought of that movie *Waitress*. The part when the wife is in the kitchen with someone else. Her mean husband off at work. How happy she seemed. Vicky focused on the scene when the husband comes home and pushes her around, so when she spoke her voice cracked a little, "Sometimes I feel like it's too much. I feel like leaving. Just hiring a live-in and setting up auto pay into her account and disappearing for a while. Maybe then they'd all miss me, and then I could come back and we could start over from there."

The therapist looked up at Vicky. She could feel her eyes traveling all over her face. Thinking about the movie really did help. She had cried during that scene, on the couch, Pay-Per-View. She let herself look up at the therapist, and her stomach instantly clutched in terror. Maybe she'd pushed it too far. Maybe she'd think she was really unstable! "The truth is, I would never do anything to hurt them," Vicky said, drawing her cheeks up to reveal her teeth. She held the smile. "I would never hurt them." She repeated after Helen set the pencil down and looked up from her yellow note pad.

At the end of the session, the therapist recommended Xanax and Zoloft. Xanax for anxiety attacks on an as needed basis, and Zoloft twice a day. She said Vicky demonstrated "a generalized anxiety disorder."

"Common among mothers," Helen explained. "It should take a couple of weeks before the medication starts to work. Be sure to keep taking the recommended dosage, even if you don't feel any different." Helen stood handing her the prescription.

A heady rush of triumph filled her chest as she reached for the square of paper. She only glanced at the letters, before picking up her bag from the floor, and slipping the prescription inside. Ducking her head she hid the smile that beamed across her face. Without looking at the clock she knew that it was time for her to go.

At home Vicky placed several vases around the house and filled them with the Shasta Daisies. Elia was in the kitchen prepping the vegetable for dinner, and then she would be leaving. For the rest of the week she was scheduled 12-8, but tonight Vicky just wanted the family together. She trotted out to the yard to gather some iris and fern. A few of the gladiolas still looked fresh, she looked at them longingly, but their scent was so overpowering so she left them

behind. She snipped Iris and a few bunches of fern and went back inside to make the arrangements.

At 6 o'clock Vicky wrapped herself in a towel and walked over to the floor length mirror in the corner. The bathroom steamed in her wake. Every day now she checked herself for wrinkles. Last year she'd undergone a minor eyelift, which had virtually erased that tired look she had started to get above and below her eyes. There was still the issue of the tiny creases appearing around her mouth, but the plastic surgeon assured her that regular injections would take care of these, at least for a few more years. She was still relatively confident that men found her attractive. She stepped on the scale. Her weight was steady at 125, and clothes hung well on her five-foot-eight frame. She flipped on the light in her walk-in closet and surveyed the seasonally appropriate options. He would definitely want sex tonight, she thought as she walked through the mist of her favorite perfume. She pulled on a pair of bikini cut white cotton underwear and searched for the matching under wire, demi-cup bra. A fluted skirt and leather flips with a wrap around cotton tee would do nicely. Maybe she would lure him to the couch in the den. Or what about the garage? The thought made her giggle. The bed was getting so predictable, even if it was only once a month. She wanted more from their encounters. The garage would add the spark they needed, on the hood of the car. She had fantasized about doing it on the hood of the car many times. Of course, their hood would no longer be warm, or parked at the edge of a cliff, but the slick of cool metal beneath her ass would be a nice change.

She moved across the bedroom wondering if Manny was still in the air. The therapist had really helped her come up with a plan for dealing with the dildo. "There is no point in worrying or guessing how it arrived, just ask him at the first quiet moment you have together." The therapist leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "On second thought, not the first quiet moment, try to enjoy some quality time together first, say the first night, and then maybe first thing in the morning you can ask him about it. Until then you just have to assume there is a rational explanation. Like it was a gag gift at his bachelor party, or he bought it for you as a present, but was too embarrassed to actually give it to you. Or that it is someone else's all together."

This final option startled Vicky. "What do you mean someone else?"

"I mean that someone left the device, probably on accident, or maybe it was stashed by someone, who, who comes over occasionally. Do you have a regular visitor, Vicky? Someone who sleeps over and might have stashed it where they thought no one would find it."

Vicky's mind was blank. There was no one. Only her mother slept over. Manny's parents never left Florida. There was Shannan, of course. But that was impossible. Shannan was not a sex maniac. At least she'd never exhibited any signs...she was a pot head...she had stashed her pot at the house—Vicky shook her head. Anyway, there was nothing she could do about it except ask Manny and then see where that led. And she wasn't asking Manny tonight. Tonight, she was supposed to “relax” according to her shrink and enjoy some “quality family time.”

Slipping her feet into the flip flops, Vicky took one last look in the mirror. A dab more powder on her chin and forehead and a bit more lip gloss. Her eyes looked mysterious with the new dark mint shade along the lower lashes. She wondered what Manny was doing right now. A flutter of anticipation rose in her stomach. An image of an airplane with Manny aboard reading the latest celebrity gossip magazine came into view. Vicky turned away from the mirror. The idea of him hurdling through the sky unnerved her. She preferred to think of him just landed. Barreling down the runway, wing flaps raised the rush and roar of 25,000 tons of steel just slowing to a roll at the platform.

Vicky walked down the hall and poked her head inside Ira's doorway. He was sprawled across the beanbag reading a comic book. Iris was on the computer playing in her Webkins World. Many times Vicky thought about what she would do if Manny died. What her reaction would be? How she would cope? Monologues played in her head detailing how she would she feed the children. What she would do with the finances. She had even pictured the memorial. Her cloaked in a black, below the knee, chiffon. No, too light, she had decided. Most likely a heavier, simpler fabric. Linen, would be much more appropriate if it were summer. Nothing but the heavy drape of wool would do during the winter months. Weeping into a handkerchief her children on either side. Her mother would be forced to fly out—surely she would— despite her own elaborate fear of airports and Los Angeles in general. Her sister too, would be there. God what would she wear? Something low-cut. Black, certainly, but Jen had a way of filling out even the most demure cuts that made Vicky want to shelter Ira's eyes, and those heels. Her sister always wore spiky, high heels. Vicky would insist they all three wear low heels, certainly given the circumstances her sister would accommodate. Would they put the long box on the dining room table? Manny stretched out in his tuxedo inside. Or bring their own stand? Either way, she'd need to clear a room to store the flowers. A startling part of her embraced the idea. At night she would sleep with the lights on until they took the box and placed it in the ground. Would she be able to sleep with her dead husband down the hall? Should she sleep? Maybe she should stay by his side all night,

sobbing and praying. Maybe her Mother would insist she read from the bible to him. *To help him on his journey to heaven*, she could hear Jasmine's voice, bright and jubilant. *Another good soul returned to his savior, the Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen. Halleluiah!*

Thirty minutes later Vicky appeared dressed and ready in the kitchen, relieved to see that Elia had finished the vegetables and had gone home. She tied a flowered apron around her waist. The chicken breasts already lined a Pyrex, pounded, lightly breaded and stuffed with chèvre and prosciutto. Asparagus tips tossed with olive oil lemon juice, garlic and minced roasted red pepper filled a yellow bowl next to the sink. Still there was the garlic bread and side dish of fettuccine alfredo—Iris' favorite—thankfully she could cheat on that, she thought, pulling the basket of sauce packets down from the shelf. Organic Alfredo in a pouch was a real Godsend.

"Ira," Vicky called into the hallway, wiping her hands on the lime green towel. "You're in charge of the garlic bread!" The kids were only just now coming in from the back yard. Neither one had changed or washed. The stove timer beeped.

"Mom can we watch a movie?"

Vicky shot them an annoyed look. "You already used up your TV quota this week, so why are you asking?"

Both kids erupted into a chorus of whines. Indecipherable messages mixed with random phrases like "all the other kids get as much as they want" and "Zachary got a new X-Box for Christmas."

The timer beeped. Whining killed her. That is why the first chapter she read in the *Positive Discipline* book had been entitled "Whining: What to do when they won't take no for an answer." Ignoring the chorus was the approved tactic. "Acknowledge them once, calmly." That was the first step. Then "Proceed with whatever it is you are doing. If you ignore the whining, it will stop," That's what the book said, but this had not been her experience. Then again, maybe she had already messed it up because the next line stated: "No matter what you do, never, never, never give in." Vicky had failed many times at this step. All the steps, really.

The whining continued and she wondered if it was too late, if her bad parenting had already set the stage for spoiled, whining children.

She tried to negotiate around them in the kitchen. 'Get pasta pot. Fill with water.' She told herself systematically. "Out of the way, please." She stated calmly.

Dodging Iris, Vicky sloshed water across the front of her apron and onto the floor. The timer beeped. She set the stove to high. Grabbing a handful of paper towels she bent “excuse me, please” to wipe up the spill. The whining continued. As she bent over Iris pulled on her neck and they both toppled over backward.

“You hurt me!” Iris wailed. Straightening, Vicky helped her daughter back to her feet, and placed her gently in the kitchen table chair.

“You okay?” She asked. Concern was not the emotion that Vicky really felt. Anger. Frustration. Annoyance. She picked Iris’ doll from the floor and handed her to Iris.

Ira continued to list the top twenty reasons why he deserved a new X-Box.

Vicky’s hair had fallen from her barrette and into her eyes. She moved quickly to the mirror in the hallway and reclipped the strands straight back over the top of her head inspired by Jennifer Lopez at the Emmy’s. Vicky guessed she was about the same age as Jennifer Lopez, but she could only dream of having such a luscious body. Clothed Vicky turned heads, but so up-and-down angular naked. She ran her palm across the top and sides of her hair. Smooth, clear skin for the most part. No sign of sun damage. No scarring. No additional freckles or moles. All that would come later. Had Jennifer Lopez lifted her eyes? Liposuction? They started so early in Hollywood. Nip and tuck was as essential as cut and blow dry.

Iris joined Ira in the campaign for electronic toys. “I’d like the Barbie Does Design School Program! Everyone already has that and I only have four Webkins and everyone else has like 20.”

“Stop whining, please,” Vicky said with a steady tone, staring at the mirror making sure she still appeared calm—as opposed to the usual frazzled tired look she exuded. No one could hear above the racket. One of the PD tips Vicky liked best so far was: Minimize Attention.

Vicky listed the bullet points at the end of the *Undue Attention* chapter:

- °Avoid special service
- °Distract the Child
- °Change the topic.
- °Ask a favor. Give choices.
- °Change the activity.
- °Ask a direct question.”

“Would you two like to set the table for dinner?” She called over her shoulder.

No one was listening. She didn't blame them. She was tired of listening too. There was so much required noise. It was enough to drive a person crazy. Possibly, she was already crazy. Clearly the shrink thought so. Why else would she have three prescriptions in her medicine chest and one more in her purse? Dr. Yancey was right. The *Positive Discipline* course was just what she needed. She had received an education for screenwriting; she most certainly needed education on the most important job of her life.

The timer beeped in the kitchen. Vicky reached behind her and tightened the apron strings. She pressed her hand against the crisp English cotton and admired the pink checks with long-stemmed roses, bright green stems and pinkish red blooms.

Besides for six weeks she would have some place to go outside the home. Manny had already announced he would be gone most of March and April. Time spent with 'grown ups,' instead of teenagers working retail would be a nice change of pace. In church—Jasmine would love that—instead of the mall. Vicky played her mother's reaction through her head, then immediately shut it off.

Vicky examined her make-up in the mirror. She needed a foundation touch-up on her forehead before Manny got home. The new mineral powder just didn't do the trick. Palms on either side of her forehead, she pulled back gently on the skin simulating a facelift. Ever since getting Botox, she found herself staring for long periods of time at the space between her eyebrows, scrutinizing the skin for any sign of creasing. Letting her hands drop, she scrunched up her face testing the strength of her muscles against the Botox.

The timer beeped again, interrupting her thoughts. The chicken! She raced back into the kitchen, and peered through the oven glass. The edges of the neatly stuffed, rolled and pinned breasts were golden brown but the highest part was already charred and covered with blisters.

"My chicken!" she screamed, pushing the kids out of the way. Flinging open the door of the oven, she searched frantically for the hot pads, which were nowhere in sight. "God damn it!" She screeched opting for the dishtowel. Her fingers seared through the thin cotton as she dumped the Pyrex on top of the stove. Burned. The chicken was fucking burned. How many times had she tried to have Manny's welcome home dinner a Martha Stewart picture of perfection, and failed? How many times!

"God damn it!" she yelled, "Shit!" Vicky threw the dishtowel onto the floor.

Iris watched the towel drop.

Ira stared at her smirking. “Good going, Mom,” he said, with a half smile on his face. “That looks re-e-a-l-l-l appetizing.”

Where did he learn sarcasm like that? Never once had she used sarcasm with them. In fact, she had consciously avoided sarcasm throughout her parenting career. It was insulting to think that no matter how hard she tried, her children had already charted their course. That no matter how much she wanted them to be successful, the odds didn’t look too promising. Her son had already burned down the garage by the time he was six-years-old. Iris had been written up for stealing, smart mouth, non-cooperation and now bullying, and she was only five!

Vicky stared at the black blisters on top of the creamy breast meat.

“It looks cancerous,” Ira stated.

A few seconds passed. Then, Iris asked, “Can we watch a show?”

Vicky’s eyes landed on her children. If she had been a cartoon sketch her face would have been tinted bright red. An onslaught of negative commentary built up behind her face. *Spoiled brats, good for nothing, ungrateful*—all the sayings her father had flung out carelessly—threatened to explode from her lips.

Instead, she clenched the dishtowel in her fists. “Fine. Just get cleaned up first, *and I mean hands and face!*”

Both kids ran down the hall. Iris squealed with delight and immediately ran into her room. Ira stopped at the bathroom. One minute later he emerged wiping his hands on his pants and ran into his room. The Power Rangers theme song came across the speakers in his room. Great, Vicky thought. A wisp of hair had fallen across her eyes. Once again Manny would come home to a burned dinner, and she couldn’t wait to hear his comments about how much television the kids watched. Hardly fucking wait.

Chapter Break

After dinner, Manny stretched out on the couch with the newspaper and Vicky set to work cleaning up the kitchen. He had opened a bottle of wine at dinner, and, usually, Vicky refrained when Manny was home. Drinking wine made her sleepy. It was fine to flop face down on the couch after the kids went to bed still wearing her jeans and a t-shirt and not stir until morning when she was alone; it was another thing entirely when her wayward husband was

home. She knew it was going to take every ounce of energy she had to get the kids in bed, and then stay up until after they were asleep to have sex. But she stared at the half full bottle on the counter, considering the idea anyway. The phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” she chimed pouring herself a glass.

“Hi, it’s Shannan.”

Vicky liked the way Shannan still announced herself by name, as if the possibility of multiple calls from multiple friends could be confusing. Clearly Shannan’s fogged state of mind had limited her observational skills because it would not have been difficult, over the course of the past year, to discern that besides her mother and sales calls Shannan was the *only* friend who ever called.

“Hi Shannan. How are you?”

“Terrible. Listen, I need to come over for a toke.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Manny’s home.”

“Wow. Shocking,” Shannan’s voice was deadpan. “Did you cook him a fabulous meal and is he now sprawled on the couch watching television?”

“*Producer’s Weekly*.” Vicky took a long gulp of wine.

“Well, he won’t mind. I’m sure half the people he works with are potheads. The industry would die without Sensimilla.”

Vicky lowered her voice. “I don’t want him knowing that you keep your stuff here.”

Shannan laughed. “Come on it will be fun. Maybe we can all roll a joint together.”

“Very funny.”

“What else do you have on your agenda?”

The truth was Vicky wasn’t up for Shannan’s company. Not that Manny would mind. Last time Shannan showed up unexpectedly he’d been happy to entertain her. She glanced at her husband on the couch. His mouth was set in that sleepy frown he always got before he drifted off. Vicky worried that what happened last time he came home might happen again. The funny thing was that *she* actually wanted the sex. The first three years of their marriage he had been so relentless she’d sometimes felt like a stalked sheep, but now things were different. She really wanted sex. In fact, she felt like she might lose her mind, if she didn’t have sex. Fireman Jake was becoming a little too familiar.

Manny suddenly looked up from the paper and smiled at her. She smiled back. "If you don't mind, I'd rather just meet you at the end of the driveway at 8:45."

"You are so selfish with that handsome man of yours."

"Sometimes." Vicky still found it strange that before they were married Manny's receding hairline and glasses didn't seem especially popular with women. Something had changed. Of course overwhelming success never hurt a man's chances with women, but Vicky herself thought he had grown more attractive with age.

"Hey that reminds me—I've been meaning to tell you I ran into Martin."

"Who?" Vicky shook her head pulling her dish gloves off her hands.

"You know, from "Jefferson Place." I ran into him at a party and he asked all about you."

"Oh, Martin. How is he?"

"How is he? He's working on one of this season's hottest shows. Why you don't keep in touch with some of these people, I'll never know."

"I send him Christmas cards every year."

"That's funny," Shannan said.

"It's not supposed to be." Annoyance spurred at Vicky. She twisted the wedding ring around her finger. When had she decided that the Los Angeles standard of being an atheist was annoying? Just recently Jasmine had asked, "Why do they all celebrate Christmas then?" Vicky had to agree this was a good point. If the story was so offensive, then why didn't they all get together on some atheist holiday? This was not a topic that Vicky had ever discussed outside of her immediate family. Even she and Manny steered clear of religious discussions. "Has Martin found the man of his dreams yet?" Vicky asked doing her best to change the subject.

"A few times, I think. He is certainly flamboyant. Which character did he write?"

"Oh, it didn't really work like that at the time. We just sort of worked on scenes together. We worked on whatever fit our mood. His favorite was Veronica, though."

"He's working on a new show, prime time. I got his number somewhere."

Vicky smiled, but shook her head. "No thanks."

"Are you crazy?"

"Possibly."

Shannan huffed into the phone. "Prime Time offers so many perks."

"Yeah, like, 15 hour days."

"Only for a few weeks."

“How would you know?” Vicky’s listened to the irritated edge of her voice. Why did her therapist always call attention to such annoying tendencies? Until two weeks ago she’d never once consider tone.

“I don’t care what you do. As long as you get out of the house once in awhile.”

“I should.” Vicky sighed.

“Why don’t you come with me to the Gala Awards tonight?”

“No thanks.”

“You need to let me shop your talent,” Shannan sped up her words. As a Hollywood agent Shannan dealt business advice rapid fire. “While you still have the option.”

Vicky sighed heavily. “I don’t have a babysitter.

“They are old enough. Just put them to bed and set the alarm. What could happen?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Don’t you have the ADT linked monitors.”

“Uh huh.”

“Then, what the fuck, Vicky?”

“I would never.”

“Let me get this straight—the house is guarded by a heat sensor alarm. There are cameras in all the rooms linked to Virtual Surveillance system and you are still working about a couple of sleeping kids? That’s paranoid.”

“I suppose I’ll just give Iris a list of ingredients for dinner, and they can just tuck themselves in at 8 o’clock?”

“Don’t be silly. Nobody goes out until after 10 p.m.. 11 is the earliest I’ve ever arrived at Gala Awards party.”

“I thought you wanted me to go to the event?”

“I don’t waste my time at all the event. Haven’t gone to the Gala in years. The after parties are where all the deals get made. Did I tell you I signed with Janet Jackson last week?”

“Is she still alive.”

“Very funny.”

“She just cut a new album.”

“Uh huh.”

“Just don’t forget to put the dope in the mailbox, okay?” Shannan snapped.

“Sorry.”

“Whatever.”

“So I thought you had a rule about smoking pot after 3 p.m.? Why are you breaking your own rules?” Vicky took another sip of wine.

“Dr. Penis stood me up tonight.”

“What?”

“We had our usual Friday night out at Cafe Metro planned, and he used the reservation to entertain a doctor from the Beverley Hills office instead.”

“That is terrible. How hurtful.”

Shannan laughed. “You are the only woman I know who uses a word like that, Vic.”

“Is it out of fashion to feel hurt?”

“Basically, yes.”

“Which doctor?” Vicky asked casually.

“Melissa Gurstein.”

“A woman! You let him wine and dine another woman!”

“Oh you are such a prude! Who could blame him? Considering where we live I’m lucky he’s only planning on dinner. He needs her to take some of his Beverly Hills clients. With all of this anti-Photoshop hype, he’s busier than ever.”

“I don’t get it, why wouldn’t she want more clients?”

“Jesus Vicky! You really don’t have a head for business do you?”

Vicky tapped her fingers against the wine glass.

“He’s going to take 30 percent, of course. For 30 percent, I don’t even mind if they fuck.”

“I see.” Vicky poured soap into the dishwasher. “Normal Wash.” She said closing the lid.

Vicky ran water in the sink to soak the Pyrex as Shannan rattled on. She had no interest in Ralph’s plastic surgery business. Besides Ralph started out specializing in penis reconstruction, and according to Shannan he makes most of his money off of lip implants. Vicky never understood why so many women would willingly place section of their own butt on their faces. Then again, Vicky liked her lips. Her surgery portfolio lived at Body Art on Wilshire where she had charted a conservative course through middle age. A lift here, a tuck there. Nothing too dramatic.

“...rates are 20 percent higher in Beverly Hills which means more trips to Fiji for me.”

“So I still don’t get why you are breaking the no pot rule?”

“I can’t drink tonight. My trainer will kill me.”

“Right.”

“My carb intake was over the last three weeks and...”

Vicky stared out the window to the courtyard. The new fountain wasn’t nearly as pretty to look at. Just a straight rock pillar. Water dropped from a copper shelf installed at the top. The sound was nice, of course, but she missed the stone girl in the flowing dress. The wine was making her body feel warm and fuzzy, and she hoped Manny would want sex right away. Last time he had decided to take a nap first, and never woke up. She’d slept the whole night in her scratchy push-up bra and G-string hoping he’d feel inspired.

“Vicky—”

“Sorry, yes.” Vicky suddenly realized that Shannan had been repeating her name. “8:45 end of the driveway. If I’m not there I’ll put it in the mailbox.”

After cleaning up the kitchen, Vicky joined Manny and the kids in the living room. Manny stretched out on the floor with his feet propped up on the couch. He had already agreed to play a board game and the kids were between Monopoly and Risk.

“I’m not playing Risk.” Vicky stated matter-of-factly glancing at the clock, wondering why Manny was agreeing to a board game with less than an hour before bed time.

“Risk is so great.” Manny looked over at Vicky. “What don’t you like about it, hon?”

Ira and Iris stopped arguing and looked over at her too. “Why don’t you like Risk, Mommy?”

“I just thinks it’s...I just don’t like the fact that...you know..it’s so warlike.”

“That’s the beauty of it, babe. It gets you inside the mindset of war.”

“And how is that a good thing?”

“I don’t know if it’s good, but it gives you a better understanding of how the world works, don’t you think?”

“I don’t like to think that that is the way the world works.”

“Yeah. Well, sure, but it’s still a good game.”

“Let’s play Risk,” Iris said reversing her opinion. “I want to play Risk,” she restated. “And I want to be on Daddy’s team.”

After losing seventeen of her armies in a battle with Madagascar, Vicky went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water. She rolled her head forward, trying to ease the tension she

felt in her neck. So what if her country was dying. It was just a board game. Still it was so discouraging, knowing losing was never quick and painless.

“Your turn, Vic,” Manny called from the living room.

“I’ll pay you \$20 to form an alliance,” Vicky said returning to the room and looking at her son.

“Hey! That’s cheating!” Manny shouted.

Vicky kept her gaze on Ira. “I’ll let you cross the sea into my territory, but you need to blast him If you fortify in South Africa and battle him here,” She pointed with her index finger to where Manny had built up a swarm of tanks in Mozambique and was preparing to invade along her northern coast. “And invade his country here,” she said pointing to the opposite side of the board where his army lines were perilously thin.

Ira considered the board for a minute. “\$50.” He responded deadpan.

Vicky rolled her eyes.

“You can’t use money, Vic.” Manny stated calmly.

“I thought you said this game was a good way to teach the mindset behind war?”

Manny let his head fall back, but an annoyed look appeared on his face.

“I want to see the money first, Mom.” Ira said calculating the pieces he would need to move to complete the deal.

“Really, Vicky, do you need to cheat just to make your point?”

“Ira give me the rules,” Vicky demanded. Ira handed over the lid and Vicky scanned the directions. “No. Honey, it doesn’t say anywhere that monetary alliances are illegal.”

“Give me a break.” Manny shook his head. “You can’t be serious.”

“You are just angry because our alliance will defeat your Super Power.” She winked at Ira.

“No, I’m concerned because you are teaching our children that you can break the rules whenever it’s convenient.”

Vicky glared at him and tossed the lid to the side.

“Fine.”

“What do you mean!” Ira yelled. “We had a deal. Go get the \$50!”

Iris galloped her pink Little Pony between the red tanks that covered Australia.

“Dad doesn’t think it’s right so—“

“This is a game of strategy.” He looked at her levelly. “You have to agree that turning this into a money game is a bit inappropriate. We should have played Monopoly if you wanted to teach them about money.”

“Whatever,” Vicky sighed.

“Just go then,” Ira said impatiently.

Vicky rolled and moved three more tanks to the front lines of Ethiopia.

The game lasted four hours. By the time Vicky and Manny carried the kids to bed they were both whining and crying. “I wanted to finish. Why would you let us finish,” Ira cried.

“Dee Dee. I want Dee Dee,” Iris whined. Manny disappeared down the hall once he set Ira in his bed and Vicky lingered making sure teeth were brushed, pajamas on and after fetching a glass of water for Iris, left the door ajar. In the kitchen she loaded the remaining glasses and plates into the dishwasher, and finished off the rest of her glass of wine from dinner before hand washing the two wine glasses and placing them on the rack to dry. There were two things she needed to discuss with Manny while the kids were sleeping. The first: the phone call to the school. The second: the dildo.

By the time she reached the bedroom, the room was dark; the only sound was Manny snoring. In the closet, Vicky assembled the push-up bra and panty set she’d purchased at Nasty Girls on Wilshire. The black and pink bra made a mountain out of her molehills, and the low curve of the panties set off the hard work she put into the crunch machine at the gym.

Vicky slid under the sheets next to Manny and contemplated if she should wake him up. There had been a few instances when she had accidentally woken him up and he had snapped at her in a crazed half-asleep way. Maybe he just needed a little nap and he’d wake up later, she reassured herself. This had happened once before. He had napped on the couch for an hour, woke up, moved to the bed where they had made love. She forced herself to lie there despite the discomfort of the underwire bra. The taunting lace of the panties wasn’t comfortable either, but they only had two nights together, so she pushed herself to endure. Besides she had broken her caffeine rule and opted for a cappuccino when she got home from therapy. Even if she wanted to sleep, she was still too wired.

The board game had been a mistake. Vicky’s family had never played board games growing up. Whatever happened to a good old game of cards? She and Jen used to spend hours entertaining themselves with Crazy Eights and Go Fish. Later they got into the Speed and Double

Solitaire. Although the Colonel would have probably enjoyed such a dismal game of world domination.

Vicky reached underneath her back and unsnapped the bra. Manny continued to snore. The only time Vicky remembered games when The Colonel was home was when Uncle Clay came over and the two of them would play Black Jack for hours. One night after a long session of Black Jack, Jen and Vicky awoke to shouting. From the stairs they could see that Clay had tipped over a chair and the two men were wrestling on the floor. Jen and Vicky laughed so loudly at the sight of the men grunting and straining, red faced, rolling back and forth on the carpet, that they had to move way down the hall to keep from being heard.

Of course, there were the board games Jasmine tried to get the Colonel to play much later, after he was forced into early retirement because of an incident in a Nicaraguan village where he allegedly shot someone's chicken in the middle of the afternoon. He was naked when they arrested him, so the story circulated that he was naked when he shot the chicken, but the Colonel insisted that he took his clothes off after, in protest. He claimed that the chicken had been a gift, from the farmer's daughter. Supposedly that wasn't the only incident, just the last. By the time they shipped him home the dementia was so far along he called Jen, Buzzy, which had been the family dog, and he thought Jasmine was the maid. Vicky never was sure who he thought she was. He looked at her with an empty gaze and once he had reached out to grab her arm fiercely before yelling, "She's a goner! She's a goner!"

It wasn't until much later, after his death, that Vicky learned it was aggravation over Parcheesi that prompted the Colonel to try and cross the freeway at a full sprint. He never made it to the other side. All anyone could say about it after the funeral was "What a Blessing."

Manny rolled over once and Vicky held her breath. She wanted desperately to take off the uncomfortable lingerie, but the idea that he might wake up, that he might glance over at her— she had set the room lighting to "In the Mood"— and how did she want him to remember her when he was half way around the world? Asleep in her cotton pajamas with her mouth wide open or as wide-awake sex goddess with good taste in lingerie fashion? She had gotten to the point where she didn't want him to see her without her make-up on and she was modest when she stepped out of the shower. The bathroom lighting was always unflattering.

She thought about her encounter with Danny O'Shay at the Cheese Shop. Had he been making a pass at her? She was fairly certain that the sausage ploy was suspicious, but she really couldn't be certain. It was possible they made special sausage—and she was a regular customer.

Sausage! Oh my god! She breathed out a tiny giggle. What would Manny say if she was dabbling in special sausage at the Cheese Shop? Ha! She rested her hand on the ribbed corset, and readjusted the underwire with her thumb. Still it was reassuring to know that men still found her attractive—Manny was making a soft sputtering sound on the exhale now—even if it was a cheese salesman! Jen would love it if she called to tell her she'd fallen for the "Special Sausage" routine at the local deli. Jasmine wouldn't find even the idea remotely entertaining. Jasmine had made her devotion to Manny clear. The whole idea of Vicky's 'perfect' life in LA helped make up for Jen's ungodliness. With her two children, gigantic house on the cliff and successful husband, Vicky was the equivalent of an Olympic gold medal winner in the family history book.

Vicky stared up at the ceiling and, with her right hand rested on her chest and her left on her stomach, she practiced the core breathing she had learned in Pilates. Poor Jen. She had been so popular in school. Every guy had been in love with her. Maybe that had been the problem. She never had to try to gain people's attention. As soon as she walked into the room she had everyone's attention. She had always been so beautiful. Vicky pictured the familiar scene growing up of Jen dressed in her cheerleading uniform practicing moves in the hall while Vicky sat at the Formica kitchen table memorizing To Be or Not To Be or the Gettysburg Address. If the Colonel was at home, he'd be reclining in his Lazy Boy, Jasmine ferrying his Scotch on the rocks.

"To be or not to be that is the question...whether to suffer the blows of a 1000 slings and arrows..." That was about all she retained. Something about "outrageous fortune."

"Four score and 20 years ago today..." The rest of that speech was completely lost.

Vicky rolled over and stared at Manny. He might wake up, she sighed. Shadows moved across the wall. The lights eventually faded, and then went out completely. Ocean sounds played softly across the speakers.

"Good night, house." Vicky whispered in the dark.

Manny left for a round of golf with Jimmy just after breakfast and didn't return until late afternoon. Vicky waited until he got out of the shower to remind him of the standing Saturday night babysitter.

"We could see a movie, or just go out to dinner." Vicky suggested.

“No movies. I am sick of staring at film. I can’t tell you how painful this editing process has been. How about just eating with the kids and then taking a bottle of wine down to the beach before bed?”

“With the kids?” Vicky’s voice cracked slightly.

Manny nodded. “I never get to see them, Vic.”

“Maybe we should spend some ‘grown up’ time together?” She suggested.

“After they are in bed, I’ll show you some grown up games, okay, Babe?” He reached over and tapped her lightly on the ass. Her stomach tightened, but she was nervous after last night. Grown up games had gotten awfully boring lately.

Vicky phoned the babysitter and endured her gripe about “last minute cancellations” as she opened a bottle of wine. Might as well make the best of it, she reassured herself, taking a sip from her glass. Then she set to work pulling things out of the refrigerator for dinner.

After the kids were in bed she slipped into the Andrew Mark negligee purchased in “champagne lace” at Bloomingdales last week. (The salesgirls had all ood and aahhed over her selection). By then the 2 glasses of 2006 Willamette Valley Pinot had left her feeling relaxed and ready for action. After touching up her makeup, Vicky ran a brush through her hair. She stared longingly at the Chanel Number 5 bottle still perched on a shelf in the closet—the delicately sweet, slightly sassy scent had been given up long along with the onset of adult allergies—still she was tempted. She forced herself to look away after recalling the last time she attempted perfume. Itchy eyes and unstoppable sneezing made it very hard to concentrate on an orgasm.

Tonight she was determined to make it happen. After last night there was some concern that lingerie no longer provided enough of a draw, and for the first time in her married life Vicky considered the possibility of pornography. Maybe they could read a magazine together some time? What would Manny think if she suddenly pulled out a Playboy? She imagined his stern look of surprise and couldn’t picture him overcoming the shock without a reminder of her many outbursts against pornography. As an adult, Vicky had argued vehemently against all forms. Magazines, films, erotica had all been banned early on in their relationship.

Knowing Vicky was hard wired with Christian values, Manny had never so much as questioned her on the subject. If he had, he would have discovered that Vicky herself had used pornography on many occasions in her youth, that even before knowing what masturbation meant, Jen and Vicky had stumbled across a rather impressive collection of the Colonel’s Playboy magazines during an otherwise routine game of hide and seek. Of course, much later

Vicky had spent months repenting after a surprising sermon at Vacation Bible School focused on MASTURBATION, which to Baptists was the equivalent of devil worshiping. Still, there was no denying her first experience with pornography had provided for an exceptionally good playtime.

In her marriage pornography was a mute point. They'd never discussed it. If they had, she would have used the feminist interpretation presented in her college women's studies class: Pornography degrades women. But in reality this position didn't hold much more water than the Baptist position. Jen made a six-figure income, vacationed in 5-star resorts and owned two luxury condominiums. For a single woman, with a high school degree she wasn't doing so badly. Of course there was the issue of not being able to compete with those buxom centerfolds, the idea that pornography reduces women to sex objects, but if that was the issue then they should ban 90 percent of adult television. Every script she'd ever written had done the same thing. Truthfully, Vicky didn't want Manny thinking about some hot centerfold in place of her. She didn't want to be substitute for the buxom blonde on page 36, she wanted him to worship her. Recently though, her view had shifted on this position. Being righteous didn't feel nearly as good as the soul-shaking effects of a good strong orgasm.

Manny was already in bed. The reading light on. His attention turned to a copy of *Filmmaker Magazine* that he had propped up against a pillow that rested on his stomach. Vicky could hardly help juxtaposing the image of Jake, clad in his heavy fireman's jacket stepping through the threshold in his heavy black boots with her husband, circular reading glasses, tighty whiteys and tube socks pulled half way up to his crossed knees.

"Off." Vicky commanded. The reading lamp responded immediately.

"Dim Perimeter." She said with authority to the room. A warm glow emanated from the soffit that circled the room. She pictured herself objectively, as Manny might see her. Brown, shiny hair cascading over her shoulders. Tastefully muted lipstick. The tiny negligee propped up in all the right places. Her long, thin legs accentuated by the dainty stiletto's she found at Neimans with their thin golden straps that perfectly complimented the breezy fabric of the opaque robe that didn't really cover, but rather provided a sexy layering effect (that's what the salesgirls had said). She may not be as voluptuous, but at least she had more fashion sense than your average Bunny.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" she asked her husband, trying not to feel disappointed that he had neglected to open the Pinot Noir she had set on the nightstand along with two glasses

and a corkscrew. "I thought we could take it out on the balcony and pretend we were down at the beach."

"Sorry we never made it." He responded looking up from the magazine.

"They were tired." She lifted the bottle and the corkscrew and held it up to him. "Do you mind opening this?"

"Sure," he said his tone flat. After opening the bottle he poured one glass just under half way.

"You're not having any?" Her voice was high and wavery. She inwardly scolded herself for the critical tone.

"I'm going to go grab a beer out of the fridge."

"Really?"

"I gave up red."

"I see." Irritation flushed her cheeks. She too had given up red after deciding the tannins were contributing to her digestive problems. She had only selected the bottle because at last check Pinot Noir was Manny's favorite, and because she thought on a special occasion a little next day stomach burn was well worth it.

He returned from the kitchen after only a few minutes, but Vicky was already experiencing a downward spiral of her emotions. Something about the rejection of red wine seemed to be linked to her previous night spent enduring the discomfort of scratchy lingerie. She slipped the sandals off her feet and tucked them underneath the couch. In the moonlight, the lingerie seemed so *Desperate Housewives*. She should have just opted for a t-shirt and pajama pants and hoped for the best.

Manny sat down next to her on the couch. She thought she detected a faint whiff of garlic on his breath.

After taking a slug off his beer, he lifted her arm and rested it on her shoulders. "The kids sure are growing fast."

Vicky felt her spirits plummet. Was she nothing more than a billboard for his children? A not so subtle reminder of the joys and sorrows of parenting? Oh god. She could feel herself bristling inside. She wanted to shake the heavy weight of his arm off his shoulders, get up, go inside and check Tivo for the movie selections. Instead, she crossed her legs and forced herself to take a long gulp of wine. This was their last chance. In the morning he was leaving. If they didn't have sex tonight it would be another three weeks before he would be home again. Three week!

Shit! She would be on her period in three weeks! Vicky set the wine glass down and turned toward him wondering if it would be too forward to place her hand on his thigh. Manny had always been conservative. Even before they were married, he didn't respond well to her initiating sex. Afraid he might balk, she let her fingers drop to her own leg, just above the knee, but when he looked up at the moon, she pulled the fabric of her negligee up slightly revealing more of her spray tanned, salt scrubbed, laser depilated, Pilates toned thigh.

"Tell me about Indonesia," she said, in an effort to reboot her enthusiasm

"The moon looks different," he said.

"Really."

"Brighter."

"Oh."

"When it's full it looks just like a spot light up there."

"Must be the smog here."

"Uh huh." She arched her back, pushing her breast up through the sheer fabric, as if on cue a slight breeze blew across the balcony and her nipples rose to the occasion.

"They don't have heavy machinery like we do."

"Really?" Vicky rubbed her lips together making sure the gloss was still intact.

"When I first got there I saw women carrying baskets on the heads walking on the side of the highway, and I thought they were maybe carrying food from the market, but when I asked someone they told me it was gravel."

"Gravel?" Vicky looked surprised.

Manny chuckled. "Yeah, they were fixing the pot holes in the roads. The division of labor is totally different than here."

"But it must be so heavy?" Vicky sounded alarmed.

"It is," Manny answered, turning to look at her.

"Are you going to miss Indonesia?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are so close to wrapping things up there. *Rage of the Warrior III* is already in editing and you must be nearing the end of filming for *Clone II*."

Manny brought the beer back up to his lips. "Oh, yeah." He brought one leg up and rested his ankle on his knee, and then straightening his legs back out, he shoved his feet under the table

knocking the metal table leg in the process. Vicky's wine sloshed on the glass. "I do love it there. You would love it there," he added quickly turning to her.

"I'd like to go some day," she said dreamily.

"Really?" He turned to face her for the first time.

"When the kids are older, of course."

He took another drink from his beer. "Yeah, right."

"Do you realize we only have a couple more months of this long distance crap," she felt the relief just saying the words. They would be a normal family again. Three years felt like so much time lost between them.

Manny's eyes switched to her outfit. "That's nice."

"You like it?"

"I do," he reached out and tugged on the velvet string of her robe. The delicate fabric fell to one side.

Manny took another swig of beer and then set the bottle on the side table. "You want to go inside where it's a little more comfortable?" He asked.

Vicky let her head fall back on the plush cushions of the outdoor furniture. "This feels pretty good to me."

Manny reached over and took one long pull on his beer. Vicky noticed he had already almost finished the bottle. She thought she saw him take in a deep breath as he set down the bottle. He came at her full force, scratching her face with his rough skin, his hands suddenly groping at her breasts, grabbing at the lingerie until she turned her face away long enough to say "Wait!"

She wriggled out of the robe and placing his hands back on her body, she put her mouth on his. He moved over on top of her and she let her headrest on the cushion. His body pressed on hers and she struggled to feel him against her. Was he hard? He wasn't. She sat up slightly and let her breasts slip right in front of his eyes. They were petite, but perky. Not too droopy, not too bad, she had always thought. She kissed his neck and his ears. He was breathing heavy almost sighing, and she thought for sure she had him going, and then her hand fell to his crouch. Nothing. Just the soft folds of jeans.

'Oh my God!' she internally screamed. *'What do I do now?'*

'You need to suck him,' a voice of reason answered.

The Christian Coalition prompted retorted: *Never! Work of the devil!*

'But I need to have sex with my husband,' a wimpy quiet voice responded from way in the back. Christ on the cross appeared. The cross held up by short stalky woman, her blue-grey hair formed like a cap around her head. *'Felatio is not the job of a good Christian woman,'* the blue-grey haired woman announced.

Vicky wanted to run up the aisle and beat the woman with a chair right there in front of the entire congregation. *'But I want to come! I want him to come! It is imperative that I reach orgasm!'*

Manny continued to knead her breasts. Vicky responded by rubbing her pelvis against him. *'Not Back and forth,'* she told herself. *'Up and down!'*

'It's only a matter of time,' she told herself. *'Don't panic,'* she repeated, forcing the church lady from her mind. Slowly, she wedged her hand between them, moving steadily for his crouch, hoping that by the time she reached him, his penis would have formed the requisite shape and size. Otherwise, she had no idea what to do with it. God knows this had never been a problem before. She let her mouth close in on his and squeezing her eyes closed, allowed her fingers to creep back to his jeans. Some progress had been made, she reassured herself.

As soon as she attempted to rub him, he sat up suddenly. "Let's go inside."

"Sure." She answered, aware that she had been holding her breath. She gulped in air as he stood, and quickly gathered her garments.

On the bed he rolled on top of her and started rubbing hard and fast against her. The button of his pants poked her uncomfortably and his shirt rubbed across her breasts. She lifted her chin to the ceiling and let the air fill her lungs slowly not wanting him to notice the patience of her deep breathing. *Whatever it takes,* she prayed. *Whatever it takes, Lord. As long as we have sex...* she caught herself then. This wasn't the type of conversation appropriate to have with the Lord. She remembered as a child there were so many of these inappropriate requests she wanted to send up in prayer. "Please let my breasts grow bigger, Lord" or "Please let my period go away before swim class, Lord." "Or please let my nipples not rise up during spelling bee, Lord." All of these pleas seemed so inappropriate to raise with a male God. Still, they were some of her greatest concerns. Despite the midnight mass and prayer beads, many times Vicky found herself longing to be Catholic. At least the female saints provided an appropriate reception for her problems.

Manny grunted and quickly unzipped his pants. Vicky knew this was her cue, she needed to act fast. Spreading her legs she shoved down her underwear quickly and rose to meet him just

as his hand jammed into her crouch. She could feel the press of his knuckles as he guided himself in and she wished he would use them right there, on the outside of her vagina. He was pressing and grunting now. There were only a few seconds left, she knew. Still she longed for his knuckles...right there...she thought...oh...so close...her hand instinctively rose, pressing against his hand...yes!...she wanted to scream...right there...oh baby... But then...he rolled over. He was done. His hand rolled with his body and rested next to her on the bed. She lay there aching next to him. After a few minute she listened to the sound of his soft snore.

At some point just before midnight, she went into the bathroom and washed down three Tylenol P.M. with a half a glass of water, and moved to the living room couch.

In the morning, Vicky awoke to a loud popping followed by a low boom. Her heart leapt into action as she sat up straight and looked instinctively at the wall clock. 9:15 a.m. She hadn't slept so late in months, maybe years! Another series of noisy bursts erupted from the back yard. Running through the living room and around the dining room table, she flung open the glass door.

Manny and Ira were crouched next to each other on the back patio. Vicky stopped in surprise when she saw a coke bottle with a firecracker attached to a stick stuck inside. Her son was holding a lighter.

"What are you doing!" Vicky bellowed from the doorway.

"Bottle rockets," Iris announced in her grown-up voice. Vicky looked over to where her daughter was standing against the dining room window holding her hands over her ears.

"He isn't allowed to play with a lighter." Vicky looked at Manny as though he had just descended from a distant planet.

"It's okay," Manny responded. "I gave it to him."

"Have you forgotten that he almost burned down the garage last month?" Flames melting the florescent lights came instantly to Vicky's mind. Firemen hacking through the garage door with a giant saw. Two weeks ago they still had a melted roof and a triangle cut into their garage door.

Manny didn't respond. His focus had shifted back to the stick with two fat firecrackers wrapped in pink paper taped near the top, and Ira fiddling with the fuse.

"I thought we decided he wasn't allowed to play with fire AT ALL."

"This is supervised." Manny countered.

“He’s letting him light the fuse, Mom.” Iris reminded sternly. “I don’t think Ira should actually light the fuse.” Iris had a slight lisp. F’s and S’s came out thicker, adding a sense of finality to her words.

Manny was silent for a moment, and Vicky knew he was considering the validity of his daughter’s request.

“Does it make you nervous Iris?” Manny asked looking over at Iris.

Iris nodded, her piggy tales where droopy from bed.

“Okay. No problem, honey,” Manny put his hand out. “Let me light it Ira.”

“No way Dad! You said!” Ira exploded. “That’s not fair. That’s Bullshit!”

“Ira. You are not allowed to use that kind of language!” Vicky squawked.

“Hand it over.” Manny said to Ira, extending his hand, palm up.

All the rules Manny had broken since he’d arrived home started ticking off in Vicky’s head: roughhousing before bed, television on Sunday, dessert before dinner. They had already determined Ira was a budding pyromaniac. Did he really think that a pyromaniac should play with explosives? On a Sunday for Christ’s sakes!

“Dad! Come on! Are you going to listen to her?” Ira nodded at Vicky. “Come on. You know she’s just crazy.”

Vicky felt her stomach drop. “I’ve heard just about enough of this,” she said. Had this been a private conversation between them—that she was crazy? Was that what her husband and son discussed when she was not around?

“So have I,” Manny agreed.

“I’m taking the lighter, Ira.” Manny said grabbing at the lighter. Ira pulled back, but too late. Manny caught hold of his wrist.

“Drop the lighter.” Manny looked straight at Ira. Ira dropped his gaze. A second later the lighter clicked on the stone.

“I’m sure Mr. Dooley is really enjoying all this noise.” Vicky moved over to straighten Iris’ hair.

“I could care less about Mr. Dooley.” Manny said loudly as the fuse started to burn. Smoke and a short piercing whistle filled the air as the m-80s shot off the end of the stick. The noisy explosions made Vicky cover her ears. A charred cloud filled the space above the pool.

“We’ve had so many fires Manny,” Vicky said after the stillness returned to the air. “It doesn’t seem safe.”

“Duh, why do you think we shoot them over the pool.” Ira said with obvious irritation.

Vicky had never heard such meanness in Ira’s tone before. Stomach acid rose up from her stomach, burning her esophagus. Hard swallowing prevented her from responding. Iris had moved over between Manny and Ira, who was already inserting the stick into the neck of the bottle.

Vicky stared at the remaining bottle rockets on the flagstone and pictured herself throwing the whole bag in the pool. Instead, she sat down heavily in the chaise lounge and stared up at the empty sky.

One morning when she was about 12 she had woken up to the sound of gunfire in their backyard. She and Jen had run through the kitchen, passing by Jasmine, who was at the sink washing dishes as if gunfire in the quiet suburban track was nothing out of the ordinary. Outside, the Colonel was still holding the shotgun up to his shoulder. The rabbits had been regular visitors to the grass for some time now. Grey fuzzy bunnies with impossibly white fluff-tails. Jen and Vicky had watched them from their window all summer, hopping across the pool deck and romping on the rectangle of grass. The problem was that they liked to scratch at the bark of the Crepe Myrtle trees, and the Colonel didn’t like that. Two rabbits lay motionless on the lawn, white cotton feet and tails spattered with blood.

The Colonel fired the gun three more times, aiming at the sage bushes behind the house. Cottontails sprang in the hair, scattering in all different directions. One leaped high, and then tumbled. A tiny cloud of dust lingered above the grey dirt.

The Colonel responded by firing three more shots.

“Stop!” Vicky screamed, then gagged on the heavy mix of sage and gunpowder in the air.

The Colonel lowered the gun, and looked at her.

Tears dribbled down her cheeks and she sniffled loudly.

The Colonel laughed. “If you were a Nicaraguan instead of a spoiled American, you’d be jumping for joy right now.” He said, reaching for his box of ammo. “We got at least a weeks’ worth of rabbit here.”

Vicky sobbed, covering her eyes. The colonel shook his head, as if in disgust.

“Can I shoot the gun, Daddy?” Jen asked, her eyes wide and dry.

The colonel pointed to the black garbage bag on the patio table.

“You clean up before your sister has a nervous break-down,” he said re-loading the rifle. “Then I’ll teach you how to use the gun.”

Jen nodded fiercely before grabbing the garbage bag off the table.

“Let me get you some dish gloves,” Jasmine offered, rushing back into the kitchen.

Vicky watched her son pull the bright red, white and blue wrapper off the last rocket. Iris had moved back over next to her on the chaise. Vicky removed the rubber bands from her daughter’s hair and combed her fingers through the dark strands. Dividing one side into three parts, she started to braid.

Manny leaned over to light the fuse. His foot tapped the bottle and the glass clanked against the stone.

Her mother had a way of adjusting to the Colonel’s presence like a Midwesterner must come to accept the occasional tornado—an inevitable disruption that could not be avoided. Vicky tugged her daughter’s hair tighter into the braid. Vicky sighed heavily. At least Manny was almost done, almost home, for good.

The fuse sizzled and burned. Snap! Snap! The explosive sputtered and spun into the air. Red, white and blue colored smoke spread out over the pool.

Iris squealed, jumping up and down, clapping her hands, so that Vicky had to let go of her hair. Loose brown curls popped like springs on her head as she jumped.

“Yeah!” Father and son cheered.

“That was the best one yet!” Ira hooted.

A thin ribbon of smoke traced the trajectory before the explosion. Vicky stood, watching the debris flutter like white pedals into the pool.

She looked briefly over at Manny, who offered her a slight smile. Vicky returned the half-smile, but promptly turned and walked inside.

After breakfast, Manny left with Jimmy to shoot a quick round of golf. Vicky had already emptied Manny’s suitcase in the laundry room and, after checking all of his pockets, washed, dried and folded his clothes. She checked his flight and shook the sand out before repacking his clothes. The kids were in the game room. After checking to see that they were playing a simulated sport, and not killing each other in a simulated environment, Vicky showered, exfoliated and moisturized. She was excited to try out her new mineral powder foundation. The

trick was, according to the sales girls, to moisturize effectively first and then apply lightly, being very careful not to get too much powder on the brush. 20 minutes later, Vicky ran a brush through her hair and reached for her final step: the lipstick. The lipstick was one of the products she had not yet successfully replaced. Shannan had signed her up for all kinds of environmental toxin watch groups, and just yesterday she received an internet warning about the possibility of high lead content in the leading brands. Maybe she should just buy a jar of Vaseline when she went to pick up the prescriptions at the pharmacy later that day? No. No. That's petroleum based! The image of a crude oil refinery zoomed into view. Male voiceover: Would you put this on your face? Camera Zooms in on: Black oil dripping like toxic honey from a spoon. Was it an episode of Oprah, or late night infomercial that had alerted her to this fact? Who would ever have guessed that such a clear innocuous looking product came from crude oil?

She stared at the innocent looking pink and orange tube in her hand. She remembered the packaging had said some thing about anti-aging papaya enzymes. How much of this sweet smelling goo had she ingested over the years? Survival these days seemed less like a skill and more like life as a moving target.

After blotting, Vicky forced a smile on her face, despite the sense of gloom that was already invading her. Vicky knew she could no longer put off the dildo discussion. This type of conversation needed to take place in person. She knew it would be a disaster on the phone. Somehow a disastrous phone conversation was worse than an in-person failure because the distance between them seemed to accentuate the drama.

Outside, Manny had loaded his suitcase in the rental car. Iris jumped into his arms after he lowered the hatch, and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

"I sure wish you could talk Mommy in to bringing you to Indonesia." Manny pressed his finger on the end of her nose.

Iris shook her head.

"Please?" Manny pleaded tugging on the frilly hem of her skirt.

Iris giggled, then shook her head again, slowly this time, her eyes looked dark and serious under her long lashes.

"Okay," Manny smiled. "Maybe when you get a little bigger." He looked down at his son, "but you are definitely learning how to surf this summer."

“Alright!” Ira hollered looking up at Vicky defiantly. “Did you hear that! Dad’s going to teach me how to surf. You need to take me to the board shop.”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Great,” she said meeting Manny’s gaze.

“You can’t protect them forever, Vic.” He put the car into gear and glanced in the side mirrors. “It won’t be long before they are going to grow up and see the world.”

“Yeah! I get a surf board!” Ira grabbed his bike up from the pavement and rode in a circle around the driveway.

Manny lowered Iris into Vicky’s arms and opened the car door. Vicky felt the familiar trembler of emotion rumbling through her body.

“I forgot to tell you to call the school.” She blurted. “You can’t leave until you call the school.”

“Why?”

“They called me into the principal’s office.”

“What happened?”

“I punched a boy.” Offered Iris.

Manny laughed and raised his fist like a prizefighter. Iris giggled and clenched her fists tagging his in response.

“This is not funny!” Blasted Vicky. “You think this is funny?” She glared at Manny.

“They think Iris is an endangerment to other children. They could kick us out. She gave Ashton a black eye. His mother threatened to sue for damages, and your response is to laugh! Excellent parenting, Manny.” Vicky’s face felt hot and her heart raced.

“Calm down,” Manny shot her a reproving glance. “Besides with a name like Ashton he probably deserved it.” Manny tapped Iris on the chin with his knuckles. Giggles bubbled up between them.

“That’s great!” Vicky stormed.

Manny let Iris down to the ground, and she ran over to the garage where Ira was dislodging a bike from the rack.

“I’m sure it’s real funny as you are sauntering the beach with your assistant. You can share a laugh together about your soon-to-be-action-hero daughter, but the truth is that I am the one here dealing with reality. This isn’t the movies, Manny—“

Dukey started barking in Mr. Dooley’s front yard followed by Mr. Dooley’s whistle.

“Jesus, Vicky, lower your voice.”

“Oh, sorry,” Vicky glared at him. “I thought you ‘could care less what Mr. Dooley’ thinks.”

Ira attempted wheelies down the driveway.

“You need to call school Now.” Vicky felt a panicky desperation rising in her throat. Dr. Yancey had been expecting the call. Why hadn’t she remembered until now? What was wrong with her? How could she have let this slip through the cracks?

“I don’t think they’ll be there right now given it is Sunday.” Manny’s voice was light. Iris sped across the driveway after her brother on her scooter.

“Well, you could leave a message.”

“I’ll call. Okay?” The leather seat creaked as he sat down in the rental car and pulled the door shut between them.

Vicky tapped on the glass and he rolled down the window. He looked at her with that look that she had seen so many times before. Impatience. Irritation. Like he could hardly wait to get down the driveway. “By the way, I found your dildo,” Vicky felt the words slither out of her mouth like a snake. Smooth and deadly. Certain to cause a fight. “You must have forgotten about it by now. It was covered with dust, but I can go get it for you if you’d like. I’m sure the high quality ones are hard to find in Bali.”

Manny squinted his eyes and his mouth tightened. He looked like a confused child. She couldn’t decide if his expression was rooted in fear over her own mental stability, or if she had made a discovery that was truly frightening.

“Excuse me?”

She hated this phrase. It was the one he used every time she said something that he hoped she would not dare repeat. The phrase meant: You are crazy. Stop talking. You need medication.

“You heard me,” she sounded like Doris Day on a mean streak. ‘The shriek is not an effective tool,’ her therapist’s voice rung through her head.

Vicky swallowed hard and lowered her voice to a course whisper. “Your device. Sex toy. Vibrator.”

Manny’s eyebrows folded together. “I have no idea what you are talking about, but it sounds interesting. I’d like to know more.”

Vicky shrugged. “Maybe your girlfriend left it then. The last time she was here? Or maybe your homosexual lover just stores it in our house, I’ve heard gay men like to be well prepared.”

Manny glanced in the rear view mirror. The kids were circling at the end of the driveway. "Do you think you could tell me exactly what you are talking about? I don't have a dildo or a lover—gay or otherwise. Have you lost your mind?"

"No yet, but it is possible, Manny. Especially if you keep belittling the important issues surrounding our family. You just might push me over the edge." She could almost hear the hiss and rattle behind her words.

"What do you mean?"

"You told Ira he is ready for a job in Special Effects? Encouraging our son, a known pyromaniac, who has already caused an explosion in the garage that he could develop his talents in the industry?" The words slice through the air like a knife. Noisy laughter from the filled the silence that passed between them. "He could have been gravely injured in that fire, Manny? Did you ever think of that?"

"He wasn't even in the garage when the fire started, Vicky," Manny responded, but his tone had shifted and she knew he was listening.

"And encouraging your daughter to hit is something I think you should talk to Dr. Yancey about—"

"I'm sorry, Vicky." Manny's voice dropped, every hint of humor had vanished. "You're right. I was out of line. I'll talk to Iris. I don't want her hitting."

"While you are at it you might clarify to your son that pyrotechnics aren't really enough to land him a position on the Special Affects Team, but that getting good grades in school might help him stay out of prison. Or maybe just remind him that arson is a felony because at this point I think you've convinced him that I am just a crazy old nag and that fire is fun." She glared at him, knowing she should just shut-up, let it rest, let him drive away with a kiss on the cheek and reassurance that everything is okay. But she couldn't. Devil voices. That's how her mother defined them. Sometimes the devil voices would not shut off.

"Do you realize how many fires we have had since you've been gone? Do you even remember that we were evacuated last year? I know it's probably hard for you to keep track of because you were enjoying the surf in Bali, but meanwhile back in reality we live in a fire trap up here, and you have the nerve to tell your son that I am overreacting about FIRE! One mistake up here and we are toast." Vicky knew she should stop and take a breath but the words tumbled out louder and louder. "How dare you laugh about Iris hitting at school! You are so clueless!"

"Lower your voice, Vicky," Manny warned.

The kids had opened the gate and were riding in the cul-de-sac. "What happened to 'I don't care what Mr. Dooley thinks!'" She screamed at him. "Wasn't that what you told me? Well, I don't care who hears either!" Vicky's forehead flushed and her hands clenched. "I'm sick of having you come home and act like I don't know what I am doing!"

Manny reached out and grabbed her hand. "Vicky. Stop." He said firmly. "You are going to scare the kids."

Vicky didn't even see him. The words kept rolling out. "You don't know what it means to be a father, and now that I think of it, you don't know much about being a husband either." Her nostrils flared and her breath came in huffs, but as soon as she said it she felt horrible. She didn't mean the sex, but there was no taking it back now.

Manny's eyes dropped to the steering wheel. She didn't sense that he was angry—she wished he was angry. Anything was better than this practiced patience as if she was something he had learned to endure. He sat quietly in the car, waiting for her to finish, making clear that this volatile departure was nothing new to him, nothing out of the ordinary, and nothing he could not handle.

"I know you have a lot on your mind, Vicky." Manny said after she had quieted. He shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry I'm not giving you what you need."

Vicky's eyes lifted to the sky, and then scanned the yard, the fence, the gate, the kids playing in the street. The gigantic house lurked like a monster behind her. Maybe Shannan was right. Maybe she did just need to get a job, get a life. What the hell was she doing harassing her husband in the driveway about a few innocent mistakes? Wasn't this supposed to be a discussion about the dildo? This was not what she had planned. In fact, she had decided to make a joke of it. It was funny, after all, to find a dildo on top of your refrigerator. Wasn't that funny?

She tuned back into Manny's voice, even though she had heard the diatribe so many times before.

"...You know, I wish more than anything that you and the kids would just fly out, and spend some time so we could be together...these weekend trips are killing me..."

"Is that your best excuse?" She interrupted. Vicky felt a cold pale replace the red heat on her face. "Or is it that there is someone else?" Her voice hardened.

"It's not easy for me either, Vic."

Ira had returned and pulled a pogo stick from the garage. He hopped furiously back up the driveway screaming "Dad. Look at me!" over and over. Iris peddled her bike along next to

him precariously. She had picked up her doll Dee Dee and was attempting to carry her and ride Ira's bike without training wheels. Vicky glanced over knowing it was only a matter of time before one of them would fall. She sighed heavily.

"Wow! Nicely done buddy!" Manny called lifting his hand to wave out the open window.

Maybe she was losing her mind, she thought watching his hand lift and his mouth form the words. She couldn't escape this addictive blend of fear, shame, hatred and remorse. The plan for their final good bye had been to walk out the front door, hold hands in the courtyard, the fountain babbling in the background. They would kiss next to the new Japanese maple, just planted and safely staked a careful distance from the window. Vicky wanted their last few moments together to be like the final phase of a deep-tissue massage. Healing and warm, never wanting it to end, but knowing all along that this was the end. Their time was up.

But the kids were there, bobbing and swerving, pushing and hollering all the way to the car. Desperation had kicked in when he pulled up his keys from the floor mat.

"So what's this about a dildo?" His hands moved from the steering wheel to his lap, and a smile emerged on his face. This quality always amazed her. No matter how much she ranted, he never seemed to lose his capacity to forgive her. This, perhaps, was the entire reason they were still married.

"I found one on top of the refrigerator." She said lowering her eyes.

"It's not yours?" He looked up into her face, the smile persisted.

"Give me a break."

Manny shrugged and looked out through the windshield. They both heard the sound of Mr. Dooley's rake. "It must be Elia's." He said turning the car on.

"Dad!" Ira called.

Manny waved at Ira who was jumping wildly on the pogo.

Vicky was convinced that both children had a sinister agreement not to allow her and Manny more than 10 minutes of conversation. That's how the whole weekend had gone. It didn't really matter. Manny had a plane to catch anyway. "You want me to show it to you? Seeing it might jog your memory."

"Very funny." He laughed, and pressed his head back against the leather headrest.

Her arms crossed tightly across her chest. Inside she felt the familiar irate, out of control lunacy building. The inexplicable reality that the dildo had come from somewhere agitated her. Not knowing the explanation for something so absurd combined with the desperation she always

felt when he left, trilled through her like an electric current. After witnessing so many torturous explosions of emotion during his departure—didn't he understand how hard this was on her? This coming and going was killing her. How could he laugh? There was a part of her that really wanted to punch him in the face. Wanted him to just go ahead and die in a plane crash.

"I know it's your dildo, you fucking bastard." Did she really say that? The Devil existed. He had her tongue. Her mother was right they had entered her head during meditation and had erased all sense of logic, reason, rational from her mind.

She watched as a shadow of uncertainty crossed his eyes. She knew he was trying to figure out how upset she really was. If it was a joke. She used to write sitcoms. Surely, this was a joke, he was thinking.

"What?" He depressed the button on the emergency brake, and then as if on second thought, left it engaged.

They had had tried to have sex that morning, but his iPhone had rung and he took the call. He took the fucking call! The memory left her feeling even more enraged. "I know you are sleeping with your assistant."

Manny scoffed, an open-mouthed "K" sound he made, followed by a smile ringed by disbelief. "You're sure, huh?" He said, finally, after they had stared at each other for a full minute.

Vicky nodded her head.

"And you think the dildo is mine?"

"Is it?"

"Dad!" Ira yelled again. He was attempting to dribble a basketball and pogo, but was experiencing little success at either.

"No." His tone switched to insulted. "Come on, Vic, you know I'm not into that—"

"Not with me. That's for sure. But who knows what you are doing when you are away? You didn't used to surf. Wear flip-flops. Say 'Cool'." The word flaccid popped into her mind but she stopped herself.

"I don't know what you do, Manny," She finished, her eyes suddenly felt too moist and her vocal cords came precariously close to cracking. She hated this part of his coming home. The part where she was angry and vindictive and completely unreasonable. Once she had accosted him about contracting malaria. Another attack had been over his suggestion to put the kids in boarding school. Boarding school! The thought of that argument heightened her rage even now.

Manny cocked his chin. "Come on, honey. You know I would never cheat on you." She could see his right hand releasing from the e-brake. His left hand already on the door handle. In one minute he would be holding her tight, and she knew there was no chance then to fight him. His embrace weakened her will every time.

She took a step back as he opened the car door. He reached out to pull her in his arms just as the kids rounded the bumper. Ira jumped from the pogo stick. Iris headed straight for Vicky. Vicky realized Iris was crying. A trickle of blood dripped from a wound on her knee.

"What happened!" Vicky's voice rose to a level that Vicky would have considered rude before she had children. Now was a common tone utilized around the house whenever she wanted to be heard? Iris grabbed a handful of Vicky's shirt and started yanking. "Up!" she screamed at Vicky "Up!"

Vicky stepped away from Manny, bent and lifted Iris into her arms.

Iris continued to whine and cry. "Dee. Dee." She called out for her doll as if she might come running.

"Vic," Manny's voice was soft despite the noise. "It's not mine. I promise."

"You and your assistant were here together—last fall—she was there and I left to get the kids—"

"Come on," he sounded irritated.

"I want you and the kids to come with me," he said reaching out to stroke Iris' hair. Iris cried loudly in Vicky's arms. It was a wonder they could even hear each other, but the chaos of her cries allowed them to converse privately. "I don't see why you are so stubborn—"

"Don't start," Vicky snapped. The whole idea of pulling the kids out of school and living on location with Manny made her want to scream. Didn't he respect how much work she had put into that damn school, with all of the fundraisers, mandatory parent meetings, not to mention all of the volunteer time she spent in the classes? The art projects and cooking projects and sporting events she had staffed? All he did was write a check twice a year, but she was expected to get them dressed and help them with their homework and get them to school on time every day and BE INVOLVED. EVERY DAY.

She glared at him still holding Iris, who rested her chin on Vicky's shoulder and continued to cry softly. "I'm sure they'll get into Harvard with an academic record based on movie locations."

Manny pressed the palm of his hand against Iris' forehead. He looked back up at Vicky. "There must be a reasonable explanation. It must be Elia's, or the babysitter."

Iris hit Vicky on the shoulder. Her tiny fist clenched and she hit her again, this time with all of her strength. Vicky turned her head, and blanched.

"I want Dee Dee!" Iris bellowed.

"Iris!" Manny said sternly. "Don't hit Mommy."

"Put me down!" Iris kicked her feet, and ran back up the walkway toward where she'd flung Dee Dee to the concrete. Vicky turned and watched her go. They stood there like that for a few minutes while Ira continued to bounce around them on the pogo stick.

"Maybe that new babysitter has some kind of weird fetish." Manny said finally.

"What's a fetish?" Ira asked.

"She's been working for us for more than a year. It was dusty."

"Maybe she got a boyfriend."

"That's disgusting, anyway. Using it in our house? While she is babysitting our kids? No way."

"Maybe Shannan stashed it there."

"What are you guys talking about?" Ira asked.

"Grown up talk." Vicky answered.

"I think you put it there and forgot about it." Manny sat back down in the car and pulled the door shut. "I gotta go, Babe," Manny said softly. He reached out and tussled Ira's hair. "I love you guys. I sure wish you could convince your Mommy to let you come to Indonesia."

Ira shook his head firmly. "I got baseball practice starting next week."

"Remember to choke up on the bat." Ira looked blank, but nodded.

"See you next time." Vicky said stepping away from the car. Iris waved and Manny blew her a kiss before pulling back down the driveway. He honked and Ira raced behind him out the gate and down the street.

Chapter Break

Vicky let her eyes close when the pedicurist began massaging her calves. Chemicals—sweet slightly sterile—filled her nostrils. The vinyl chair supported her head comfortably, she allowed her eyes to close for a few seconds, enjoying the heat of the backrest. The bell on the salon door jangled. Automatically her eyes opened, but after scanning the customer—female, 45, overweight, pink sweater—her eyes landed on the television screen in the corner. Oprah looked at least ten pounds lighter. She was interviewing a family of ‘little people.’ The words, “Little People” appeared in red at the bottom of the screen. Thank goodness for mute, she thought, as her cell phone rang. Her mother’s voice filled the line.

“You have a minute?”

Vicky knew immediately that Jasmine was upset.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Justin Conner died.”

“No.” Vicky felt her stomach drop. Justin Conner was the son of Madge Conner, one of her mother’s longest standing sewing club members.

“The Lord has him.” Jasmine said immediately.

“He was doing so well. They had just received word that he was due home for Christmas.”

“I’m so sorry.” Vicky said, her eyes lifted back to the screen. “Madge must be a mess.”

“Oh, she is,” Jasmine answered her tone lowering. “But the Good Lord will see to it that they will meet again in Heaven some day.” Jasmine’s tone rose exponentially until she practically sung the last line.

“Well, send her my love.” An image of Ira popped up in Vicky’s mind. He would never go to war, she quickly assured herself. He was going to be a director, or an astronaut, but certainly not a soldier.

“At least I don’t have to worry about that,” Vicky said.

“What?”

“Ira going to war.”

Jasmine didn’t respond.

A commercial came on for Purina Dog Chow, and Vicky glanced down at the magazine selection.

“When is the service?”

“They shipped him out on Tuesday.” Jasmine replied. “Gladys is planning at her house this Sunday.”

“Why not at your house?” Vicky smiled, for as long as she could remember her mother’s house had been grand central for all church related activities. And since her mother had no life outside the church—all activities.

The line was silent.

“Mom—“

“Oh, it’s just that Gladys wants to take some of the pressure off me, I guess,” her voice lowered an octave. “She thinks I’ve been under too much pressure lately.” Jasmine clicked her tongue. Vicky knew this was a signal that Jasmine did not agree with Gladys, but good Christians didn’t openly argue over such matters. A good Christian argument took years to play out in innuendo and quiet scriptural wars. Gladys and Jasmine could duel in scripture better than any television evangelicals. If only some one would develop a Christian game show—her mother would be rich. Gladys and Jasmine had been friends since childhood, and this wouldn’t be the first time they disagreed. Gladys had taken “fundamental Christian” about as far right as it could go. Her weekend hobbies included speaking in tongues and protesting at abortion clinics. Unlike Jasmine, Vicky had never quarreled with Gladys—she liked to think that she knew better—but the truth was Gladys had funded her UCLA education and that fact alone trumped any question Vicky might put toward “Aunt Gladys’s” activities.

“Can you come out?” Jasmine asked, her voice rising.

“You know I can’t manage that, Mom. Manny’s gone.” Vicky stared at the tiny metal spatula being jammed into her toenails. “It’s too hard with the kids. Besides what am I supposed to say to them?”

“That Justin has gone to the Lord.”

“Yeah, right, I got that part.” Vicky lifted her eyes to the ceiling tiles. “I mean the part about getting killed in action. You know, the war?”

“They don’t know about the war?”

“Why would I tell them about the war?” Vicky snapped. “You know, if I say one thing about anything, the next thing they do is look it up online. Do you know what they put on You Tube these days? That would be a real good way to traumatize both of them. Then in addition to shuffling them to soccer, dance, science camp and foreign language fiestas-I could take them both to psycho therapy.”

“Just tell them it’s God’s plan and they will understand.”

“I’ll let you try and tell them that, mother.” Vicky paused trying to picture Justin the last time she saw him. At his wedding, kissing his new bride.

“Well, there were two things I called for, really.”

“Uh huh.” A commercial for bathroom cleaner reminded her of Manny’s guess about the dildo. Vicky tried to picture Elia on their bed watching the porn channel on the flat screen, her Rubbermaid container of cleaning supplies on the ground just inside the door, the steady buzz of the vibrator coming from underneath the sheet. Vicky jerked her legs straight, splashing water on the pedicurist.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, struggling to focus on what Jasmine was saying.

“I do his laundry for him...and he has spent a couple of nights here.”

“Okay, so?”

“I just wanted to tell you...just...in case...”

“I stopped caring where Jett sleeps when I was about 19, Mother.” Vicky closed her eyes again.

“I know you don’t have feelings like that for him anymore, sweetie.” Jasmine’s voice was low and smooth. “It’s just that he’s been helping me with this whole Jen crisis and then Justin. A few of the ladies at the sewing club noticed his motorcycle here over night and thought that it was inappropriate, is all, and in case you hear, probably from your sister, I just wanted you to hear it from me first.” Jammed together, the words came out in one syllable.

Vicky took a moment to decipher the sentence, then she tapped at an itch on her forehead. Another itch attacked her nose.

Before Vicky could respond, Jasmine added, “I care very much about Jett,” her mother said. “You know that don’t you, Vicky?”

Vicky yanked the tissues from her bag and blew her nose.

“Vicky?”

Vicky let her head roll back and forth on the headrest. “Yah, I know.” The topic bored Vicky. Jett was like Jesus. He could do no wrong. The pedicurist picked up her foot again, and continued prodding Vicky’s cuticles with a small metal spatula.

“Anyway, I just wanted you to know from me, that’s all.”

“Why didn’t he go home anyway?” Vicky smiled trying to picture her mother fending off the silent opinions of the group. Good Christian women never discussed such controversy

publicly. Everything was done, one on one, passed around the circle like a seriously defective game of broken down telephone wire.

“You know, he’s living in a cave, Vicky. I told you that, remember?”

“What?” Vicky stared at the television again. Oprah was shaking hands with the mother of ‘little people family.’ “I don’t remember you telling me that.”

“Oh, yes, dear. You are just so busy lately. I told you he was trying to get a job at the fire station, remember? That he has been volunteering there—“

“I vaguely remember that, but you never said cave.”

“He is sleeping in the caves on the way to Pyramid Lake. I did tell you, Vicky. I know I told you.”

“Well, anyway. So he is sleeping the caves and you felt sorry for him and invited him to stay over, okay.”

“Yeah, basically. Really, he just needed a place to shower on the days he isn’t scheduled at the station. The cave is a nearly 45 miles from here. Out in the middle of no where. You know he’s trying to make a real good impression, and he doesn’t want to look dirty, or linger around when they don’t need him...”

“Uh. Huh.” Vicky didn’t want to keep thinking about Elia with the dildo, but once the idea had entered her head, it lingered in the room like a mirror that kept catching her eye. Once she had mistakenly watched a segment of *America Undercover* where they rolled a film clip of a man who broke into a private room on a cruise ships, and carefully went through things in the room until he found a video camera. Once he got the camera set up, he filmed himself going into the bathroom. Wiping himself. It was disgusting, and at this point, she should have definitely stopped watching. The man stood up, picked up one of the toothbrushes and proceeded to insert the toothbrush up his anus. When she first heard that story Vicky had run to the nearest garbage can. After retching several times, she turned off the television and vowed never to watch *America Undercover* again. The idea of Elia and the dildo gave her the same sick feeling.

“...He’s such a good person, Vicky. I really think they will give him the job. It’s just a matter of timing, that’s all.”

“Uh. Huh.”

“I’m very worried about Jen. I pray night and day that she will choose the righteous path.”

“Has Jett talked with her yet?” The heated chair was suddenly burning her ass. Vicky shifted her weight. The pedicurist withdrew the paintbrush from her toe, and held the tiny brush in the air.

“Tomorrow is her day off.”

“I hope it does some good.” The chair suddenly began vibration. Vicky punched again. The heat noticeably diminished, but the chair began pounding her in the back causing her stomach flab to jiggle. Vicky paused, evaluating whether or not this was a pleasant sensation.

“Well, you are probably busy, so I’ll let you go.”

“Thanks for calling, Mom, and I’m really sorry about Justin.”

“Thanks, Sweetie. That really means a lot.”

Vicky tossed the cell phone back into her bag and tried to enjoy the repeated punch her lower back.

The image of Elia and the dildo continued to plague Vicky’s thoughts. At home the image of Elia on her bed with the dildo struck her again, and Vicky felt her stomach leap and whirl in reaction. The new Pottery Barn catalog had just arrived and she sat poolside leafing through the bedroom furniture collection waiting for a load of clothes to dry. Oh my God! What if it was Elia’s dildo! Vicky flashed on an incident a couple of years ago where a Spanish porn magazine had mysteriously showed up in Manny’s bureau drawer. He, of course, denied having bought it, but this was nothing unusual. Every time Vicky discovered a pornographic magazine in his possession he blamed someone else, or simply denied knowing anything about it.

“I don’t know.” He would say, as if the thing could possibly have just appeared. Really, how could men think women were so stupid? Vicky was sure that he learned some of his tactics from sitcoms.

But maybe, just maybe, Manny had been telling the truth, and Elia had bought the magazine. Then there was the incident with the You Tube video. Supposedly that had been Ira and Zachary’s doing. They had gotten into the video control room in the basement and some how—she still couldn’t believe they could figure this one out—they’d cut and spliced a segment from the house security tapes and made a You Tube. The video showed Iris and her friend Emily jumping the beds in their Tinkerbell costumes. Vicky would never have known except Iris caught Ira watching the You Tube on the flat screen in the theater room. This event had totally creeped Vicky out—seeing her own daughter on a You Tube? It took her three hours just to calm

down enough to figure out what they had done. What if Elia had shown them? What if Elia was a You Tube techie in her spare time, and only used housekeeping to pay the bills. God knows housekeeping in Beverly Hills was a lucrative profession. Oh my God! Vicky's fingers flew to her mouth.

What about Iris? Iris loved to run through the house naked. She preferred swimming naked. In fact, hadn't it been a reoccurring problem that Elia let Iris swim naked instead of insisting on a bathing suit? Elia gave her baths, and dressed her. What if Iris was acting out in school because she was sexually confused about her exposure to the housekeeper's sexual proclivities? What if she was *recording* the events in the house, embezzling the tapes and selling them to...to—God only knows? Vicky's eyes shot up to the ceiling. Vicky knew there were tiny cameras and speakers hidden all over the house. Manny had insisted on the highest level of security, but what if someone else was watching *them*? Impossible, she reassured herself. Still, she considered getting up to take a Xanax to combat the jittery rise of panic.

Vicky heard the dryer buzzer. "And why the hell won't she do the laundry?" Vicky said out loud setting the magazine down on her lap. "She is the hired help. She is the housekeeper." Vicky still felt the sting from the last time she had asked Elia to put in a load.

"NO laundry!" Elia had practically yelled at Vicky before leaving the room.

"I've had it." Vicky huffed. She stood up abruptly knocking the ladder-backed chair over backwards. The Pottery Barn catalog slipped to the ground.

"I can't take it any more!" Vicky told herself. She lifted her chin and said loudly. "I don't like your stashing mother either! You do a lousy job Elia," she said as if the housekeeper had appeared right in front of her. "I wouldn't even give your name to anyone I cared about. You are a terrible, housekeeper! And your mother is nothing but a nuisance around here! Stashing this and that." Vicky stared at the pool. The pool sweep cruised the dark bottom, the black hose swishing like a snake's tail along the bottom. Maybe the stashing was part of a plan—to keep her guessing about the location of her things. That way she'd never notice when something was *really* gone, or was merely stashed in some bizarre location. She never had found that Grecian figurine. The one with the man and woman clutching each other. It had been over a year now since she'd seen that object. Now that she really considered its whereabouts, Vicky realized that she had assumed the fragile statue had been broken, and she'd already forgiven Elia's mother—who had also proven to be so clumsy she'd knocked over more than one houseplant. Maybe they were taking things!

The stashing, arguments, the snickering conversations behind her back, her refusal to do this and that—what the hell was she doing with such a lousy housekeeper?

“I’m going to fire her,” Vicky muttered. “I need to fire that woman right now.” Vicky repeated, marching over to where the outdoor phone was mounted in the patio. The headset was missing. She quickly decided against the hands free option. The speaker phone function would only increase the likelihood of a miscommunication. That was another problem! Poor communication! How many times had Elia nodded her head as though she understood, and later it became apparent that she’d had no idea what Vicky was asking her to do. How many times had she asked her to change the sheets on the beds, clean out the trash bins, polish the silverware—only to come home to find none of it had been done? Instead of saying she didn’t understand, she just nodded as though she did.

“Why don’t you just tell me when you don’t understand?” Vicky asked out loud. “If you said ‘Yo no comprendo,’ it would save me a lot of trouble!” Vicky looked up at the sky. “I am going to fire her right now.” Vicky said with more gusto this time. She stormed across the patio looking for the cordless phone. She pushed the hand retrieval button, but didn’t hear anything. Elia was due to arrive at 4 p.m. A rising panic filled her. Maybe it was too late to fire her! Maybe she wouldn’t get the message. Vicky could imagine Elia calling her back and saying coarsely, “Sorry, but there is a 24-hour time limit to process requests.”

“God Damn It! Where is the outdoor phone!” She thundered. She could just go inside, but the missing handset was irksome. It needed to be found, and Vicky was not one to procrastinate.

After thirty minutes of searching she found it wrapped in a towel inside the tree house.

“Buenos Dias. Leave a message for Elia.”

“Yes, Elia,” Vicky said clearly into the phone. “I’m sorry to have to leave this message, but I’ve had some problems with your work here for quite some time and I know I should have said something, but, well, I did say a few things, like remember the time you told me that you don’t dust chandeliers? I told you then that I thought that was rude. I really don’t see why I should clean the chandeliers. Nobody is paying me! And your mother needs to learn how to organize if she is going to stash things. You can’t just shove everything in the nearest location. I can’t tell you how many times I have pulled the hand soap dispensers out of the laundry baskets in the bathroom. That’s just really not okay.” Vicky struggled to control the volume of her voice.

“Anyway, I just, you are a fabulous person, my mother loves you, my kids, Manny, but I just, well, I need to get a full time person...a nanny. You see, I’m taking a job, and...” Vicky’s mind was spinning faster now at the realization that she was actually leaving Elia a message, that she was actually firing Elia. She had daydreamed of this moment for so long now, and she was actually doing it, but she didn’t want to be rude. She needed to have a good reason. The words ticked out of her mouth faster than she could even think them. “I—they offered me another job at the studio, and I’ve hired a nanny. She cleans, cooks, does chandeliers, you know, the whole thing and she wants to work full time. In fact, she’s going to be a live-in. We have so much room, you know, that we don’t use. She’s European...um...Spanish, or Portuguese, anyway. She is starting next week. She really needed the work, and I know you are so busy now. You have plenty of clients, probably too many. So thank you Elia. Thank you for all of your hard work. I’ll mail your check, but stop by and visit any time, okay?”

Vicky hung up the phone, walked through the house, out the front door and stood in front of the fountain. Water flowed down the copper spillway, over the edge, and exploded on the circle of black rocks around the base. Vicky touched her fingers to the water. For a minute or two she felt the blissful ease of accomplishment. Then a surge of panic caused her to retract her fingers. What the hell was she going to do now? She had no housekeeper. No one to watch the children after school. Not only was she going to have to clean the chandelier, but the appliances, the floors, the toilets, the tubs, the counters. The laundry! Elia refused to do the sorting and washing, but at least she helped with the folding and putting away.

“Oh my God.” She whispered to the fountain. “What the hell am I going to do?”

How would she get to all of her appointments? The therapist, the trainer, the plastic surgeon? Even a manicure and pedicure would become a problem. She’d become one of those women who wore sandals despite unkempt toes! Vicky rushed back inside and dialed Shannan’s number. The sound of her voice mail made Vicky want to cry. ‘Shannan will know someone,’ she reassured herself waiting for the tone.

“Shannan, It’s Vicky.” She forced in a breath. “I just fired Elia. I’m in deep shit. Please call immediately.”

In the bathroom Vicky took a Xanax. She moved into the hallway and touched an electronic photo of a Niagara Falls on the wall. She scrolled down her bookmarked phone page.

“School List” the wall phone said.

“Natalie Walden.” Vicky responded.

The phone dialed. A minute later Vicky watched the lights signaling Natalie's cell phone ring. Some awful 70s song played across the speaker.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Natalie. It's Vicky Anderson, Iris' mother."

"Hello."

"It was sure nice working with you at the Film Fair bake sale."

"Thank you. It was nice to see you too."

"Listen, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm in a bit of a jam. My housekeeper is moving to Mexico."

"How awful."

"Thanks. I am hoping you wouldn't mind sharing your housekeeper's contact information." Vicky knew this was bold. No one at the school ever brought up housekeeping or childcare info. To divulge one's hired help was to risk losing them to the competition. How could one be sure that the other family wasn't neater, cleaner, didn't have a better frozen food selection?

The line was silent.

"Maybe you know of someone who takes care of children? A nanny who cleans?" Vicky asked again trying not to sound too desperate.

"No. I don't, but thanks for the call." The woman said abruptly before hanging up. Vicky stared at the wall phone. After a minute Niagara Falls faded back into view. The conversation left Vicky feeling slightly ashamed and she went immediately to the laundry room. The light in the laundry room always seemed too bright and the inferior venting allowed the room to overheat easily. Vicky didn't mind the washing; the foamy white swish of warm water and soap, an occasional snap of metal against glass. Clothes went in dirty, and came out clean. For the most part, washing was a simple, gratifying event. She set to work separating the darks from lights, hots from colds. After programming the wash, she looked around the neat display of baskets lined up along the open shelves. Her eyes dropped to the marble countertops. The swirls of stone captured her glance for a minute as she considered the multitude of projects stored in the room. There were magazines to go through. Recipes to test and file. Photos that needed sorting, touching up and organizing. Albums needed to be dated, labeled, and filled.

No. No. She couldn't possibly start something crafty now. Her eyes fell to the basin where her favorite blouse soaked.

Vicky grabbed at the fabric, fumbling for the sleeve. Despite her efforts with a toothbrush and soap, and the lengthy soaking, the wine stain persisted. She emptied, rinsed and refilled the sink with warm water. After measuring one capful of bleach, she lowered the delicate fabric back into the water. Vicky watched the silky blue fabric floating underwater. After a few minutes, she held up the dripping cloth from the washbasin and sighed heavily. No matter what solvent she tried, the stain remained. She stared at the sleeve in frustration knowing she should just throw it away, but she still didn't feel ready to give up. The blouse had been a mainstay in her work wardrobe. Pared with a suit, the blouse had been her favorite. She spread the blouse out to dry on the counter and turned off the light in the laundry room.

Positive Discipline 5 p.m flashed on the electronic wall calendar above her desk in the kitchen.

She'd forgotten about the meeting! Now she had no one to watch the kids. What had she done? Why hadn't Shannan called? Vicky dialed Shannan's cell again, but there was no answer, so she hung up.

"5 O'Clock meeting," Doris chimed once quietly a minute later.

Maybe her Saturday night sitter would like some extra work? Asking a babysitter for anything new was extremely risky, but with summer coming up maybe she needed the money. Vicky pushed speed dial.

"Hi Kim. This is Vicky," Vicky always did her best Peg Brady imitation whenever she talked to Kim. Kim was repeatedly late, but in the highly competitive West Los Angeles babysitting market, the sitter could do no wrong.

"Hey."

"Hey, listen, you've met my regular housekeeper, you know Elia?"

"Yeah."

"Well, she is not feeling well...actually she is sick. Cancer."

"Oh."

Vicky had learned to overlook the deadpan attitude common amongst teens. "Yeah, it's awful. Anyway, I was wondering, I just started this class and it runs two nights a week. And tonight is usually Elia's night and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind watching the kids this afternoon?"

"Just this week?" Kim's voice sounded suspicious. Teenagers also didn't like to get dragged in to too many hours. Their mothers didn't like that, either.

“Sure, yeah. Just this week.”

“Okay.”

“Okay great. Is 2:30 okay?”

“Alright.”

“Thanks so much—“ Click. The line went dead.

After three weeks of regular attendance Vicky still hadn't made any friends at The Positive Discipline meetings. The babysitter was 15 minutes late, so Vicky would miss out on the banter before the meeting, which was somewhat of a relief since there was rarely talk of anything outside of naughty husbands and children. In fact, more often than not Vicky observed that the women were equally as likely to talk about how the techniques in the book worked on their male counterparts. Last time Vicky had tried to engage in the discussion by telling them about a *NY Times* article she had read written by a Marine World animal trainer, who claimed that the same reward based training program worked for husbands. The women were incensed.

“How could she think a cookie is enough to get him to put down the toilet seat?”

“Positive reinforcement,” corrected Vicky. “She said the animals respond better to positive—“

“Like he wouldn't just take the cookie and then piss all over the seat! Those East Coast women don't know what kinda men we got out here.”

“Marine World is in California,” Vicky added feeling distraught.

“Thought you said she was a New Yorker.”

“In the *New York Times*.” Vicky suddenly felt self-conscious about mentioning the newspaper. Newspapers were so “Hollywood Hills.” Oprah would have been a much better source.

Vicky had arrived on the first day of class hoping she might connect with a few of the woman. After all, knowing a few good Christians in Los Angeles might be nice. She was sure they would make for better play date partners than Shannan. It would be really nice to have at least one friend who didn't depend on a daily health regime that included bong hits and beet juice fasts. Really, Shannan was hardly the type of friend she'd imagined for herself. Vicky reached into her bag to check that her cell phone was set to vibrate. No messages.

After the failed Marine World discussion Vicky began to feel that the women seemed especially unfriendly. Yes, she was late, often, and a couple of times she had been late returning

from the break, but really, she always put her best effort towards being nice. She'd even dropped a few lines of scripture around to see if anyone would take the bait.

No one did. Vicky parked next to a white Dodge van with the small black letters CPS printed on the doors that most of the women used to carpool from West Covina and Baldwin Park.

As she walked toward the stone building she thought about how ironic it was that the only reason she went to church these days was to learn how to manipulate and out-smart her own children. Then again she laughed to herself, maybe that was always the point. How many nightmares had she woken up from inspired by the hell and eternal damnation sermon?

Vicky pulled open the door labeled with a Bible Study placard and walked quietly across the stained blue carpet to where the women sat in metal chairs. Vicky pulled out a chair to join the circle. A few women glanced her way. Nobody smiled. The woman speaking was perched on the edge of her seat, tears brimming her eyes. A crooked picture of Jesus on the cross was the only decoration in the room.

"I had only been gone a couple of hours!" She wailed. Vicky noticed she was wearing a navy blue pullover cotton sweatshirt. There was a corduroy teddy bear wearing plaid overalls on the front. The woman's pudgy hands were clasped in her lap. The skin on her index finger swelled over a thin gold wedding band.

The other women in the circle nodded their heads in understanding.

"But I remembered what ya'll said last week," she nodded towards the 'coach.' "In fact, I could hear Angela's voice in my head as I walked in the door. Both the babies were screaming with dirty diapers. Something had spilled on the floor. There were piles of clothes and toys all around the room as if the boys had just pulled everything down off their shelves and into the living room."

"Trying to get his attention, probably." One of the women said. Others nodded and murmured in agreement.

"What was your husband doing?" Angelica asked. Her voice was always calm, monotone. There was a positive discipline inflection behind everything she said.

"He was watching football."

The woman clucked and shook their heads.

“I wanted to scream at him! I just cleaned the house. I straightened everything up before he got home. I was at the store for less than three hours. I wanted to start throwing things. I think there was a little part of me right then that wanted him dead.”

Vicky watched the other women nodding their heads. She tried to picture Manny lying on the couch watching football. Piles of toys strewn around the house. This was not hard for her to imagine, it happened every time he was home during football, or soccer, or basketball season. She *expected* a mess when she arrived home. That’s why Elia was always scheduled on the days Manny was in town. Vicky looked around the room again. Didn’t these women have housekeepers? An uncomfortable feeling rose in her stomach at this thought. They didn’t have housekeepers, and neither did she.

The woman with the Teddy Bear sweatshirt was actively crying now, and the woman sitting next to her, also wearing a pullover sweatshirt but with nothing sewn onto the front, put her arm around the woman’s heaving shoulders.

“I just walked right past them all and locked myself in the bathroom.” Tears and snot slimed the woman’s face. She chuffed heavily, trying to control the sobs enough to finish the story.

Vicky hoped desperately that she was almost done. She was uncomfortable with the tearful, loud, messy display. She looked around at the other women’s faces. No one seemed uncomfortable. Surely, this kind of blathering was not encouraged. This was “positive” discipline for Christ’s sakes! Not group therapy. Vicky reached in her purse and fished around for a piece of gum. A woman shot her a piercing look as she pulled off the wrapper. Vicky pressed her lips into a polite smile after she shoved the stick in her mouth.

Angelica was praising the Teddy Bear woman’s efforts. “Taking a few moments to yourself is very helpful when faced by a difficult, or challenging situation.”

“I think I might a just popped him on the head with the broomstick if I’d a come home to that, honey,” said one woman, who was not connected to the carpoolers and always carried a very large leather briefcase in to the meeting. Papers and pamphlets pushed out the top of the bag. No one was sure the ages of her children. In fact, she’d never even mentioned whether or not she had children, or a husband for that matter.

“Margaret.” Angelica warned. “We are trying to get away from ‘hurting’ and on to ‘helping’ our families. I am proud of Kathy for sharing this story and really encouraged by her ability to take some time for herself.”

“How about you Vicky?” Angelica said causing Vicky’s stomach to lurch. “What would you do if you walked in to that kind of mess? How would you react?”

Vicky felt panicky every time Angelica called on her. Angelica seemed to have a sixth sense about calling on Vicky whenever she hadn’t read the assigned chapter. Last week she’d tried to sit down and read from the book five times, but not once had she gotten past the first paragraph. In fact since that first day, Vicky could hardly get interested enough to open the book.

“I think Margaret’s idea of locking herself in the bathroom was a good one. I often feel like doing that—” Vicky started. She stared at the unfriendly faces around the circle. Vicky swallowed the sugary mass of gum without thinking, and instantly pictured the wad sitting undigested in her stomach for the next twenty years. The shock of her mistake caused her to speak more freely than she had intended, “I just don’t see how that helps Margaret with the mess in the living room.”

The room was silent. No one moved or breathed. “If Margaret’s husband is so messy, I think the real answer is for Margaret to hire a housekeeper,” Vicky blurted to fill the silence.

There was some uncomfortable fidgeting around the circle until Angelica spoke up again. “You have a housekeeper, Vicky?” she asked softly as if there was a delicacy to the question like they were talking about death or dismemberment.

Vicky was suddenly struck by why they didn’t like her. She was the only one who pulled into the church parking lot driving a \$75,000 hybrid SUV. From the looks of it, her purse probably cost more than most of the women paid for their entire wardrobe. Her hair stylist probably made more than all of their husbands. They didn’t know that inside she was just like them. That she grew up in a track home with a mom who clipped coupons and bought her school clothes at Mervyns. There was no real difference between her and these women except that the guy who got her pregnant turned out to be a brilliant filmmaker. How could she have predicted such a thing? She wanted them to think she was one of them. She really was, after all, just trying to survive. To do right by her kids. To keep her marriage alive. To just stay afloat.

“No” Vicky stated proudly. “I don’t have a housekeeper.” There was a noticeable shifting around the room, and one of the women leaned over to whisper to one another. “My husband is gone a lot and, well, I am fortunate to be a stay-at-home mom.” She started again determined to switch them all back on to her side, although as she looked around at the collection of faces, she could already feel the impossibility of this task. “It’s just that if your man is messy, then maybe he needs to get you some help.”

Angelica stared, wide-eyed at Vicky and nodded her head slowly. “Yes, we know, what you mean Vicky...it’s just that,” her soft pink lips formed and then straightened again as if searching for the right words. “It’s just that I don’t think everyone in this room can afford,” Angelica held her fingers up in the air and rubbed her fingers on her thumb, “to hire a housekeeper.” Her fingers lowered, but not all the way to her lap, “you know, not everyone has those kinds of choices.” Her hands opened wide appealing to the women in the room. They nodded as if on cue.

“I don’t mean some fancy service.” Vicky pushed a smile onto her face. “I know a woman who cleans for \$10 an hour. She’s great—

“An illegal.” The woman sitting next to Vicky muttered.

Vicky stopped speaking and looked over at her. She couldn’t remember her name, but she did find annoying the woman’s habit of wearing the same matching pink tracksuit to every meeting. Vicky responded quietly, genuinely surprised by the suggestion, “I don’t know. I never asked her about that—“

“We don’t got no money for no housekeeper,” Margaret said, wiping her doughy nose with a Kleenex that someone had handed to her.

“Must be nice, though,” said the woman sitting on the other side of Vicky. Vicky glanced over. The woman had a kind face and her smile looked sincere.

“I...not for me...she doesn’t clean for me...My friend hires her....?” Vicky felt weak. There were sharp pains in her stomach. She had forgotten to eat again.

“We got credit card bills that come before any cleaning services.”

Vicky nodded and looked down at her hands. What the hell was wrong with her? She had no job. A ‘smart’ house. A hard working husband. A knack for organization and here she was. Her son was a pyromaniac and her daughter was beating up on other kids at school. She could hardly get her kids to come to the table for dinner at night, hardly succeed in getting them to school on time, hardly get them to complete their homework, hardly get them to watch less than 4 hours of electronics per day. She didn’t even have the excuse of poverty, or a lazy husband. Vicky suddenly agreed with all of the women in the room. She was pathetic.

The two women on either side of Vicky began sharing stories of ‘husband’ messes they had discovered in their own homes. After Angelica listened to a few more stories she opened her book and turned to the next chapter “Building Positive Self-Images in Children.”

Vicky's phone vibrated in her pocket. Without thinking she removed it from her pocket, suddenly aware of her own shame over the presence of the sleek Iphone in the circle. "The babysitter," she murmured, grabbing her bag, and excusing herself from the circle, she walked towards the back of the room.

"Hey!" her only friend's voice suddenly sounded like a horn in the fog calling her to safety. "I'm at this great party. You should come. There is someone here you know. You remember Mark? That hot camera guy from The Show."

"Did you get my message?" Music blared in the background. Vicky raised her voice. "About Elia?"

"Yeah. Yeah. So, you remember Mark?"

"No."

"You know, Mark Anton."

"Uh, oh, yeah. I guess." Vicky stepped further down the hall just in case a member of the clergy occupied one of the offices in the narrow corridor. "So you think you know someone?"

"He says he's got a gig for you. All lined up. The producer will be here later. You've got to come, Vicky. Mark and I think it is time for you to get out of that house."

"You and Mark, huh?" A flash of emotion caused her face to warm. "How do you know Mark?"

"Everyone knows Mark." Shannan laughed. Vicky waited while Shannan had a brief conversation with someone else. Vicky could come up with so many reasons why she should not be Shannan's friend. It wasn't just the pot. Or the fact that her husband was a spamming penis enlargement specialist. She had sold out her own clients and her children were maniacs. Zachary's older brother played Grand Theft Auto and dyed his hair pink. Despite these imperfections, Vicky couldn't deny the flush of relief she felt listening to her voice.

"Anyway." Shannan's voice was loud, speaking over the party noise, and Vicky held the phone away from her ear. She stepped back out into the main church and headed towards the front doors. Blue and gold stained glass windows glowed brightly in the otherwise darkened room.

"I'm not interested in hearing one of your lame excuses. Manny's gone for at least six more weeks. You are going crazy locked up in that annoying house of yours, it's time—"

"Can you find me a full time housekeeper!" Vicky suddenly demanded into the phone.

Shannan was silent for a minute. The thump of music filled the void. “Yeah. Sure.” She finally answered. “No problem. I’ve got a few people in mind.”

“Great.” Relief rushed through Vicky’s body leaving her feel warm and shaky.

“So can you think about what I am saying to you know?”

Vicky’s mind was blank. She reached into her purse and wrapped her fingers around the gun. She had bought more bullets at a sporting good store during a shopping trip for new cleats, and she later that day she stood in her backyard while the kids were in school overcome with the strange desire to shoot. Instead she just held the gun out and aimed silently.

“Did you hear me about the writing gig? At Studio 12?”

“I don’t know about that,” Vicky turned and walked down the darkened hall. Her mind swirled around the possibility of what Shannan was saying. The usual anxiety that attached to ideas that included reliving any aspect of her old life was surprisingly gone.

“What are you doing that is more important?” Shannan demanded.

Vicky looked across the empty pews in the church at Jesus hanging on the cross. Stained glass windows lined either side of the room, but it was too dark to see the images. “I’m just leaving a meeting.”

“So what’s your excuse?”

Why was she leaving the meeting? The idea of going back into the room was unbearable. “Alright. What is the address?” She pushed open the double-doors of the church and felt the hint of moisture in the cool night air. The ocean was only eleven blocks away from the church and she felt like running down the street, stripping off her clothes and diving in.

“You’ll come?” Shannan’s voice cracked in disbelief.

“Yeah. I will.” There was a smile on her face as she realized that she was going to go. She was really ready to get the hell out of this church and go to a party with other people who had housekeepers. They might not have children, but at least they had housekeepers. Except for Mark. He had children and a housekeeper. And so did Shannan. Suddenly, Vicky felt more excited than she had since....she thought for a minute....since she and Manny watched the last episode of the Sopranos together. Was that really the last time she’d felt excited? Yes, yes it was.

Chapter Break

It was a typical Hollywood cocktail party. Everyone was fashionable, well-mannered, thin and beautiful. The finger food consummately chosen to appease the wide variety of tastes in Hollywood. Vegans, raw food fanatics, and the proud, stubborn meat eaters who preferred that nothing green take away from the already palatable flesh of birds, fish and mammals. Vicky chose an object that looked surprisingly like an eyeball from the silver tray. As she nibbled, she recognized the flavor of egg at the same time that the realization struck her that she and Manny had not attended a Hollywood party since his first blockbuster. Iris was born that same year. Vicky had been so young when she worked as a writer. Just graduated from film school, she hadn't known enough people then to get invited to many parties. But now her popularity didn't even require witty conversation. All she needed to be was "Manny's wife" and everyone in the room, everyone at the party, was in awe of her. She dabbed the cocktail napkin along her fingers and scanned the room for another tray. She had forgotten dinner, and the vodka was already making her feel a bit unstable on her Choo's.

This time she reached for a stuffed mushroom, but changed her mind before her fingers touched down. What if they had garlic? Her stomach was so sensitive these days. Bacon wrapped filet passed by just behind, but that wouldn't do either. Too much grease was also hard on her digestion.

"Do you have any vegetarian options?" Vicky asked and the girl nodded to the crudités set out on a table across the room. "Perfect. Thanks," Vicky nodded making her way over.

When the economy stalled right after Ira was born, Vicky felt nothing but relief. Surely, the slow down would affect the film business, but Manny's special blend of violence, camp humor and the consistency of his sex scenes—the leary benevolence of his leading man merged with a variety of sex hungry American women—seemed to be riding a worldwide wave of unstoppable popularity. No-name actors played terrorists toting high-powered machine guns, and the 'good guys' were hired straight from the television casting calls, combined with third world set locations that kept the costs of production relatively low. It didn't matter that the films were straight to video. Most people didn't want to fork over \$40 to sit in the theater, or maybe didn't have time, or couldn't agree on which movie, and with the average house holding an average of 3.2 television sets, who needed movie theaters anyway? Everyone in The Hills owned a home theater and with the ease of Netflix, B movie production set new records.

Manny's first film became one of the most requested at the local Blockbuster. Copies of his next two films filled an entire wall. War movies, Manny's war movies in particular, seemed to provide an outlet to the unspoken tide of indifference in the aftermath of the flag waving entree' into the new Millenium. Echoing the distinct low that followed the patriotic high of those first couple of years, the movie placed ex-patriots in exotic locations where they tended to blow things up and find time for sex under palapas on the beach. Manny's films provided an effective placebo to the dismal quagmire of fighting that plagued the economy and made the nightly news a nearly unwatchable repeat of botched missions accompanied by morbid tally of dollar signs and slaughter. Manny's depiction of destruction on the grand scale—armored helicopters, exploding tanks, and sometimes whole towns detonating simultaneously—a world where wars were predictable, inexpensive and won by heroes—made people feel good.

Several people had smiled and nodded at her by the time she reached the platter of vegetables. Everyone at the party knew Manny Anderson, it seemed. Several strangers approached her just after she had stuck a carrot in her mouth. "We just wanted to let you know how much we admire your husband's work," one woman said. Vicky struggled desperately to chew while smiling without exposing her teeth.

One of the men started in about set design on one of Manny's films, and Vicky realized there was no hurry to get through the carrot. He was a gaffer, and had all kinds of obscure observations that she could only agree with because she had nothing brilliant to add to his dissertation. Still, it was pleasant that he thought she might care about what he was saying. As if by being Manny's wife, she too shared the same odd, artsy perspective on movies that all of these people had—instead of the very shallow perspective—nothing more than actors filling the screen that provided her the escape she so enjoyed.

After an hour or two of cocktails and conversation, Vicky felt like she had been transported onto another plane of existence. One where no one yelled at her and told her "No!" One where knowledge of history, politics, film, art, music and sports made conversation interesting—fascinating even. The sprawling modern mansion opened up to the glittering skyline and people slipped in and out the glass doors enjoying the pleasant warmth of the evening breeze. Shannan had long ago disappeared inside one of the bedrooms with a group of people, and Vicky felt vaguely ready to go. Knowing she needed to say good-bye, Vicky wandered up the curved staircase hoping to run into Shannan upstairs. The hallways were empty and all the doors were shut expect for the one at the end of the hall. She entered the darkened bedroom, drawn by the

warm breeze blowing the curtains up from the open doors on the balcony. Gold lights lined the streets in the suburbs and white lights signaled downtown Santa Monica. The haze of vodka settled in on her like a warm blanket. She felt comfortable in her own skin, happy, and she reflected on her life from a distance that made everything seem as distant as a foreign film. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at her watch, surprised that it was only 8 p.m. Hopefully, the babysitter was at least directing the kids towards a bath.

She looked around the well-furnished room and recognized the Pottery Barn sofa set, but the bed and linens looked imported, French, possibly from The Maid's Quarters. Although depending on the designer, they may have been special ordered. The Turkish lamps were definitely imported. There was that new store at the mall—possibly from there. She'd loved the colored glass chandeliers they had in the window last week. The idea of what had become Vicky's private Saturday night ritual made her smile. The babysitter arrived at 5 o'clock and by 6 she was mounting the escalator to the third floor of the Beverly Center. She played the trailer of herself wandering through Bloomingdale's, taking time to chat politely with the sales girls, often making purchases just to please them. They all knew her on a first name basis. In a room upstairs she had a stockpile of unopened bags and boxes. She swore to herself she would return the merchandise, but secretly feared she would never complete the transaction. Returning things made her feel like a fake. Only a crazy person would buy things that she didn't need and then return them. What was the point in that? A gilt framed mirror hung on the far wall and Vicky moved in front, studying her reflection in the glass. Was she still pretty? Sexy? She reached over to where she left her purse on the bed and removed the pistol. She ruffled up her hair and held the pistol up to her lips. Then she leaned back and pointed the gun at the mirror.

Shannan called her name from the hall.

"I'm in here!" Vicky answered, shoving the gun back into her purse.

A minute later Shannan poked her head through the door. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

"I was just taking a little break from the noise." Vicky stared down at where her shoes had slipped from her feet onto the wool shag. "Is that Reggae mix all they play now?"

"You are such a prude."

"I just don't know how to dance to it. I feel so...so white."

"You should take my Slam Dance class at the gym. Tuesday's 5:30." Shannan flipped on the lights. "Is there a bathroom in here? You need to put on some lipstick and brush you hair."

Vicky struggled to straighten the straps of her sandals. “My feet are swollen,” she muttered.

Shannan marched across the room to the door in the corner. Inside the bathroom she turned on more lights. “Come in here!” she called.

“Why do I need more lipstick? I have lipstick on.”

“You need a high-gloss. Here use this,” she handed Vicky a squeezable tube.

Vicky hesitated wanting to tell Shannan that she intended to go. “No, thanks.” Vicky looked away quickly and started digging in her bag. “Do I really need lipstick—I was just planning on—”

“The producer is here.” Shannan interrupted. “Mark wants you to meet him.” Shannan glared at the black tube Vicky pulled from her bag. “That’s matte. You need gloss.” She demanded.

“I...I don’t like to share cosmetics.” Vicky said quickly.

“I’m not sick.”

“Bacteria thrives in—”

“Is that Laura Mercier?” Shannan said snatching the tube from Vicky’s hand. “Do you know how high that scored on the cosmetics database?”

Vicky blanched. “I think it was only a 6.”

“Only a 6! You have got to be kidding me. You are eating this! This is toxic!” She threw the tube in the wastebasket. “You are willing to eat toxic chemicals. Poison! Let me tell you a little bacteria never hurt anyone.”

“Actually bacteria can—”

Shannan glared at her.

Vicky reached for the tube and applied the gloss to her lips. “Um. That’s nice.” She said after rubbing her lips together.

“Much better.” Shannan smiled taking a brush out of her purse. “Now lose the hair clip.”

“What?”

“You heard me. This is serious business. You told Elia you got a job, right?”

Vicky nodded looking at her hair in the mirror. She liked the barrette. She liked her hair pulled away from her face. She looked...sophisticated.

“You lied to Elia. That is a sin. You need to make this right. Besides you subconsciously knew that the best thing for you to do—for you and the kids— is to get back into what you are

good at doing. You have a talent Vicky. You were a writer on one of the most successful sitcoms in the industry—“

“It only lasted four seasons!” Vicky protested. She hated when Shannan pulled the Christian guilt trip on her. Why she would even think that tact would work on her was odd, since going to church once a year on Christmas Eve did not a Christian make.

“Four seasons is like a miracle! Four seasons qualifies as one of the top televisions series of the decade.” Shannan unclipped and pulled the barrette from Vicky’s hair. She handed Vicky the brush and a tube of gel in a generic container.

“What is this?” Vicky brushed her hair without looking in the mirror.

“Egyptian secret oil. It makes your hair shiny and smooth. Just like a 20 year old.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Mail order.”

“You have no idea what this is...it could be...it could be anything.”

“It’s turtle oil.”

“Aren’t they endangered?”

“Better them than us.” Shannan squirted a few drops in her palm and rubbed her hands over Vicky’s hair. The pressure on her head felt good and Vicky closed her eyes.

“Okay. You are ready.” Shannan dropped her tools back into her bag and pulled out a small glass vial. She dipped her finger in the liquid and dabbed some along her collarbone.

“That smells good.”

“Primrose.” She held the vial out to Vicky who dabbed a little on her wrists.

“So are you ready to get hired?”

Vicky stared in the mirror. Her skin was still smooth. She examined her hair for any new appearances of gray.

“Vicky?” Shannan asked grabbing her arm.

“Oh. I don’t know about the job. I know I lied, but I can just pray for forgiveness.” Vicky regretted ever having told Shannan that she grew up Baptist, and that she still said her prayers every night.

“What if you run into Elia and she asks about the new job? You know she will.”

“I’ll just make up something.”

“Lie again? How many lies does The Good Lord excuse?”

“Come on. Stop with the bible thumping, will you? Haven’t you figured out by now that has no effect on me.”

“You know you will see her around town,” Shannan continued. “You know she is going to hate you for not giving her notice. For leaving a message instead of talking to her in person, but if you did actually get a job, she would understand. You could say how busy you were trying to make everything work. You could maybe even ask her back in a few years. You might need to, you know.” Shannan squinted her eyes in warning. “You know how hard it is to find someone you trust. How long did Elia work in your home—more than 5 years, was it 10?”

Vicky reached for Shannan’s glass of wine. “Can I have a sip of this?”

Shannan shrugged. “You can do this, Vicky.”

“I should probably talk to Manny before I—“

“Cut the housewife bullshit. When was the last time he checked in with you before accepting another gig? Give me a break!”

Vicky gulped down a mouthful of wine. “I just don’t think I’m ready, yet.” Vicky whispered.

Shannan was already flinging her bag over her shoulder. She made no outward acknowledgement that she heard. “Finish the glass.” She ordered leading Vicky out of the bedroom and back into the hallway.

As they ventured down the stairs Shannan tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked back at Vicky. “You’re not getting any younger. In another year or two no one in this town will want to give you a chance. It’s now or never, you do realize that don’t you, now or never.”

Vicky felt thankful for the handrail, the stairs seemed much steeper from this perspective. Shannan turned and trotted the rest of the way down.

The volume had been turned up to a level that made conversation inside nearly impossible. Vicky surveyed the room. It looked like a busload of models had just emptied out. Willowy blondes with toned, rail thin arms stood like statues around the room flanked by men wearing Prada eyewear and crisp button down shirts. At first glance no one appeared to be talking, but on closer inspection Vicky observed the subtle movement of conversation around the room. Rather than yell to be heard above the music, the custom was to lean and speak directly into the ear of the person on either side. The movement was then repeated, and at some point the direction reversed. In the corner by the front windows a group of people were dancing. Vicky stood alone by the stairs as Shannan ordered another drink at the bar.

Vicky's eyes caught on the oversized artwork that filled the 12-foot walls and she drifted around the room studying the colorful images. How lovely! She thought gazing at the pink and orange swirls. At first glance she had thought it was an exotic flower. But there were dark brown streaks underneath the vibrant colors. Maybe an underwater scene?

Mark Anton suddenly appeared next to her. "Chemical spills." Mark spoke close to her ear.

"What?" Startled, she turned to look at him.

"Chemicals," he repeated, pointing to the beautiful colors. "Clorox and Tide mixed with motor oil enlarged 1200 times."

"How do you know that?" Vicky was intrigued.

"Jimmy and I go way back."

"Is he the artist?"

"This is Jimmy's house."

"Oh."

"We surf together."

"Not another surfer." Vicky said her voice dropping in disappointment.

"You don't like surfing? Or is it the surfers who annoy you?" Mark was standing next to her now. His teeth were straight and white.

"Oh, it's just that Manny's new passion is surfing..."

"You'd like more of his passion, I take it."

"I guess that's it." Their shoulders were nearly touching. Vicky was aware of her heart beating. "So what makes you say these are chemicals—they look like flowers."

"I was with Jimmy when he bought them. They were in a gallery in Laguna Beach, but the artist is from Santa Cruz. That one over there is Jet Fuel and Dawn with a dash of salt." He lifted his glass and gestured toward a large green and blue swirl on the far wall.

Vicky turned and looked at where a spotlight lit up a giant blue green explosion on the far wall.

"They're great, aren't they?"

"Beautiful."

Vicky's head felt like a down pillow. Stuffed full of nothing. Not a clever word or thought. Not even a response emerged from the fluff. When she first arrived at the party she had surprised herself with her ability to produce witty sound bites, properly balanced, well-timed. Idle

banter had always been difficult for her, but the years of being away had given her a storehouse of energy for this type of chat. Or perhaps it was the regular dose of Ellen DeGeneres she had received over the years. They moved over to the next picture hanging on the wall. Several minutes passed with only the thump and drone of music between them.

“Isn’t it strange that such a toxic blend can look so beautiful?” Vicky said at the same time Mark said, “Shannan says you’re ready to start working again.” They laughed. Vicky looked down at her shoes.

“You do want to work again, don’t ya?” He nudged her with his shoulder. His accent killed her. How could anyone resist such a soft combination of sounds?

“I don’t want to get you into anything you don’t want. I know you are a mum. And that’s a big job—“

The noise had forced her to study his lips to decipher his words. His lips looked equally soft and appealing. “You think so?” Vicky couldn’t help but smile. Her eyes lifted for a second to meet his gaze, then she looked away. She was afraid he would see how scared she was as a result of her present occupation. Motherhood had erased her public identity. She was no longer the daughter of an army Colonel, no longer the high-achieving UCLA film school student, no longer the driven scriptwriter. She was a housewife and a mother, and neither one of those jobs seemed to mean anything to anyone but herself. Her eyes remained locked on the gooey bloom of chemicals on the glass. She was afraid if she looked at him again that he would know she suddenly felt scared and bewildered like a lost child.

“I know so.” Mark nodded. “I was so happy to see you, at the school, I mean.”

“Yeah. Funny how we’ve both been there and never crossed paths before.”

“At first, I felt really odd, seeing you.” Mark said. “I mean like I had forgotten how well we had known each other.”

“Uh huh.”

“I really liked you Vicky.”

Vicky swallowed. The music faded in between mixes.

“We had some good times.”

Vicky nodded. “It was fun,” she said. “I mean, working together. I had fun.”

“Just the working part?”

He bumped her with his shoulder.

“All of it,” she said, letting out a burst of air that sounded like a laugh.

His fingers pressed her chin until she lifted her eyes. "You really have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

Her stomach dropped.

"Do you?" He demanded, smiling her.

"I see myself in the mirror," Vicky pressed back against his fingers, and turned her eyes back toward the painting. "and I'm not usually too horrified."

"And talented?" His hand dropped to her elbow. He stepped closer, and Vicky could feel a charge run along her spine. What exactly was she supposed to do with this feeling? His touch had triggered a warm rush of blood to her extremities. A bloom of desire heated her lower torso.

"You held that show together, Vic. You think no one remembers that? I was there. I remember, and so do they." His body cupped against hers, his mouth bumped softly against her earlobe "Jack wants you back at the studio," he whispered. "He's very interested." Vicky could feel the papery dry surface of his lips as his tongue swept across leaving the wet embrace of saliva on the surface.

"Jack Bellow?" Vicky's knees felt weak. She moved over next to the photograph and braced herself against the wall. Her Sheer Elegance thigh high nylons suddenly felt scratchy against her skin. Why had she worn them? She hated nylons. She could hardly wait to go into the bathroom and take them off. "I remember the name, but who is he again? What has he done?" Vicky's mind felt foggy. Nothing was clear. Not the room. Not the painting. Not the memory of a name that she knew she should recall.

"He did a few pilots that didn't pan out, but he was in on the backside of *CSI Miami* and some other detective show. He started way back in the dark ages on *Bay Watch*."

"Does he even have a contract?" Mark had always been a straight talker. She had always admired that about him. Never afraid to dig deep in the Hollywood gossip, and remembered all the details.

"He sold to NBC. But got crushed by the writer's strike. The network got backlogged and the budgets dried up, but he's got it all put back together now. Seems like a sure thing. He's looking for one more writer." Mark took a slug of beer. His lips looked slippery when he lowered the bottle.

Vicky looked away, out at the room full of people. Thankfully someone had turned down the music, but the group by the window still danced. She lifted her heel to readjust the strap on her sandal.

She lowered her foot. Determined to end the conversation before she fell onto the floor. Weak knees were not what she was here for—Christ, was she so desperate? One touch from Mark and she was ready to melt. How could Manny leave her for so long? The thought sparked a low burn of anger.

Vicky turned back to Mark. “Why are you trying to get me a job?” His eyes were that terrible bright blue—deep blue—like blue jays and alpine lakes. Muddy flecks plumbed the depths around his pupil.

“We’re friends, Vic.” He put his thumb on her shoulder. “You remember? We were mates. Weren’t we?”

Vicky nodded slowly. The time between then and now seemed so long, but she could still recall their casual friendship, easy. Fun. Lunch. Beers after work. The long days at the set.

“Besides,” he started and then looked away back at the painting. “You looked a little...”

“What?”

“At the kids’ school the other day. I dunno.”

“What?” She demanded.

He laughed. “You looked like you needed a little spark. Like maybe you had life in the bag and you...well...like you might be needing a little something more...challenging.”

“You decided all of that about me? In a two minute conversation?”

Mark nodded. “I’m a camera guy. It’s my job to flush out what’s going on inside from the outside.”

Her own laughter welling up was startling.

“Was I wrong?” He bumped her softly with his shoulder.

The laughter bubbled out, and Vicky felt relaxed by its release. “I don’t know. I have a lot of responsibilities with the kids, and Manny being away so much.”

“Yeah. He’s doing great. That’s awesome.” Mark nodded solemnly. “I always knew that bloke had something special about him. He seemed to always know there was something big coming his way.”

“Really? I never thought that.” Vicky smiled, thinking back. “I thought he was always going to be the nerdy guy a Polo shirt and glasses, and I was fine with that.”

Mark glanced over his shoulder. Boisterous laughter erupted from the group on the deck. “So, you ready to meet Jack?”

Chemicals blurred and faded in front of her as Vicky closed her eyes. The music pulsed. Vicky nodded.

“Come on, then.” Mark turned and Vicky glided back through the living room towards the back deck.

Chapter Break

“Jack Bellow.” A man with a tight t-shirt and shiny shoes, immediately stepped over to her and held out his hand.

“Victory Anderson.” Vicky noticed Mark had receded to a group gathered along the rail.

“I’ve been looking up your specs. You’ve done some great writing.”

“Thanks.” Vicky’s legs felt cool in the night air. She had tucked the scratchy tights deep inside her bag, and the air against her legs was liberating.

“Can I get you another drink?” Jack nodded at a petite woman standing at his side.

“Jessica get Victory a drink.”

“What would you like?” Jessica smiled. Her hair was up in a bun and she wore rimless glasses. She had a spark in her eye like every small town homecoming queen.

“A Cosmo. Thanks.”

“Cosmopolitan? How retro!” Jessica wrote something down on her palm pilot before turning briskly towards the bar.

“What is the show called?”

“Dirty Sexy Money.” Answered the man standing next to Jack. “Better than Sex in the City. Three high-powered female friends as they weather the ups and downs of lives lived at the top of their game. We’re in negotiation for Prime Time right now.

Two women in the circle smiled and whispered back and forth to each other.

“Sounds intriguing,” Vicky smiled at the two women wondering if they were the other writers.

“We’ve got a great cast. No one has made it big yet, but they are all up-n-comers.”

Jessica returned and handed Vicky her drink.

“Pulled a couple of the gals off fear factor. Another one from Nashville Star. Really strong talent.”

“Check out the trailer online. I want you to come to our next Hotel Bel-Air meeting. You could meet with some of the other crewmembers and writers, you know, see if you fit.

Vicky looked around the expectant faces. “I wasn’t really looking to take on anything new right now,” she said hesitantly.

“This isn’t just your regular television job, Vicky. We are like a big family here, aren’t we guys?” He nodded to the circle of people, who looked around uncomfortably.

Jack waved his fingers at a slightly built man with curly hair and glasses. “Frank, and Conner,” he pointed to a stylish looking man with a shaved head and goatee, “are the lead writers.” Conner nodded stiffly at Vicky. “That’s Frank’s boyfriend, Stephen.”

Stephen draped his arm over Frank’s shoulders.

“We let him tag along to keep Frank in line.”

“Steven is in charge of donuts.” Some of the people in the group smiled, others looked like they stopped listening to Jack hours ago.

“Actually, I’m the Production Coordinator.” Steven said loudly. “I work as the liaison between the studio and the writers.”

A couple people in the circle looked at Stephen.

“Whatever that means,” Jack interjected. “And you’ve already met Mark, director of photography AKA camera guy.”

“We’ll take good care of you,” Jack continued shaking the ice in his glass. “Manny Anderson’s wife deserves nothing but the best. Flexible schedule, you know whatever you need. I’m just the idea man. Getting the pilot of the ground was my job. I keep the money guys in line, and make sure the director’s not slacking off, but it’s my writers that make the show. You’ll see it’s a real collaboration.”

“How many writers are there?”

“You’re looking at them.”

“Martin,” Stephen reminded Jack.

“Oh, of course, where would we be without Martin?”

“Martin Glass?”

“You know Martin?” Jack looked at Vicky with surprise.

“We both graduated from UCLA. I worked with Martin on Slut Wars in 01.” Vicky felt strangely unstable on her feet. Her heels suddenly seemed to be swaying slightly.

“Great!” Jack smiled widely. “See you’re already part of the family.” He placed his arm across her shoulders and Vicky stumbled slightly as he pulled her sideways into him. The Cosmo sloshed onto her shoe. Vicky noticed Jack’s hair was thinning and slicked back with shiny grease like a used car salesman.

“We’ll pull in a few more newbies on contracts,” He tugged a cigarette out of his interior pocket and offered one to Vicky.

“No thanks,” Vicky shook her head.

“You know, we follow the rules around here.” He reached into his front pocket and pulled out a black and gold business card with Trident Media printed across the middle. Jack Preston, President in small letters in the left hand corner. “Even the golden one.”

Vicky took the card.

“Make new friends.” Jack said, looking over his glass at Conner as he lifted it to his lips. “But, as the say, the gold is in the old.”

Conner stiffened and shot a cold glance at Jack.

“The show sounds interesting.” Vicky felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. “I’m sure you will do well but—”

“Thatta girl.” Jack’s arm tightened across Vicky’s shoulders. She struggled to center the floor beneath her heels. “Jessica will set you up with a few cues and you can write up some sample scripts. We’ll mull it all over, but I’m, like, in a time crunch.” He took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled to the side. The cloud of smoke lingered like fog, blocking the stars. “It’s now or never with this baby. We got to crank out 15 shows by October 1.”

“What’s your full name?” Jessica stepped up with her Iphone and began flipping screens until she settled on one. “Address?”

“Friends Forever was a hit show,” Jack continued. “You’ve got some tough competition out there, but you give me a good sample, really convince me that you think you’ve got what it takes, and you’re in. And don’t worry about the female thing, we are planning on pulling in a some real strong freelancers, you know from the guild. We’re taking care of that end of things, don’t worry.”

“I’ll send this out to you right away,” Jessica nodded at Vicky and tapped a few more times on the IPhone before heading back across the room.

Several details that occurred during the next four hours stood out in Vicky's mind the following day: The incessant thrum and thump of techno mix music, snippets of conversation: Brad Pitt's obsession with Cock fighting...Paris Hilton's secret pregnancy...Cranberries reduce cellulite. She remembered how Shannan had insisted Vicky join the Dirty, Sexy, Money crew for an after hours party at Club Noir: "You act like an 80 year old" and "I will tell your children that you get Botox injections." During the limo ride to the club, Vicky vaguely remembered a champagne cork flying out the moon roof. She was sure she must have dozed off because the next thing she remembered was dancing in the VIP room of the club. Red couches surrounded the room and a light machine rolled film clips of colored bubbles along the wall. All the awkwardness of dance had evaporated from her body and Vicky moved to the techno hip-hop like an MTV extra. Or at least that's how she remembered dancing as the memories played through her mind the next morning. The lights in her bedroom already set to the rosy glow of Early Tropical Morning. Chirping birds, crashing waves and the gentle rattle of palm fronds played across the speakers.

Vicky sat straight up in bed, her head throbbing, her tongue felt like a dried kitchen sponge. "No!" she uttered, her hands flying up to her mouth as the final vivid scene of the night played across her mind. Was it a dream? She thought in desperation as the scene visualized with a clarity that only real life can bring. She and Mark—it was Mark, wasn't it? Desperately, she scrolled up to his face, seeing again her fingers tangled in his ebony hair. Feeling his rough shaven cheeks scratch at her skin as they kissed wildly in the dimly lit room. Was it a bathroom? Yes. Shannan's. Guest house. Oh my God. Back pressed against the glass shower door, skirt hiked up around her waist, one foot propped up on the vanity, breasts exposed to the colored light seeping in through the stained glass window. A bird of paradise, she recalled, casting a purple and red glow. Mark's hot mouth on hers. Erection like a dagger against her abdomen. His fingers deftly rubbing her panties until she was so wet her knees wobbled. Faltering with his zipper. He helped. She removed his erection and fearlessly guided him inside her. Had she lost her mind? How had she escaped the Christian Coalition? Where did she find the courage? Where were her morals? Urged on by an unholy mission, she had listened only to her vagina. Her vagina wanted sex with Mark. He pumped once, twice, three times. A hard slide into home. She was coming. Glory Hallelujah! She moved faster with him, her body clutching him like a demon.

“Don’t stop.” Her ragged whisper, a breathe of desperation born deep in her throat, then the melting rush, hot flower bloom, burst, shattered, soaking and shaking her down to the soles of her feet, his arms the only support keeping her from falling to the floor.

Vicky jumped from her bed and ran into the bathroom. Sheer panic replaced the groggy ache of head and stomach. She stared at herself in the mirror, questioning the reality of the vision. Oh my God. Oh my God. Repeated in her mind. I had an affair. I had sex with Mark Anton, she told herself. Her head throbbed. Everything felt dry. Her eyes burned. She reached mechanically for knob on the medicine cabinet, debated briefly over Xanax, but tapped two Vicoden into her hand and swallowed them down with a palm full of water. Oh my God. Oh my God. The scene played on through her mind, sultry, dark and mysterious like literary erotica only the climax was hers not some poorly drawn character on the page. *Her* fingers pressed into the curving muscles of his back, slick with sweat, *her* body convulsed, released, *her* hands slid down underneath his shirt, and then, afterward, as if remembering where they belonged, retracted, traveled to her own damp skin. Her body no longer an entity operated by the cerebral cortex of her brain. Instinct had taken over. Eyes fluttered open, focused. Fingers pushed bra straps back up onto her shoulders. Knees bent, kneeled, hands reached, groped, located, her panties, wrapped around the leg of the claw foot tub.

Straightening her skirt, she had smiled up at him, and they laughed at the sudden awkwardness of the cramped space. *She* was the adulteress, the sinner, the whore— the cheat. All of this was very clear now. As if the orgasm had evaporated the fog illuminating this one portion of the night. Mark turned and washed his face in the sink. Spanish guitar playing in the living room could be heard through the bathroom wall. Laughter too. Shannan and the Dirty, Sexy, Money crew swilled wine and watched You Tube comedy clips on the widescreen. The smell of marijuana and cigarettes drifted up from underneath the door.

“That was bloody good.” Mark said smoothing his long hair back with his damp hands. “After all these years.” He shook his head as if in self-congratulation and smiled, checking his teeth in the mirror.

Vicky wished he had pulled her back into her arms at that moment and the whole scene faded to romantic music only to reappear three years later...Mark, Vicky and all four kids splashing in the surf of Byron Bay. Instead Mark threw some water in his mouth rinsed and spit with a loud hacking sound into the sink. Vicky moved next to him and reapplied her lipstick.

“Dirty, Sexy, You *are* so money.” Mark said, slapping her on the ass.

“No. Don’t.” She jumped, smearing the color onto her chin.

“Yes. Done.” He laughed.

Vicky covered her eyes, let her face fall into her hands.

“Don’t get all emotional on me, Vic. A little poke in the bush isn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“Oh God.” Vicky whispered. She moved over and sat on the toilet. “I’ll have to tell Manny.”

His blue eyes snapped to attention. “Are you bloody nuts?”

“What do you mean?” She wiped a piece of toilet paper across the lipstick mark on her chin.

“You can’t tell Manny. You can’t tell anyone.” He insisted. “My wife will kill me. She’ll take both kids back to her parents in Boston. She’s been threatening for years. This is just the sort of thing she’s been waiting for. This kind of royal fuck up. My whole life will be over.”

Vicky looked up in surprise. He sounded genuinely panicked. Scared. “Really?” Vicky felt the jangle of nerves wrap around her heart. Could she lie to Manny? First Elia and now Manny. She remembered Shannan’s question, was that just yesterday? How many lies would God excuse? The ambiguity of God presided over her life except when things went wrong. As if, as a safety measure, in times of crisis, certainty in Christ must be considered, just in case hell existed.

“I can’t just not tell him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Vicky. Of course, you are not going to tell him. You are a grown woman. What good would it do to anyone to explain the last ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes?”

“Yup. We started at 3:14 and we were both seeing fireworks by 3:24.” Mark began buttoning his shirt.

“You timed it?”

“Sure, I didn’t want you to be gone too long. We don’t want anyone to get suspicious out there.” He turned his blue eyes onto hers. “You can’t trust anyone. You know that, right? Not Shannan. Not your mother. No one.”

The pressure of tears clouded Vicky’s eyes. She blinked rapidly determined not to let him see.

“Don’t be scared,” Mark patted her on the wrist. “It’s going to be alright. You can do it. Pull yourself together and get back out there. I’m gonna say I had a phone call. International. These guys all know what phone where I am.”

Vicky stood up and straightened her skirt. "What country does she live in?" She turned and took a few steps back towards the door still trying to process what had happened.

"My Mom calls me from Australia twice week." Mark explained, grabbing her softly on the elbow. Vicky turned.

"I don't have a lover. Didn't have a lover." He looked into her eyes. "Never have had one. Until now."

She didn't believe him, but couldn't think of anything appropriate to say.

"Here," He reached into the front pocket of his jeans. "Take one of these."

Vicky looked at the tiny plastic bag with four white pills inside. "What is it?"

"Valium."

"In fact, you can have them all. Take one whenever you feel like confessing. There is no reason to worry, Vic." His fingers pushed his hair back from his face. "Just remember: Sex is good. Say a few prayers and take a Valium, do what ever you need to do, but always remember: Sex is good. "

"That's not what my mother told me." Vicky said, slipping a pill into her mouth, but she couldn't hold back a smile. "Sex is good," she repeated out loud.

"There you go," Mark pecked her on the cheek. "Now get along back out there and if they ask you what took so long, act like you threw up or something."

Sex is good, she told herself now looking in her own bathroom mirror. Sex is good. Her body felt warm and tingly when she remembered her orgasm. Never had she climaxed with anyone but Manny, and sex with Manny didn't necessarily guarantee an orgasm. When she dated in college, she had always been too nervous and uptight about her body to have sex. The few times she had, the Christian Coalition chorusing in her head had ruined any prospect of getting off. Never had she laughed after sex. Never had she had sex standing up in a bathroom. Never had she lied to Manny. But suddenly, desperately, she knew that Mark was right. Manny should never find out. No one could know. And as for Mark Anton. Never again. She could chalk one time up as a mistake. An example of why she should not go to parties with Shannan, dance in clubs and drink cocktails after midnight. She could cope with this as a one time mistake. She had learned her lesson. That's what she always told the kids: Mistakes are opportunities to learn. Vicky moved over to the linen closet in the corner of the bathroom. Opening the door, she examined shelf full of vitamin supplements. "There must be some sort of hormonal imbalance," she muttered, scanning the labels briefly before popping a collection of probiotics and b-vitamins

into her mouth. She'd take Evening Primrose and the Chinese herbs later, after her stomach had settled.

At five minutes after nine in the morning the phone rang. It was Jessica. "I'm just calling to confirm you received my e-mail with the date and time of our meeting tomorrow at the Bel-Air."

"I didn't," Vicky stuttered slightly. "I mean I haven't checked. I'm sure it's there...it's just that—"

"I'm sorry to call so early. Jack insists that I wake people up so that there is no phone tag. He likes me to get people in person."

"Uh huh." Vicky's head felt heavy. She had agreed to let both children watch their wall screens as long as they went to the early morning church service. Vicky was surprised when neither one of them complained about going to church. They left before the babysitter woke up, so Vicky left a note and a \$100 bill on the counter.

"You know, Jessica, I don't think I'm going to take the job even if Jack decides to give it to me."

"What?" Jessica's tone was flat.

"I'm just not ready yet." Vicky poked her head into Ira's room. He was playing his new X-Box 6000.

"But you agreed to the meeting. Its all set up!" Jessica was upset, her voice had raised at least two octaves. "Jack isn't going to like this." She paused, hesitated.

Vicky could hear traffic in the background. "I was a little tipsy last night, Jessica, and I'm sorry if I committed to—"

"Look, I don't know what happened between you and Mark Anton last night, but don't let it get to you. He's the biggest womanizer in the industry, and you just have to learn to ignore him, okay. He's really nice once he gets the message that you aren't going to...um..well...that you are married."

Jessica stopped half way down the hall. "Nothing happened!" She practically shrieked into the phone. "Did someone tell you something happened?"

"Listen, I don't like to spread rumors. I'm just saying Jack is expecting you and—"

"Just tell Jack to go fuck himself, okay! That ought to do it. Just give him that message at the meeting today alright!" Vicky slammed the phone down, her heart stomped in her chest.

At 10: 15 the phone rang again. Vicky was sitting on the chaise with a cold towel over her head and a bag of ice on her ankle, which had started to swell, probably from dancing all night in her spike heels. “Mark Anton,” the phone buzzed. Vicky knew there was some way to turn off the voice ring, but after a few tries, she gave up. “Mark Anton.” There was no way she was picking up. “Mark Anton.” What if one of the kids picked up? She sat upright knocking the bag of ice to the ground. No, they wouldn’t. They never grabbed the phone when it wasn’t for them. Mark An—

Ira ran outside holding the receiver in his hand. “Mom! It’s some dude!” Vicky stared at her son in disbelief as he handed her the phone. He never brought her the phone.

“Who’s Mark Anton?”

“A photographer.”

“Cool. Is he going to photograph us?”

“No. He’s does film. Television.”

Ira stood staring at her after he handed her the phone.

“You and your sister can have an ice-cream bar, okay.”

“What kind?”

Vicky pushed the mute button on the phone. “Whatever is in the freezer.”

“What did you buy?”

“Just go look, will you?” She put the phone to her ear and took a deep breath.

Ira stared at her. “Will you get one for your sister, please.”

“Sure.” He shrugged.

“Now.” She glared menacingly at him. He didn’t move. “It’s about a job, okay.

Someone wants Mommy to go back to work, but I’m going to tell them No. Alright?”

Ira shrugged again, but turned and ran back into the house.

“Hey.”

“Hello. How’s the head this morning, love?”

“I’ve had worse headaches. I can’t recall when, but I’m sure there have been a few.”

“Good to hear. I just wanted to call to tell you that you did a great acting job last night. I don’t think anyone at the party suspected a thing. Our little secret is safe.”

“That’s not what Jessica said.”

“Who?”

“Jack’s assistant.”

“What did that little twot say? She has no business saying a word about anything anyway she wasn’t even at Shannan’s house.”

“She said I wasn’t to let you get to me that you are, ‘the biggest womanizer in the industry.’

“That’s a crock of shit. She’s just mad because I wouldn’t fuck her, that’s all. I can’t believe she’s going around blabbing like that. Actually, I can believe it. I believe anything in this town.”

The line was silent. Vicky felt sick. She pushed the towel back up on her forehead and leaned back against the chaise. “Anyway, I told her I wasn’t taking the job, and she seemed a bit annoyed with me, after last night I—“

“No wonder she’s spilling a bunch of spoiled milk! You can’t just pull out without meeting with Jack! You got him all excited, Vicky. You can’t be that big of a tease. He’ll get bitter, you don’t want that.”

“I don’t care.”

“You will care.”

Vicky groaned. “All I wanted to do was go out. See some people. Have a good time!”

“Well, you got all that ol’ girl, and you don’t have to take the job, now. Don’t worry. But you said you’d at least go to the meeting. You got to at least throw him that bone. He’s got a rookie crew of writers on his hands, Vic. I think he was looking at you to kind of pull the whole motley crew together. Besides with Manny’s name connected to the enterprise he’s sure to get the production—”

“I don’t care.”

“Why not.”

“I...I don’t know. I just. Well, look at the mess I got myself last night. I’m just...I’m out of practice. This whole thing is so—I can’t do it.”

“Calm down. You *can* do it. The whole thing is nuts, but I don’t think you fared too badly last night. You go a prime time television offer and a first rate orgas—“

“Stop!” Vicky yelled. Clearing her throat madly into the phone. “How did you get this number, anyway? You can’t call me on the house phone.”

“Shannan didn’t mention that it would be a problem. You tapped, or something?” Mark chuckled.

“Who knows? This whole house is wired, has a mind of its own. It’s like living with some kind of extraterrestrial, I never know what its capable of. Besides the kids—“

“Sorry.”

Vicky pressed the towel harder against her forehead. “My head feels like a tsunami.”

“Listen, I’m sorry if you are feeling bad about...things, Vic. I woke up feeling great. I haven’t had that much fun in a long, long time. I just called to thank you, really.”

Vicky’s eyes opened. The pool sweep spit water across the flagstone. “Thank you, Mark. But I really can’t ever let what happened happen again. Never.”

“Okay,” he sounded like a disappointed child. Vicky had to fight back the urge to consol him.

“So, good luck with everything, alright?”

“Take care, Vic.”

Vicky stood up nervously and went inside the house. The kids were playing in their rooms, for once, and she decided to start the new cleaning regiment right away. She headed straight for the kitchen. Underneath the cabinet she found the Stainless Steel cleaner. How many times had Elia scolded her for running out? She picked up the white and blue bottle and shook it. Half full. Using a soft cloth Vicky set to work wiping down the Sub-Zero refrigerator. Wiping the gleaming silver, for the first time, she considered the size of the thing. Each door was the equivalent of the refrigerator she had growing up. Jasmine still had that refrigerator. Off-white with that bumpy finish. She never once remembered cleaning her mother’s refrigerator. Then again, Jasmine wasn’t much of a cleaner.

After finishing the stainless steel, Vicky moved onto the light fixtures. A quick dust with the feather duster should suffice. Elia was good at keeping the cobwebs and dust down on the regular lighting—she would give her that—but the chandelier had caused many arguments between them.

Vicky remembered walking into the kitchen after one of their chandelier fights and overhearing Elia say into her cell phone in English:

“...started talking BIG to me and I was like NO way.”

As soon as Vicky had entered the room, Elia had switched immediately back to Spanish, finished gathering the dishcloths, and headed off to the laundry room. Their fights had been infrequent in the beginning, but had gathered steam over the year. Most of the conflict originated in Elia's brash refusal to take on particular chores around the house, but lately Vicky had even endured loud scolding from Elia like when she didn't soak the pots, or once because the children's toys had been left in the tub. There was an unspoken agreement that Vicky would keep things picked up and when she didn't, Elia let her know about it. What a relief, she thought now climbing down from the chair where she had balanced, cleaning the row of lights with the feather duster. There was a lot to do, but as she looked around the kitchen she felt a sense of accomplishment that she hadn't felt in a long time. Light streamed in from the leaded glass window making the stainless steel shine. Vicky admired how the spotless surfaces gleamed. With the fruit bowls and all of the chaos of meals hidden away in the perfectly polished cupboards, the kitchen could have been the cover story for a kitchen design magazine.

Toting her feather duster, furniture polish and an old washcloth, Vicky left the kitchen and moved into the entry way where she gathered up the shoes and books and coats from the hooks and cubbies and re-distributed them in their designated locations the house. After wiping down the shelves and vacuuming, Vicky returned with a mop and a bucket of warm water. Her hair felt hot on her neck, so she twisted it up with a rubber band and rinsed her face in the entry bathroom. The house had five bathrooms and glancing at the sinks and toilet, Vicky decided to save the bathrooms for a separate day. With all of this exercise, she wouldn't need to go to the gym five days a week, she thought with relief. Her routine there had become so boring lately that she could hardly get through it.

At 5 p.m., Vicky checked her appearance in the mirror and was shocked to see how disheveled she looked. Smudges of mascara underneath both eyes and hair coiling out in many different directions around her head made her look like the homeless woman that Vicky often passed on the road at the base of the canyon. She grabbed the hand towel from the ring and attempted to wipe the mascara from below her eye. Black smudges moved from her face to the cream colored towel. Damn! Vicky muttered throwing the towel out in the hall. What did it matter, anyway? It's not like anyone was coming over, she reassured herself, and turning away from the mirror she flicked off the lights. Vicky had moved systematically through the dining room, dusting, vacuuming, wiping up stains and spills along the way, through the family room,

living room, game room, guest rooms, and had found herself in the sewing room at the end of the hall when the phone rang.

“Hey, babe,” Manny’s voice sounded clear across the speakers like he was in the next room.

“Hi, honey.” Vicky scanned the room with her hands on her hips. The room was stacked high in many places with merchandise. Housewares, children’s cloths and make-up held the minority role in the room. The majority of items Vicky had purchased for herself. Clothing, shoes, hand bags, make-up. What must Elia have thought about this mess?

“How’s it going?”

“Fine. Are you still in Singapore?”

“At the airport. There is mechanical delay, but they are saying only 30 minutes.”

Vicky’s stomach lurched. Why did he have to tell her things like that? Why? What was the point? He knew how terrified flying made her, didn’t he? Hadn’t he been listening all of these years?

“What is the problem?”

“Just a door part, that’s all. It’s nothing—so what are the kids doing?”

“Playing.”

“And you?”

“Cleaning.”

“Cleaning?” He sounded bored, distracted, confused.

“I’ve got to go through the sewing room. It’s getting out of hand.”

“Yeah. Sure seems like a lot of stuff in there.” They had never once discussed the state of the sewing room and Vicky did not want to start now.

“What would you say if I told you I was considering going back to work?” She surprised even herself with the candor in her tone. She sounded...happy.

“I think that would be great!” Manny responded immediately.

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“It’s not like we need the money.”

“Not now, but we will.” His tone had switched from husband like to businesslike. “You know, Vicky, I’m riding this wave hard now because its not going to last long. In a couple of

years, I could find myself dead in the water. That's how the business works, you know that. It would be good for you to build up some relations in town, you know keep our name out there."

"Uh huh."

"Anyway, I think it would be great for you to do some volunteer work, or maybe some coaching at the school. You are in such good shape it seem like you could put all the energy you spend at the gym to work."

Vicky let her eyes close while her stomach lurched low in her abdomen. "I'm not talking about volunteer work, Manny, I'm talking about getting back into a gig in Studio City. Scriptwriting, you know the thing I used to do before we had the kids?" Had he forgotten that her success had launched her higher than him in those first three years outside of school, that she had been the star in the family? Vicky picked up a sleek grey shopping bag and looking inside.

"Oh, I see." Manny paused. Vicky could hear an announcement coming from the stewardess. "I didn't think you liked working in Hollywood so much, remember? Isn't that what you decided?"

"No," She snapped, but inside a shower of doubt fell. Had she decided that? When? What had she said. "It's what I am trained to do. Do you think I spent four years at UCLA to find a husband."

Manny laughed. "You certainly scored there!"

"Uh huh." Vicky's voice was humorless. How had she slipped so far on his value scale? She pulled the blouse out of the grey bag and held it across her chest. Salmon colored and strapless. Not really what she had in mind now, but maybe in the fall.

"Anyway, you have my support, Vicky. I want you to be happy." Manny said. Another announcement came across the line. "I've got to hang up. I guess they've repaired the door. We're taking off."

Vicky felt her nerves jangle. "Okay, call me when you get there."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

After hanging up Vicky moved over to the smaller bags covering the counter around the sewing machine. Only the very top of the machine was visible poking up like the tip of an iceberg about the clutter of black, white and red bags. The switch to all natural make-up alone had cost nearly \$2000 in product testing. After several mistaken purchases it became evident that keeping the 4 syllable names of all the chemicals straight in the ingredient list was impossible to do in the

store. Even at home deciphering the code took hours. She picked up a bottle of foundation and examined the ingredients. The list spanned the entire back of the bottle. Vicky set the bottle back into the bag. Wasn't there one product with ingredients she understood?

"Time to make dinner," Doris reminded in her gentle tone, which was the only tone Vicky didn't mind. If only she used that tone all the time.

"Thanks," Vicky said back to the wall. She had never quite figured out where they had hidden the speakers in the house. There must be something in the ceiling or walls. Her eyes lifted to the high wooden ceiling. How could they have hidden the speakers in the wood? she thought. Shrugging, she stood up and walked slowly down the hall towards the kitchen, a list of options for dinner already ticking through her head.

Chapter Break

On Thursday, Shannan and arrived in the middle of Vicky's floor cleaning frenzy. Her hair was piled up on her head haphazardly, on she was on her hands and knees in the entryway scrubbing the grout with a toothbrush.

"Aren't you the busy bee?" Shannan said after Ira, who had been playing in the garage, let them in through the gate.

"Oh, hi!" Vicky looked up, startled. Long ago she had vowed to never leave the house without a full make-up job and well-thought out clothing choices. Seeing Shannan without make-up, hair standing on end, was not something Vicky took lightly—especially in light of her latest discrepancy after the cocktail party. A dark blush covered her face. For a second she considered dashing to her room to change, but there was so much cleaning left to do today! She didn't have time for this interruption.

"I forgot you were coming over." Vicky said immediately.

"Did we plan something?" Shannan answered wryly. "I think the boys just decided today after school."

"Oh." Vicky wiped her hands on her sweats before smoothing them through her hair.

"So how are you?"

"Great. You?" Vicky was 99 percent sure that Shannan had no clue about her and Mark, but there was that nagging 1 percent that had haunted every conversation since that night.

"Oh. Fine." Shannan said pulling a pack of gum from her purse and offering a stick to Vicky.

Vicky shook her head. "I had three cavities filled last week and I've sworn off white sugar."

"Poor thing," Shannan said in a tone that surprised Vicky. Since when had Shannan showed any signs of compassion?

"Oh by the way, I haven't forgotten about the housekeeper business," Shannan said. "I'm still waiting for a few people to get back with me. I'm sure we'll get something lined up by next week."

"It's fine." Vicky dropped the toothbrush in the scrub bucket. "I've kind of adjusted now."

She picked up the bucket and led Shannan outside. The kids had migrated to the tree house and Vicky didn't like to leave them unsupervised when Zachary was around. There was no telling what kind of trouble that kid could get in to. "I think I've got a handle on it now anyway," Vicky said placing the bucket in the hall closet on their way outside.

"So that's your plan, huh?" Shannan sat down in one of the lounge chairs next to the pull and set the wrapper on the table. "Just going to stay at home and clean the house."

Vicky immediately clenched her teeth. Shannan was alluding to the job offer. She had been irate when Vicky told her what she had done. "I'm just not ready to leave the kids," Vicky explained again.

Shannan nodded. "Uh. Huh. You've got some life here. I can understand why you wouldn't want to fuck it all up."

"That's not fair." Vicky looked over at the tree house. The kids were invisible inside.

"No, I mean it," Shannan turned and touched her arm compassionately. "I understand. I don't want you to...I don't know why I thought you getting a job was so important. It just seemed...it seemed like you just needed a little...I don't know...a push in the right direction." Shannan retracted her hand, but her eyes remained on Vicky.

Vicky looked away. Ira and Zachary appeared in the doorway. Ira climbed down the rope ladder.

"Are you happy, Vicky? That's all I was trying to help you with..." Shannan crossed her legs. "I thought you'd be ready to get back, you know, back to what you are so good at, that's all."

Vicky remembered looking through the gilt gates at the studio. Watching the water flow over the marble fountain. How badly she'd wanted back inside.

"I could use a housekeeper," Vicky said finally. Her voice was soft and barely audible above the kids yelling inside the tree house.

"I promise. I've got a line on a few choices for you." Shannan sat up straight and began digging in her purse again. "Next week at the latest. You'll have a list of at least three to choose from."

Vicky looked at Shannan. Shannan's concern alarmed Vicky. Shannan had never shown concern before. Amusement and surprise, maybe even hints of disdain, but never concern. Vicky watched as Shannan pulled her gigantic DKNY bag onto her lap.

"That's nice." Vicky said reaching out to touch the mottled leather. "Is that new?"

"This? Naa. I've had it a couple months at least."

She continued to dig until she extracted a sandwich-sized zip lock bag. "I brought these to help you make it through." She held out the baggy, and Vicky peered at the collection of cigarettes inside.

"I don't smoke—"

"It's marijuana, you idiot!"

"Put that down!" Vicky hissed grabbing the bag from Shannan's hand and lowering it to her side. Her eyes scanned the tree house to see who was watching. All three kids had disappeared again, but their voices could be heard erupting in a loud clamor from inside.

"You are so paranoid!" Shannan rested her head back on the lounge chair and laughed out loud.

Vicky looked down at the bag next to her, and fingered the joints inside the bag. There were six, neatly rolled stacked side by side.

"I'm telling you, this stuff is great for cleaning." Shannan said. "You smoke half a joint and you won't even remember to feel sorry for yourself. I'd recommend a whole joint on the days you need to tackle all of these bathrooms. How many bathrooms do you have in there like 6?"

"Eight." Vicky answered glumly. She had to admit that more than once she had felt sorry for herself. All the time spent cleaning left plenty of time to ponder all the fun Manny must be having in Indonesia with his assistant. She'd re-created a regular Shangri-La for him and Ashley. She had thought about it so much, she had already digested his request for a divorce, planned out how they would divide their belongings and activities to help fill the next decade she'd spend alone in the house. She'd take up knitting and photography to fill the time and work through her

grief. Eventually, when she felt ready to meet another man she sign up for some golf lessons. The golf course seemed like a hotbed of opportunity. Maybe Shannan would go with her?

“Do you have any interest in golf?” Vicky asked.

Shannan looked at her strangely. “Not at the moment. Ask me again when I’m 60. Anyway, I need to get going. You don’t mind watching them for a few hours, do you? And you can take them to Tae Kwon Do?”

Vicky nodded and then shook her head.

Shannan laughed. “I’ll take them next week, okay?”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Come on, you are going there anyway.”

“I’m just kidding. It’s no problem. Just tell Zachary he needs to get his uniform on without arguing with me.”

“No problem.”

“Thanks.”

“You’d enjoy it a lot more if you smoked one of those.”

Vicky glared. “You want me to take care of your child, stoned?”

“You can handle this stuff, I told you. It’s mellow.”

“Uh huh. No thanks.”

Vicky shoved the baggy back in Shannan’s purse, but Shannan snatched it out and threw it at Vicky and sprinted across the patio.

As soon as Shannan left, Vicky stashed the baggy in her room and got back to sorting the laundry. The kids had moved into the living room to play drag racing on the Wii. She pushed the load of whites into the washing machine and carefully measured out the bleach, then she carried three loads stacked in the plastic laundry basket into the family room. Flicking on the television, Vicky found an Ellen rerun. The one about hairless dogs again! Not one of her favorites, but better than most of the other options on during the middle of the day. She sat cross-legged on the floor to fold. Stacks of neatly folded, sorted items soon surrounded her.

The good news about taking over for Elia was that she no longer hassled herself about getting to the gym everyday. In fact, outside of picking up the kids and shuttling them too and from dance, soccer and Tai Kwon Do she rarely left the house. Housework proved to be more than enough exercise. After 12 trips up and down the stairs, scrubbing, sweeping, vacuuming and washing—she was physically exhausted.

As she walked down the hall she poked her head into where she could hear Ira and Zachary playing together in Ira's room.

"Music down." She spoke into the room.

"That was, "Gone Daddy Gone" by the Violent Femmes." The house responded before turning down the music.

The boys had both hands in the reptile tank. Rather than interrupt, Vicky walked over to the wall monitor and programmed "Tae Kwon Do" warning, room 14, in 15 seconds. Then she proceeded to her own bathroom to comb through her hair. She applied powder to her forehead and chin, a dab of foundation across the freckles on her nose and glossed her lips. She looked for any new signs of aging in the mirror. Satisfied, she left the room and slipped on a dress and pair of sandals in the closet.

"Time to go!" She called in the direction of their rooms.

The boys were lying on their stomachs on the carpet watching the turtles navigate and obstacle course they'd built out of legos.

"Didn't you hear the warning!" Vicky snapped up both turtles. Carrying them legs kicking back to the terrarium. "Get your uniforms on!"

She walked back toward the door. "Now!"

"Where is my uniform?" Ira said without moving.

Vicky sighed heavily. "Hanging in your closet. Left side."

Zachary got up and pulled his uniform out of his bag. "Come on dude. You have to ask your mom where your uniform is—that's pathetic."

Vicky and Zachary exchanged looks after Ira entered his closet.

"Thanks." Vicky said quietly.

"No problem, Mrs. A."

Surprised, Vicky smiled at Zachary. He smiled back awkwardly.

"I'm getting my keys. You both have three minutes to get into the car." She yelled as she marched down the hall toward Iris' room.

On the way to Tae Kwon do, Vicky's cell phone rang. It was a Nevada number that she didn't recognize.

"Hello?"

"Vicky?"

“Yes?”

“It’s Jett.”

“Hello Jett.”

Vicky glanced at the dashboard, but quickly moved her eyes to the clock. They had 22 minutes to drive across town to the Tae Kwon do studio. She glanced at the report flashing across the screen of her GPS, traffic was thickening by the minute. The estimated time using their usual route was 24 minutes.

Vicky continued east on Seventh Street. Jamming her fingers into the buttons on the GPS, she tried unsuccessfully to bring up the alternate route on the satellite mode.

“How are you?” She finally said. Technically, it was his turn to talk and she had been waiting for him to respond, but Jett didn’t converse like a normal human. Large gaps of time would pass with no exchange of words, and he was fine with that. Vicky had often imagined how he commanded his troops. Short bursts of few words followed by hours of boots hammering the sand, probably.

“Good.”

“Must feel good to be back.” She tapped the satellite icon on the GPS screen again. What was going on? The screen remained blank. How would she know whether or not the freeway was moving?

“Sorry, Jett” Vicky said. She turned the volume knob up and down, but there was no noise coming from the machine. Not even the reminder about safety belts. “My car is malfunctioning.” Vicky decided to take the onramp and risk traffic on the freeway. Reaching down she turned down the volume. The knob came off in her hand.

“Shit!”

“Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” Vicky glanced in her rear view mirror. The silence in the car told her they were all three playing with their Ipods.

“I should call you back later. You’re driving.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got a headset. I’m really glad you called.” Vicky was surprised by how much she did want to talk with Jett. His last tour had only lasted 18 months, but before that it had been 4 years. Some how over that time span, she had lost the urge to avoid Jett. In the past, there had been more than a few phone calls that she had lied about being busy.

“Mom told me you were back, and you’ve been on my mind.” Vicky felt a rush of relief that the freeway was moving steadily.

“Are you kids buckled up?” She asked. She adjusted the rear view mirror so she could scan the shoulder strap positions.

“I know you are busy with the kids.”

“I want hear how you are doing.”

“I can call you back. I’ve got nothing, but time.” Jett was not a martyr. He was truly concerned about her well-being. After so much time passing, this trait in him seemed odder than ever. Vicky decided to ignore the rise of irritation Jett’s concern sparked. “So how long are you staying this time?”

The question landed like a jab. Jett’s tone dropped. “I’m not going back.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Yeah. I know, but there was a lot more going on over there with my guys last time. Things have stabilized, for the time being anyway.”

“Was it better or worse?”

“Better and worse.”

“Mom says you are going to be a fireman?”

She imagined Jett’s face. Wide, strong jaw. Dark stubble. Flattened Roman nose. Square teeth. He looked strong. Fiercely strong, even his face.

“If they’ll have me.”

“That’s a nice station.”

“Yeah.” Jett’s tone switched to sarcasm. “Fabulous furniture. I love the paint colors.”

Vicky couldn’t help but laugh at Jett’s attempt at humor.

“It’s the nicest building in Sparks. That fire place is impressive.”

“How’s your place? It wasn’t even finished when I saw you last. I bet you have a nice fireplace?”

The question was odd. It was odd that Jett, a man she had known more than half her life had never seen her house, did not know whether or not she had a fireplace, didn’t know what her chimney looked like. “I do have a fireplace. It’s beautiful. The chimney rises all the way to the 12-foot ceiling inside the living room. Western granite with bright orange and green lichen.”

“Lichen?” Jett sounded intrigued. “Is the lichen alive?”

The question made Vicky smile. Growing up in the desert, they had noticed things like lichen. Not much survived out there, so every little thing that did survive had some value to them.

“It is. I spray it with water once a week. We have a gigantic automatic sprayer. I walk around holding up this 6-foot wand. The climate is set to a rain forest in there. There is a humidifier. Ferns growing from rocks. Moss sprouting in the corners. There is a banana tree in the kids room. But I still have to spray whenever we run the heater.”

Vicky worried that she had gone on too long. She never told anyone about her house. How much care it took. The maintenance alone was ridiculous. Two full time gardeners, plus the arborist. The fruit trees alone required regular cutting. One pool guy and his crew. A full time housekeeper and her mother, even if she was a ‘stasher.’ Not to mention the water maintenance company, the electrician who routinely checked the system and wiring. And those light bulbs! There was no way Vicky could have changed all of those solar light bulbs on her own.

“I’m happy for you Vicky.”

Jett had said this line every time she’d talked to him over the past 10 years. The year before she married Manny things were different. That was the year he spent begging for her to come home. Begging her to stop writing for television and come home. She ignored him. Then she got mad at him. He had refused to even consider moving to LA.

“It would kill me,” he had said. “What am I going to do quit the Marines and go to work in an office building?” Vicky had no doubt that he was right. That was the year he was deployed. The news came as a relief. She didn’t want to tell him she was getting married. By the time he returned everything was already said and done.

“How about you Jett?” Vicky made sure her voice sounded compassionate. She already knew the answer. He’d given the same answer for the past seven years.

“There is still no one else.”

She’d never dared question the meaning of this comment. Did that mean he had never loved again? Surely, it didn’t mean he’d never had sex again, although this was the meaning he made the most sense. Jett was a romantic. He’d probably fallen in love with several women, but he was a prude when it came to sex. They were together for nearly four years and never once had sex. Sure, she was a 14-year-old virgin when they first kissed, but they didn’t break up until she was well over 18. More than a few times he could have had his way with her. It got to the point that she eventually gave up trying.

“Mom,” Ira interrupted from the back seat. “Are we almost there? I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Only a few more minutes, honey.”

“So where are you staying?”

“Your mother has let me spend the night a few times.” His voice was level, and Vicky was surprised he found the fact worth mentioning. Jasmine must have told him to tell her. Jett had slept in the spare room since he was 8 years old when his dad was killed on the streets in Columbia. His mother died only a month after he was born.

“Yeah. Well what about the rest of the time?”

“I’m waiting for a room at the fire station.”

“Uh huh.” Vicky wondered why he didn’t want to tell her. Silence filled the line.

“My things are in a cave outside of the reservation.”

“Is that safe?”

“I cleared it with Chief Lightfeather.”

“Jett do you know that it isn’t normal for a grown man to live in a cave?”

Silence again.

“You realize they can arrest you for vagrancy.”

“Not in Nevada.”

Vicky knew Jett well enough to know that he had checked this out. Just like he would never move into a cave so close the Indian lands without asking them permission. He didn’t learn that kind of caution from the marines.

Vicky looked out the windshield. Traffic filled all the windows. “Well, I’m glad you’re back. I’m sure Jasmine is happy to see you.”

“I’m going to visit Jen tomorrow.” Jett said matter-of-factly.

“Send her my love,” Vicky said. “I heard she got a swanky new apartment. Private club and spa, on the golf course.”

“Your mom was impressed.”

“I guess real estate has been booming around Reno.”

“She’s still working at the club.”

“She’s down to two days a week.” Jett had always defended Jen, no matter how much trouble she got herself in. They both had encountered a fair share of trouble in their youth. He’d

been kicked out of high school before the Colonel ushered him into the Marines. Jen managed to stay in school, but only barely.

“You should come out for a visit. Manny would be thrilled.”

“I like Manny.” Jett said and let the air fill with quiet before proceeding. “I just don’t like California.”

“Come on. You have to admit it is beautiful.”

“In a toxic sort of way.”

“That’s harsh.”

“I’m probably wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I wish she’d come out more often,” Vicky pouted. Jett should come and see her. What was the point of having 6 extra bedrooms if the only people who came to visit were Manny’s movie crews? “You know her friends can be pretty toxic. Did she tell you she is secretly taking a Yoga class?”

“I heard.”

“She’s terrified they will find out and accuse her of devil worshipping.”

“Of course she is. They are Baptists, Vicky.”

“Still, she’s been friends with these women her whole life. You’d think they’d know better than to think she is courting Satan.”

“You think they are going to make an exception for Jasmine?”

“She’s the queen bee of that circle. They’d be lost without her.”

“You’ve been away a long time.” Jett paused.

Traffic slowed almost to a stop. Vicky stared at the rows of cars on the freeway. Metal glinted in the sun.

“It would be good for her to get away more often,” Jett said finally.

“I’ve tried to get her to come out, but she’s so entrenched there.” Vicky pulled forward slowly as the traffic began moving again.

“She talks about you and the kids all the time. She misses the kids. How about you? Do you have a lot of friends there?”

“Yeah. Well, sure.” Vicky felt that familiar emptiness rising inside her. “I’m super busy.”

“People are nice?”

“Nice?” Vicky had a hard time defining exactly what it was like in LA. People appeared friendly. People acted friendly when they saw each other, but what went on behind closed doors,

she would never know. She'd never been inside more than three other houses outside of the Hollywood party scene. Nobody seemed to need any more friends. Or maybe they just didn't think they had time for new friends. "No one is mad at me for taking yoga, that's for sure."

"And how are the kids?"

"Great. They are both doing very well." Vicky took the next exit and drove up the street making a left turn at the first corner.

"Okay. Well, I just wanted to let you know I'm back and, you know, check in and make sure you are...everything is fine with you."

Vicky looked at the clock again as she pulled into the parking lot. Class started in two minutes. "It's nice to hear from you Jett," Vicky had said those words before when Jett had called to check in on her, but this time she really meant it. Until talking to him, she hadn't realized how glad she was that he was back.

Friday morning, the room lighting had already reached full strength by the time she got out of bed. Chopin played across the speakers in the house signaling that it was time for breakfast. After a week of cleaning, Vicky couldn't muster up the motivation to make crepes. She placed two boxes of cereal on the table alongside a jug of milk and spoons. When the kids arrived she asked them to get their own bowls. They arrived at school on time and as she handed over their lunches, she realized they had never been late, not once. Shouldn't she get some kind of award for this? As she drove back down the side streets toward the canyon, her mind centered on the chores at home. Today was the dreaded bathroom day. Shannan was right. The invisible army of germs required a toxic mix of chemicals, the smell of which Vicky could hardly handle. Today she would wear a painter's mask and special rubber gloves bought at the hardware store for this occasion. Luckily, with Manny gone only three showers needed cleaning, but pretty much all of the toilets had been used and there was no telling how many of the sinks. In her closet, Vicky pulled on her cleaning sweats and a pre-stained t-shirt.

After securing her hair in a pony tail, she let her eyes fall to the jewelry box on the dresser where she had stashed the joints in an envelope. What the hell? Maybe she should just try a little. It was medicinal grade, Shannan had assured her.

“Nothing too strong,” she said. It certainly wasn’t going to kill her. Not like her lipstick. According to Shannan her lipstick was lethal, a proven killer. So she’d put the lipstick in a bag marked “toxic” in the sewing room. Now she had developed a habit of sneaking into the bag whenever she needed that particular shade. Vicky held up the bag, eyeing the neat white cylinders. Pot was, well, medicinal, she told herself looking into the mirror. Her hair looked smooth and shiny. She put her fingers around the length and gently pulled. Her fingers slipped easily through the strands. She had snuck into her Aveda hair products that morning as well. It was so difficult to practice restraint these days. She had always been disciplined in her youth. She never even touched alcohol until she was in college, and then only once or twice. Never smoked cigarettes. But it was such a nasty trick for them to suddenly declare her cosmetics unhealthy. That just wasn’t fair.

Maybe if she smoked a little pot she could figure out how to leave hair products alone. After all shouldn’t she love herself au natural? Wasn’t the quest for youth merely an unhealthy addiction, makeup the drug? Maybe she’d find her inner psyche, her hippy-goddess core. She’d always enjoyed the crunchy ideal of hippydom—it was the dirty reality she disliked, but maybe she could overlook that if she was stoned. No, Vicky looked around the spotless interior. She liked clean. This thought reminded her of the list of chores. She had so much to do.

She examined the paper ends of the joint. Did it matter which one you lit? She gripped the shorter twist in her mouth before realizing she didn’t have a lighter. Even if she had 50 percent margin of error, that would still be only three hours. Four tops. Worst case scenario, she’d wind up calling 911. Even if she took an ambulance to the hospital, the drug would surely wear off in time to pick up the kids in after care.

Shannan said the high lasted only one hour for her. “Even a rookie like you will feel fine after a couple hours,” she’d said.

Vicky looked for the clock on the screen wall. She waited impatiently for daisy photograph to fade off the screen. 10:15 appeared and then faded back into the flowers. The kids had school until 3:30 today. There was plenty of time.

Since the power outage, Vicky had restocked the house with matches and lighters. Never again was she going to be trapped inside this house without being prepared, she had promised

herself. Five, 5-gallon water jugs lined up along one wall in the garage. Above was a cupboard affixed with a large red sticker on which she had printed “Emergency Kit Inside” with a black Sharpie. Inside was large metal box with a combination lock. Inside was a complete first aid kit, a variety dried fruits and nuts, packaged lemonade and hot chocolate, two card games, comics, finger puppets, walkie talkies, flashlights, a fresh supply of batteries—three different sizes—and an assortment of lighters and matches.

She lit the joint on the second try and inhaled timidly. Exhaling immediately, she was relieved that she didn’t even cough. The flavor was surprisingly pleasant—sharp green—and slightly sweet. She hit the joint again, harder this time. She remembered Shannan had said to hold in the smoke for the best affect. She held in and counted to 10 before exhaling. When half the joint was gone, she dropped the remainder into a mayonnaise jar and secured the lid. After only a few minutes the high spread like as shimmering wave through her body. Everything seemed to vibrate. The air was vibrating! Her skin was vibrating. She put her hands over her cheeks. Her teeth were vibrating. Her hand dropped to her chest. Then her wrist. She took her pulse. Was she holding her breath?

“Breathe,” she whispered to herself. “Breathe in. Breathe out.” In and out, she told herself fighting off a burst of panic that had stilled the vibration. Was she breathing normally? Was she taking in too much air, or too little. Was her heart beating normally? “Breathe in. Breathe out.” She told herself again forcing the air deep into her lungs. She was suddenly sure that she had a habit of holding her breath? How had she never noticed her breathing before, or her lack of breathing! Had she been going through life deprived of oxygen? She gulped in a quick inhale, at the thought of this. “Deeper, Deeper,” she scolded. Oh dear! Her heart beat seemed rapid. Was she breathing too much now?

Vicky brought the remaining half of the joint and a purple lighter out to the backyard, but she was afraid to sit by the pool in case the smoke drifted over to Mr. Dooley’s, so she crossed the yard over to a corner in the opposite side of the yard. Sitting on a flat rock by the back fence, she could see all the way down the canyon to the dirty gray and brown tones of The Flats far below. Her hands fell to the ground where she sat she dug her fingers into the rich soil and brought up a handful. Why hadn’t she ever noticed the dirt before? How beautiful it was! Rich and dark. The smell was comforting like warm milk in the middle of the night. Opening and closing her palm, she watched the dirt mold itself to her palm.

“I’m so stoned,” she managed to form the words, and speak them out loud, after several minutes passed in close examination of the soil. “I’m so stoned,” she repeated again. The idea of Vicky Anderson stoned seemed unbearably funny. She laughed. Giggled and laughed again.

What if Mr. Dooley decided to stop in for a visit? Her heart beat faster, the garage light flicked off and she waved her arms in the air. The lights flicked on again. Mr. Dooley had never been in their back yard, she reminded herself firmly and he had never come over when Manny was out of town. A part of her was relieved by the arrangement—his unspoken agreement that he would address his complaints to the man of the house. But part of her wondered why he didn’t like her.

How strange it seemed to share a street with someone for eight years without so much as one friendly conversation? Not one borrowed egg. No cup of sugar? Tomorrow she was going to bake him some lemon bars.

The sound of a truck door slamming shut made her heart jerk. It was Friday! The gardeners!

Vicky moved back into the house. Thank god she didn’t have to try and speak to the gardeners right now. She wasn’t sure if she was capable of forming sentences. She stared at the appliances in the kitchen. So big. So shiny. She moved into the living room and stared at the flat screen. It looked like a blacked out window on the wall. Her eyes dropped to the couch. So soft. So comfortable. Her feet moved toward the couch and she was just about to sink down into its soft depths when she caught herself—I must clean! Shannan said this was “cleaning weed.” Vicky touched the skin on her arms with her fingers. Her body felt like it was filled with air. Maybe a snack first, she thought. Had she even eaten breakfast?

After finishing a snack bag of oyster crackers, two handfuls of chocolate chips, one fruit roll, and then another fruit roll and a cappuccino, Vicky opened the utility cupboard and began removing the cleaning supplies. The bathrooms seemed too numerous to tackle all in one day.

“I will just clean two bathrooms,” she told herself firmly, but then sat down at the kitchen table. Her limbs refused to cooperate. Shannan was wrong. She’d never get anything done at this rate. Her eyes moved to the electronic control screen above the desk. Music! She could play some music! The sound system in the house had always befuddled her. The kids were the only ones who knew how to work it. Vicky stared at the screen for several minutes.

“Can you hear me?” she asked finally.

“What can I do for you?” Doris answered in her brisk and efficient manner.

“Music.” Vicky said.

The screen switched to a display of multiple colorful icons. “What kind of music would you like?” Doris answered.

“Rock,” Vicky said, feeling a twinge of excitement. Why hadn’t she ever thought of this before?

“Where would you like the music to play?”

“All rooms.” Vicky stated clearly.

“All?” Doris asked.

“All.” Vicky repeated.

“All is not recommended because it overrides the voice activation system in each room of the house. You will have to use the touch screens.”

A map of the house appeared on the screen. “I suggest touching the rooms in the house where you would like the music to play.”

Vicky stared at the map of the house. It looked like a giant version of Clue. The line: “Colonel Mustard in the parlor with the candlestick” came immediately to mind. But she was cleaning. She would be in every room of the house. She wanted music everywhere. A surge of irritation penetrated the fog in her mind. Certainly she could handle using the touch screen to turn off the system when she needed to—“All,” Vicky repeated stubbornly.

A green bar appeared on the screen. “Please adjust the volume by scrolling up or down.”

Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven* played through the hidden speakers. “I love this song!” Vicky yelled pushing her finger along the bar. Music blasted out of the speakers. Vicky felt it vibrate all the way through her body. A trill of excitement zipped up her spine. She smiled as she pulled on her rubber gloves. Maybe, she should finish the joint first. She wasn’t *that* high. After all she had managed to operate the sound system for the first time in her life. She stumbled against the bucket forgetting she had already pulled out the cleaning supplies. As a reward, she told herself. After the first bathroom was done.

“She was climbing the stairway to Heaven!” Vicky sung along as she carried the bucket towards the bathroom. Outside the living room windows, she noticed one of the gardeners was staring at her through the glass.

Vicky stepped quickly out of view and down the hall. The gardeners were Vietnamese. She liked the way the head gardener always smiled at her and nodded. They’d only attempted to

exchange personal information once—that's when she learned that he was from Vietnam. How awkward! Vietnam of all places. What could she possibly say to him? Sorry? At least with Elia there was no history of napalm. Only that unspoken detail of the dismal border crossing. Here again, Vicky was at a loss for words. Besides Elia had become annoyed every time Vicky attempted to communicate with her in Spanish.

"Comos estas Elia?" Vicky had tried a few times.

"Fine. Thanks." Elia made a point of responding in English. But when Vicky tried to converse in English, she never felt like Elia really understood what she was saying. Mostly, she wouldn't respond other than "okay" or "ay" or her favorite— Si' mone— which Vicky never did figure out. Manny even installed an electronic translation device in the kitchen, but Elia looked bored every time they tried to use it. Once when Elia was getting ready to leave, Vicky said in her best Spanish, "Gracias, Elia para trabajo de la casa. Buenos Nochas!"

Elia rolled her eyes as she pulled on her coat, and said in her best English, "I'll have to charge you extra, if you want me to teach you Spanish." After that they kept their exchanges brief.

A song she didn't recognize played across the speakers. Heavy guitars and male vocals. Vicky glanced at the screen. "The Primitive." Huh, she'd never even heard of them. She nodded her head up and down to the beat. "This is good," she said out loud. Setting the bucket down she swayed her body back and forth to the beat. The rif picked up and she was suddenly dancing and spinning in the hall. When the song ended, her heart was beating fast. She had an overwhelming urge to lie down on Iris' pink shag carpet. The shag was another aspect of the house that Elia refused to clean, but Vicky loved it so much she didn't mind the hour it took to vacuum. She left the bucket in the hall and stretched out on the floor, rubbing her arms and legs out in snow angel fashion.

An hour later Vicky found herself staring at toilet bowl number one. She squirted the bright blue liquid around the upper rim of the bowl, admiring the perfection of smooth surface and shape of the toilet. Just a few simple wipes and the white plastic shimmered and shined. Moving on to the vanity, she sprayed ammonia across the granite, admiring how the three crystallized colors—grey, green and red—formed the shape of mountains and an erupting volcano with people gathered around its base.

"Run!" Vicky said tapping her yellow clad finger on the steep granite slopes. "You are in danger!" She burst into giggles.

She finished the master bathroom, and bobbing to the music she carried her supplies to the next bathroom. A brief burst of panic erupted when she passed the kids room. How much time had passed? Was it time to pick them up? It could have been 8 hours for all she knew. Iris's daisy clocked said it was still only 10 a.m. 10 a.m! Wow! There was still so much time before she needed to get ready to pick up the kids. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows in her daughter's room. It was such a lovely day outside! Fresh air! Fresh air! Maybe she would have just one more puff...she peered out the window to determine the location of the gardeners. They were still working in the front yard. There wasn't much to do in the back. They'd already trimmed up the bushes and cleaned out the beds on Wednesday. Maybe she could sneak out into the backyard for a quick puff.

Once on the patio, though, Vicky felt too exposed, so she walked to the far side of the yard near the wrought iron fence that separated their lot from the canyon that dropped down behind their house. She sat up on the rock underneath the maple tree, and then scooted down, so her head no longer was visible. She lit the joint and inhaled once, before extinguishing it again. She didn't want to be too stoned. She set the rest of the joint up on the rock and let her fingers rest on top of soil. The stone pushed against her spine, but the dirt felt comfortable beneath her, cupping her, in its warm moist grasp. Redwood chips scented the air. Her fingers lifted, pulling a handful of topsoil from the base of the maple tree. Leaves rattled overhead. The sky curved overhead like a painted ceiling in a giant cathedral.

"It's so beautiful," Vicky breathed. She looked up but her eyes caught in the sun's white hot glare. She scooped up another handful of dirt, squeezing it until it felt warm in her palm.

She reached her hand toward the sky, blocking the glare she had become so familiar with as a child. Her entire childhood in Sparks had been spent squinting at that white hot glare. Only the desert glare lasted so much longer, and was so much whiter that it could not be sufficiently squinted at like this one. Closing down her eyelashes, Vicky watched the wings outstretch as a hawk soared down the canyon.

The sound of a leaf blower interrupted her thoughts. Poking her head up above the rock, she scanned the back yard for the gardeners. No one. They must be at Mr. Dooley's house by now.

Relieved, she dug her fingernails back into the dirt. Studying her French manicure enough to determine it was a mess. A snipping sound came from Mr. Dooley's side yard. Vicky pictured the dark blue cotton zip up suit he wore. She had watched him trim the flowering plum

out front once. When he was finished, the tree looked like a perfect circle, like how they taught you to draw a tree in grade school.

A clatter of blue jays came from up above in the maple tree. The hawk in the canyon swooped down suddenly.

“Wow,” she breathed. Her senses felt swollen like she could, without too much trouble, feel the molecules in the air pressing against her skin. Leaves of the Japanese maple behind her rattled softly in the wind. A shushing sound came up the canyon as the wind gusted. Every tree in the canyon moved and whispered.

“Oh it feels so good.” Her fingers dug deeper in the soil. Was she imagining that the dirt was warm? It felt warm. She pressed a handful against her cheek and then slipped off her shoes and socks, sinking her toes into the dirt.

“It is warm!” she exclaimed, grabbing a handful and rubbing the dirt along her neck and arms.

At the spa, she’d always steered clear of the ‘Mud Bath’ option. Until now, she couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to dip their entire body in dirt. A butterfly bobbed up in the air in front of her. Vicky watched the flutter of orange and brown wings. Up and over the bush, the butterfly dropped low to the earth and landed on a sunny patch of dirt where it sat opening and closing its wings.

She leaned her head back and let the sun beat down on her face. When was the last time she had felt this good? The vision of Mark in the bathroom flowed uninterrupted into her mind. Standing up next to the shower his fingers pressed into her back.

Vicky’s eyes snapped open. “Sinner!” The Christian Coalition chanted in her mind.

Even now, in this drug hazed state, fingers sunk deep into the moist earth, birds screaming in the maple tree, soft snip of the gardener’s clippers in her ears— she could feel how much she wanted him. Even now. “Stop it.” She snapped. Mark was not on her list of approved subjects, especially now, in this...fuzzy state of mind. She looked back down the canyon. The clatter of birds erupted again, and her eyes moved to the long, thin branches of an oak tree that grew just outside their fence. What beautiful oak, she mused. The trunk was thick and gnarled. Her eyes rose to the graceful sprawl of branches. Sitting on the one of the branches was a black house cat. Vicky’s breath caught and held in her lungs. Her heart raced in protest. Fear flooded like cold water through her veins. The cat moved down the sloping branch, jumped to the ground and disappeared behind a pile of brush. OH MY GOD! Vicky stood up quickly. “That was too big

to be a cat.” She said out loud. Without taking her eyes off the brush, Vicky backed away from the fence. The words ‘mountain lion’ streamed through her brain. No! It couldn’t have been. She she go get the gun? No. What if it was one of Mr. Dooley’s cats? He’d recently called and asked if she’d seen one of them, but it had been bigger than a house cat. Alternative animals ran through her brain. Raccoon, possum, coyote, dog, a very large house cat. A dog-sized house cat? The tail was long and thin and curved gracefully when it jumped. It leaped, gracefully through the air. Vicky ran through the foliage that circled the lawn. A holly bush poked and scratched at her legs. When she reached the lawn, she turned and stared through the back fence, replaying the movement of the animal as it stepped smoothly down the limb. It was the size of a medium dog, but it had been black. There weren’t black mountain lions, were there? Her hands rose to her mouth! “I just saw a black mountain lion,” she whispered. Her heart beat in her throat. Her eyes moved back to where one of the limbs of the oak tree reached over their fence touching the side of the treehouse. The kids! Oh my god! What was she going to do?

This is not possible she told herself sternly. “You are stoned. High as a kite. You saw a cat. A domestic black cat, and you invented the whole idea of the mountain lion as some sick drug addled fantasy that metaphorically represents your fear.” Vicky clenched her fists. “That was not a black mountain lion.” She told herself again, and this time she could feel her heart beat slowing. She took in a deep breath. Still, maybe she should go get the gun. But should she handle a gun while she was stoned? Never handle fire arms while intoxicated seemed like a likely rule of safety. “You saw a cat,” she told herself firmly. “Mr. Dooley probably got a new cat. You can go over there when the drugs wear off and ask him.” Vicky unclenched her fists and forced herself to turn away from the canyon. She needed to finish the bathrooms, she needed to stop shaking and tripping out and finish cleaning the damn house. A rush of regret passed through her. What had she been thinking? She didn’t want to feel stoned anymore. What a stupid idea! Had she just hallucinated? Shannan was a liar. What if there was a mountain lion. A cold fear lifted in Vicky’s throat. Vicky felt her heart racing again. This was not medicinal grade! She trotted toward the house, looking over her shoulder. When she reached the patio, she half expecting to see the mountain lion crouched and ready to pounce. Vicky let out a panicky squeal and ran inside and slamming the door behind her.

Four hours later Vicky stepped out of the shower. She had dismissed the image of the mountain lion as the effects of drug use, and done her best to force the whole idea out of her mind. She had managed to power through the rest of the bathrooms and even cleaned the inside of

the kitchen garbage can. In the closet, she opted for her straight-legged jeans and a plain white t-shirt with flip flops. After brushing through her hair and a light, school-appropriate, application of make-up, she went into the hall to turn down the music. Really, except for the hallucination, the whole experience hadn't been that bad, she reassured herself. She was thankful, the lighter than air feeling in her head was gone, and for the most part, she felt that she could manage. She examined herself in the mirror and was satisfied that she had banished all traces of druggy from her appearance, but as she walked down the hall a new wave of nervousness enveloped her. Was she really able to drive? She held up her hands, they shook slightly.

By the time she entered the garage, terror struck her like a bolt of lightning. Was she "under the influence?" She had never asked Shannan how long she should wait before operating a vehicle? On all of her prescription bottles the label clearly indicated whether or not one should drive. The hulking block of steel loomed like a monster on the far side of the garage and the distance between her house and the school seemed impossibly complicated, far too distant.

"Oh my god!" Vicky was suddenly sure her reflexes were still affected. "Oh my god!" She breathed again at the immediacy of her revelation. "Why didn't I think of this? What if I get pulled over?" rattled through her brain.

"What if I get in an accident?" She said, her fingers rising quickly to her mouth. "I can't drive. I can't drive the kids." She whispered through her fingers. The idea prompted her to walk back inside the house. In the hall bathroom, she examined her eyes: slightly red and glassy.

"Visine!" She ran back down the hallway to the master bathroom, digging frantically through the drawers before she located the small white bottle. Where were her sunglasses? She must have sunglasses! In the car, she reassured herself, she always kept a pair in the car.

The garage felt like a cool, dark cave. The clean lines of the hybrid SUV gleamed under the fluorescents. Oh my God I'm too high to drive the kids, she thought, her heart racing, her palms wet and clammy.

"I can't do it!" She said out loud. "Shit! Shit!" She looked down at the keys in her hand, failing completely at every attempt at deep-cleansing breathe. Inside she could hear Doris Day chiming. "Time to pick up the kids. Time to pick up the kids. Soccer meeting. Soccer practice today."

"Oh my god!" Vicky's heart seized and her hands flew to her mouth. She had forgotten about today's soccer meeting after-school! She folded her hands together in prayer and murmured. "Heavenly Father please forgive me for I have sinned. I was tempted by the devil and

I know what I have done is wrong. And now I can't pick up my children. Please help me father, please forgive me and guide me, I ask for your guidance oh dear father." A blank silence filled her thoughts. The phone rang.

"Shannan Thomas on the line. Shannan Thomas." Said Doris.

Vicky gasped for breath as she flew back through the garage door and into the kitchen.

"Shannan!" She practically yelled into the phone after slamming down the speaker button.

"Hey there!" Shannan's voice boomed across the line causing Vicky to glance outside. One of the gardeners was trimming the bushes in the courtyard. "Can you shuttle my kids to soccer today?"

"Listen, I screwed up. I really screwed up!" Vicky jabbered into the line, fumbling to get the headset on so she could turn off the speaker phone. "I...I...tried the...the...you know," Vicky frantically pulled the headset over her ears, but before she could push the speaker off Shannan responded loudly,

"You smoked the joint, didn't you!" Her exclamation immediately followed up by her laughter.

"SShhhhh!" Vicky hissed, still trying to straighten out the headset.

"Oh my god. You have really lost it haven't you?"

"I...I never should have tried it. I can't drive and I saw a mountain lion."

"A mountain lion?"

"Yes. A black one."

Shannan's laughter blasted across the speaker into her ear.

"It's not funny. I...I...I can't drive." Vicky whispered fiercely. "You have to pick up the kids. You have to go right away and pick up my kids. There's no more time."

"Are you serious?"

"I can't do it," Vicky said glancing nervously out the window.

"How long ago did you smoke?"

"I think it was around 10:15."

"This morning?"

"Uh huh."

"Oh my god! You are such a freak. You can drive. That is shitty pot, Vicky. There is no

way you are still too stoned to drive. Besides I need you to take my kids to soccer, that's why I called."

Vicky felt like crying. It was too much. It was all too much. "I really can't," she pleaded. "I just can't okay."

"Listen, you are just freaking out. Once you get in the car, you'll do fine."

Vicky stared out the window trying to picture herself driving down the road.

"Did you really see a mountain lion?"

"I don't know. I think it was a hallucination."

"Yeah, must have been because there are no black mountain lions."

"No?"

"So just get in the car and you'll see that you can drive just fine, probably safer than ever." Shannan's voice sounded patient like she was talking to a small child.

"Not with the kids." Vicky wailed. "I can't pick up the kids," Vicky was crying now. She was desperate. She had to get Shannan to pick up the kids. She would do anything.

"Look! I'll watch your kids for you all weekend. They can have a sleepover!" Vicky yelled into the phone. "I'm begging you!"

Shannan's tone switched. "Okay, it's alright. I can pick them up, don't freak yourself out. Just take some deep breaths." Shannan's words came out in a steady tone making clear this wasn't the first drug induced overdose she had encountered. "It's all in your head, Vicky. You are freaking yourself out over nothing. Just breathe, okay?"

"I know," Vicky hiccupped, more tears sprung from her eyes.

"There was no lion. It was probably just a cat, just a regular old kitty, okay?"

"I can't drive like this with the kids." Vicky repeated. "What if something happened?" She took in a sob-wracked breath. Snot and tears ran down her face and she sniffled loudly before wiping her face with the dishtowel.

"You need to take a chill pill. You are working yourself up over nothing."

"Will you just go and get them!" Vicky screeched into the phone. "You are going to be late! They are going to be standing on the curb!"

"Calm down." Shannan insisted. "I'm a good 10 minutes closer than you, remember?"

"Oh," Vicky wiped the snot on her t-shirt sleeve and collapsed into the kitchen chair.

"Okay, but you are saying that you will go pick them up, right?"

"I can pick them up, but I can't make the soccer meeting."

Vicky stood up from the chair. “What are you saying?”

“I’ve got a scheduling conflict and I can’t stay at soccer. That’s why I called.”

“There’s a mandatory—” Vicky struggled to clarify her thoughts, “There is an all-parent meeting.”

“Which is why you need to be there. You are the one who cares about such things. Listen, I’ll come and pick you up and drop you all off at the soccer meeting, then I’ll pick everyone up after.”

“We don’t have time for that!” Vicky screamed into the headset.

“Calm down.” Shannan’s voice was stern, impatient. “It’s not going to kill the kids if they have to wait five minutes. Just get in the car and meet me at the bottom of the canyon.” What had she been thinking? How could she have thought smoking marijuana was a good idea? I will never, ever, ever smoke marijuana again, she repeated to herself.

“—we have plenty of time.”

Vicky forced air into her lungs. “I don’t know,” Vicky moaned, unable to answer her own question. Her brain felt like a bowl of oatmeal.

“Just get in your car and drive. You are fine.” Shannan insisted.

“I still feel a little...um...,” Vicky searched her vocabulary for the right description.

“Not right.”

Mostly she needed to calm down, she realized. She needed a Xanax. Standing up she moved over to the cabinet where she kept her vitamins. Moving the multiple bottles aside, she located the small prescription bottle in the back corner.

“Shit, Vicky, you smoked a couple of hits at 9 in the morning—snap out of it!” Shannan continued, sounding half amused. “Half the people on the road are stoned. Stoners are the only ones driving the speed limit! Really, you are overreacting.”

“Okay.”

“Hurry up!”

Chapter Break

On several occasions Vicky had sworn not to get into a vehicle with Shannan behind the wheel and today, with her nerves already shot, she could hardly refrain from screaming as the Hummer lurched and zagged through heavy traffic on the freeway. Vicky gripped the hand holds and tried her hardest to picture something other than their reckless progression up the street. More than a few times along the way she had the distinct feeling that her the day had become as disturbing as a scene from one of the video games she had long ago banned her children from playing—the latest creation from the makers of Grand Theft Auto—the drug addled characters, the gigantic vehicle, lunging full speed through crowded streets. Shannan had a habit of approaching cars moving slower than her at full speed and flashing her lights until they pulled out of the fast lane.

The voices of the kids filled the speeding metal box until Vicky could no longer hear the pop music that blared from the radio. From the vantage point of the Hummer, Vicky looked down on the passenger vehicles on the road. Thoughts swirled like a slow motion tornado through her mind. Did she really see a mountain lion, or had it just been a large house cat? How could she let the kids play outside now? Was there a mountain lion hunting group she could contact? Were they protected? God no! They couldn't be. It was like living next door to a person with homicidal tendencies. Certainly, there must be something she could do. But it couldn't have been a mountain lion. There were no black mountain lions. Besides she was stoned, on drugs, hallucinating. So how could she act on the product of a drugged mind? Wasn't that like having a dream and treating it like real life? Her mind jumped and skipped all the way up the 405.

By the time they exited the freeway, Vicky had convinced herself that the mountain lion had been a house cat and there was nothing to worry about.

Shannan zoomed up the residential street. The soccer field appeared in the side window. Chalk marks ran in straight lines cutting the smooth green surface into rectangles. Jimmy's face appeared in front of Vicky like a reflection in the window. As the Hummer blasted up the street Jimmy's fatigue clad body flew alongside the vehicle body, arms and legs rising above the perimeter chalk mark on the field. He had a straight white teeth kind of smile. An army transport vehicle appeared beside him. The dirty bumper bounced along the turf. Jimmy jumped inside. Vicky pictured the vehicle bobbing along the dirt road. The noisy engine rumbled and the smell of exhaust filled her nostrils. A yellow-white blast hit like lightening from the sky. Dirt and debris filled the air. Jimmy's body tumbled through the sky before the image faded out of view.

Goosebumps rose on Vicky's skin. Her gaze shifted to the field. Dozens of kids wearing bright colored uniforms ran across the grass. White and black balls flew into the air.

In the parking lot, all seven kids piled out of the back of the Hummer and twenty minutes later, Vicky found herself standing alongside the cluster of soccer moms, umbrellas and coolers, feeling like an alien just landed on a strange, fertile planet. Kids ran everywhere. Kids on the sidelines. Kids filled all the fields, Kids in strollers. Kids on blankets crawling in diapers. Kids riding across the asphalt on bikes. Kids walking in clusters along the streets outside the fence. Vicky hugged Iris, who had already reunited with three of her friends, and said good-bye. The girls ran in a cluster of pink jerseys over to the other side of the playing field.

Vicky and Ira marched passed a line-up of parents hollering from the sideline.

KICK IT! Get IT!

BLOCK Them!

Their voices sounded more like a war cry, than an encouraging coax. At the beginning of the season Vicky had read through the extensive soccer handout that had been sent home with each participating family. After attending her first game, she went home and reread the pamphlet out loud to Manny on the phone.

"Doesn't that say not to yell from the sideline?" she asked.

"Well, sort of."

"What do you mean, sort of?" Vicky looked back at the black print. "It says right here: Please do not 'coach' from the sideline. Leave the coaching to the coach."

"Yeah, but..."

Vicky waited. Vicky often found herself struggling to remain patient, while waiting for her husband's response. Long ago she had given up on the idea of immediacy with Manny. His brain just seemed to spin at a slower pace. Not to say, he wasn't intelligent—no—just that his ideas took longer to form and transform into verbal dialogue on the phone, or maybe he was distracted, attempting to do something else, like watch television or answer e-mails. The line was crystal clear between them. It was amazing to think that he was half way around the world. At sunset Vicky often looked out across the ocean and wondered what he was doing at that exact moment. How high the sun already was in the sky. How hot?

Finally, she gave up waiting. "Yeah, what?" she snapped impatiently.

“It’s just people get excited, Vicky,” Manny finally answered. She was sure he was looking at e-mail now. “It’s okay. You have to let people get excited—it’s their kids. It’s bound to happen.”

“I just don’t think it’s appropriate to be shouting like a maniac from the sideline when we all READ the pamphlet. We all know the rules.”

“Are you kidding?” Manny laughed. “People don’t read that stuff.”

Vicky sniffed as she and Ira moved across the grass. Her hay fever had started up recently and every time she went outside she stared down every leaf and flower trying to determine which one was spewing pollen into the air. Or maybe it was the oak trees? The grass? The turf was artificial at the field, so that couldn’t be it. Vicky looked across the smooth green field. What a crazy concept to think the whole thing was like a giant carpet. Did they have to vacuum? Did they have a special sweeper? Strange, very strange. Her brain felt like melted chocolate. When she looked around the field she had the sensation of looking at a movie in slow motion.

What if someone suspected she was stoned? a strange shrill voice echoed in her head.

“Nobody is going to suspect I’m stoned,” she hissed at herself. Ira glanced up at her, and she smiled back at him. He gave her a strange look. Vicky wished he would still hold her hand. She missed holding hands with Ira. Why did he have to be such a mini-man already? She didn’t want a mini-man, she wanted her sweet little boy back, the one who held hands, and loved to be cuddled. Vicky reached out and put her palm on the top of his head. She let her hand slide across his smooth hair, but only for an instant. She knew that was all he would allow.

At Field 10, Ira threw his bag down at the sideline. Vicky smiled and said “Hello” to the coach. He waved back. She set up her folding chair and offered a stainless steel canister of water to Ira. He shook his head and followed Zachary out to center of the field where they attempted to kick a ball back and forth to each other, only Ira’s kick went way off to the left of Zachary and Zachary made him chase after it.

Vicky slumped in her fold-out chair along the sideline. She tugged her Hardee baseball cap down low over her eyes, and felt thankful she had remembered to bring her DG sunglasses. The mirrored surface kept everyone at bay. She knew it was enough to sit and look stylish in this crowd. No one would require her to speak.

Several other parents lined up in clusters on either side of Vicky’s chair. Vicky smiled and nodded as one of the Dad’s said, “Hello.” Three mothers from Mount Holy Oak, none of

whom she could name, pulled up folding chairs next to her. Luckily, these three got along well. Vicky had lost count of the number of times she'd shared a bake sale table with women who hated each other. Usually one or the other would wind up excusing herself after a few polite attempts at conversation swerved in a horrible direction.

"You conniving cunt." Was probably the worst direct accusation she'd witnessed. That was at the Charity bake sale after Ramican but the simmering hatred left unexpressed in dialogue was the worst kind of fight. Whole conversations could pass about some banal subject like the weather and all the while Vicky could feel her blood pressure increasing in her veins from the unspoken tension. Vicky hated to get in the middle of these petty arguments. How many times had she heard the one about the stolen nanny? 10 times? 15 maybe? It was like a syndrome in the Hills. The You-stole-my-Nanny-Syndrome. They should feature it on Jerry Springer. Vicky giggled suddenly at the thought. The two of the women on her left turned to look at her. Vicky nodded her head and smiled. The ball rolled near the other team's goal sparking an irate chant in the parents around them.

"Get 'em!"

"Attack that ball!"

The ball followed by the cluster of kids moved back down towards the center of the field.

"Get it!"

"Come on!" One of the mother's yelled in frustration.

Several of the parents stood suddenly waving their arms when one of Ira's team mates managed to steal the ball, but turned and headed in the wrong direction. "Don't go that way. Go that way!"

Vicky looked down at her hands and was startled by the sight of her fingernails. Mud tucked in each underneath nail could be seen through her opalescent polish. How did she get so dirty? She wondered clasping her hands. Fondling the dirt this morning, she remembered now how soft and warm the earth had felt against her skin. Her eyes closed behind her sunglasses as she recalled the raucous call of blue jays that morning, the long arms of the oak trees reaching out into the sky. The moment right before she saw the lion. Her fingers uncurled at the memory.

More loud cries interrupted her thoughts, but she refused to look down the field where she knew her son was probably doing his best to act like a goalie without ever coming in contact with the ball. A group of men stood just to her left blocking her view. She couldn't see anyway, she consoled herself.

Vicky tugged the brim of the oversized baseball cap lower over her eyes. She still couldn't believe that she had decided to smoke pot. What had possessed her? The cleaning. The damn housecleaning. It was driving her crazy. A twinge of regret made her grimace. She hated to admit the fact that she already missed Elia. Sure, she was difficult. Sure, she refused to clean the chandelier and the shag carpet and the refrigerator! Of course, she used the wrong cleanser on the hand blown glass sinks downstairs, and yes, there was the constant annoyance of her stashing mother, but together the work had at least been bearable. How would she survive day after day of nothing but shuttling kids, making meals, doing laundry, paying bills and now CLEANING! The play dates would have to cease. No more hosting multiple after-school gatherings. No more hosting movie nights on Friday with popcorn all over the living room. It was just too much.

At least barring some teenage-related illness the babysitter would still arrive Saturday night, and she could escape for a few hours. Automatically, Vicky clicked through the inventory of what she needed to collect at the mall. Iris needed new rain boots and Ira said he wanted a different pair of pants for picture day. He now refused to wear corduroy. She liked this baseball cap. Maybe she'd pick up one more. It seemed to really keep the sun off her face. Last time all they had were the ones' with Asian women, dressed in kimono. Two gold sticks in their black hair. In retrospect the image appealed to her. Yes, she'd get one more of the Hardee baseball caps. Only a shred of guilt remained over her failure to go back to the Positive Discipline meetings, but she couldn't possibly go back there. The idea of spending her one night away from the house and kids talking about the house and kids was just too much.

After practice, Vicky moved in a circle with the rest of the parents.

"We have a problem with our team name." The coach said.

Vicky's stomach clenched remembered how the coach had decided to let the kids pick the name. Each kid had written whatever they wanted the name to be on a slip of paper and the coach had picked one of the slips of paper out of a baseball cap. Ira's name had been chosen: Ravens of Terror.

"There have been several complaints about the name, which is why I decided to call this meeting." The coach looked expectantly around the circle. When no one said anything, he continued. "A few parents think the name is too violent."

"I agree!" Said one of the women that Vicky sat next to. "I don't know who complained, but I've been uncomfortable with the name since the day it was picked."

“Terror is too much like terrorist. Do we really want to think of terrorists when we come to the soccer fields?” Another Dad joined.

“Ravens are scavengers.” One Mom said nodding her head.

“Yeah and what about when we play Compton or Lakeside? We don’t want to encourage the idea of violence out here.” Two mothers shook their heads fiercely. The games with the public schools already inspired much panic among the parents. Some of them refused to send their kids.

“How about Flying Ponies?” Maddox interjected, he was the only kid who had opted to join the meeting. The rest were scattered across the field kicking the ball, some had drifted watch one of the other teams play. Maddox was the only kid on the team who wore glasses and the top of his shorts pulled all the way up to his chest, which shouldn’t have mattered, but he also had a habit of dancing on the field during games. Disco dancing. The other parents stared uncomfortably at Maddox. No one said anything.

“Well, thanks Maddox.” Coach said. “I don’t know how we should handle this—do you want to take a vote or just select a team name right now.”

Vicky’s brain felt like mush and all she could think about was taking a nap. She was glad that Ira and Zachary had been given the job of collecting cones. She watched them all the way across the field stacking cones. Zachary’s latest hair color glowed bright blue even at a distance. After 15 minutes of discussion, the coach called for a blind vote. Zachary and Ira dumped the cones in the coach’s wheel barrel just as the votes were being counted. Vicky crossed her arms across her chest, dread filling her lungs.

“Ravens of Terror 1 Flying Ponies 9.” The coach announced. “I guess our new name is The Flying Ponies!”

“What!” Ira yelled.

“What a stupid name!” Zachary hollered. The parents turned to stare.

“That is the stupidest name I’ve ever heard!” Ira repeated.

“You can’t just change our name!” Zachary yelled at them.

“We can,” one of the mother’s retorted. She was wearing an officially looking sweatshirt with the LA County Soccer League emblem printed across the front. “And we did.”

The rest of the parents retreated from the confrontation and began gathering clothes and bags.

“That’s bull!” Zachary said even louder. “Hey you guys did you hear they changed our name!” He yelled out to the other boys, but the next team had already moved into the sidelines

and most of the team was already scattered between the field and the parking lot. A few of the kids started at him briefly looking confused.

“We don’t want to promote violence on the field.” The mother in the red sweatshirt said loudly before turning to pull her umbrella from the ground.

“Come on guys,” Vicky said putting her hand on Ira’s shoulder. “It’s already done. Let’s go get your mom, Zachary.”

“I’m not playing then.” Zachary announced loudly and walked off in the direction of the parking lot. The next team assembled around them. Kids watched as their parent tied shoes. Others pulled jerseys out of their bags.

Ira shrugged her hand off. “You know that was so lame.” He said to her before running after Zachary.

“We need to set up here,” The next team’s coach said moving up between them placing his large cooler near Vicky’s feet.

“Ira wait!” she called. He stopped, but didn’t turn.

She put her arm around his shoulder. “I thought your name was great, honey.”

Ira shrugged off her arm. “Then why didn’t you stand up for me?”

“I voted,” Vicky responded defensively. “What else could I do?”

“You were the only one.” There was something reassuring in the fact that he noticed this.

“All I heard was stupid Mrs. Rambower saying. ‘We can not tolerate violence in this league,’” Ira imitated Mrs. Rambower’s voice. “Why didn’t anyone stand up to her? It was just a name! They picked it fair and square. Now we have to be the stupid Flying Ponies! That’s a girl’s team name!” Ira’s voice was getting louder and louder. Some of the parents glanced in their direction. “Iris would love it. Why don’t they go over to the girl’s team and hassle them about their name? All of the parents are so stupid!”

“Shh!” Vicky hissed. “We don’t use that word, Ira.”

“You may not use it, but I do!” he yelled at her and then ran to catch up with Zachary who had just jumped inside Shannan’s Hummer. Fine, let Shannan deal with them, Vicky thought.

Instead, she walked across the field to where the girls were sitting in a circle after practice. Iris was playing Cats Cradle with a red-haired girl. As they walked toward the cars, Iris gave Vicky a detailed explanation of the Star Wars scene she had just acted out on the playground with three other girls. Iris never had anything to say about the soccer game. It was as though the

whole trip to the field was just a different venue for the same games they played at recess. Occasionally, she'd get the ball and kick it in one direction or the other, but mostly she stood with a couple of other girls in the middle of the field while the other players kicked around them.

"And then Anakin takes off with Padama and they are not going to let him be a Jedi Knight, so Padama runs away..." Her words, trimmed in a lispy 'th' sound ran unimpeded through an elaborate story which Vicky tuned out until the final line.

"...and then he gets in a fight with the Doorka and they cut off both of his legs."

"Oh!" The visual prompted Vicky's stomach to turn over. "That is horrible, Iris. I can't believe you play those kind of games."

"Well, it really happened Mamma," Iris said, gripping her hand tight. "And then Anakin went over to the dark side because his mother died and Padama wouldn't speak to him."

"Iris," Vicky stopped walking and bent down in front of her daughter. "That didn't really happen. It is a movie. That is a story made up by someone who made the movie."

"Daddy says everything that happens in the movies happens in real life too."

"Well, that's ridiculous." Vicky straightened and pulled Iris toward where Shannan was sitting in the car with the rest of the kids. "We don't even have space ships."

By the time Vicky arrived home, she had a headache and opted for frozen food for dinner. After dishing out chicken nuggets and peas, followed by homework, the bedtime routine, and the dishes, Vicky plopped down on the couch already knowing she would not rise again until morning. Through the open door of the downstairs bathroom, she could see her basket of cleaning supplies still sitting in the middle of the rug. Piles of laundry rose up like skyscrapers on the dining room table. "Tomorrow," she whispered to herself. "Tomorrow, I'll finish everything."

CHAPTER BREAK

Saturday morning Vicky woke up with a dull headache. Her mind instantly zeroed in on the pot as the culprit. She pictured herself huddled behind the rock in her backyard. Dirt coating her fingers, smudged across her cheeks. The black cat crouching on the branch. Never again, she told herself, pulling the sheets up to her chin.

The wave sounds had transferred to jungle noises some time before dawn and she listened to the tweet and twitter of birds coming through the invisible speakers. Even with the noises the room seemed disturbingly quiet.

She rolled over to one side, clutching a pillow to her chest. Manny hadn't called in two days. Vicky felt an overwhelming urge to cry. When Manny first started traveling, they would talk sometimes three times a day.

She knew what his excuse would be. "I'm trying to push this schedule through, Vic. So I can come home sooner." She'd heard it so many times, she couldn't even bring herself to ask him about not calling anymore. There was little point in her calling him. The time change, the cell reception, the language barrier at the hotel all formed a successful blockade against her efforts.

Tonight the babysitter would arrive and she'd be out alone on the town on a Saturday night. She could call Shannan. Vicky replayed the memory of her ride home in the Hummer after the soccer game. Gripping the door handles of the Hummer as Shannan swerved in and out of traffic on the freeway while yelling about how "Idiotic" the soccer parents had been to get "their panties in an uproar" about something so "ridiculous." Vicky had remained silent, hoping the pop music station playing on the radio prevented the kids from hearing the mix of bad language and inappropriate metaphors erupting from the driver's seat.

"Flying Ponies!" Shannan had hooted. "Sound like a name you'd give to a bunch of sissies! If I were a kid from East LA and found out I was playing a team called the 'Flying Ponies!' Ha!" Shannan laughed. "You boys better get ready for some ridicule by the homies at Lakeside. They might just assume right off the bat that you're all a light in the loafers with a name like that."

Vicky remembered how excited Ira and Zachary became after listening to Shannan's response. Slapping and hitting each other, laughing and joking about the interaction they'd have with the Lakeside Leopards—kids who had to be patted down before coming onto the Holy Oak field.

"What if we win?" Zachary said in a somber tone said after they had bantered back and forth for awhile. "Can you imagine if we won? They'd have to take the news back to their home turf that they'd lost to a bunch of rich, white faggots!"

"That is completely inappropriate." Vicky scolded. They would never win, Vicky reassured herself. But it was scary to think about what would happen if through some strange fluke the Leopards did lose. How would they handle getting their asses kicked by a team called the Flying Ponies from Mount Holy Oak?

"Yeah. We are gonna have to lose that game or we'll get our asses kicked for sure."

"I've always thought we needed more security during the games with the East side schools," Vicky added.

Everyone had ignored her, and the subject switched to the latest episode of *Cops* after that.

Vicky rolled over onto her back. The lighting had switched to sunrise signaling that it was time to get up. In the bathroom she washed her face and applied moisturizer and decided she'd be better off sticking to her usual routine of going to the Beverley Center. Shannan was trouble. Besides, she needed a new pair of sandals to go with the skirt she bought last week, and she was still looking for the right color blouse to match the suit she'd just picked up at the dry cleaners. Vicky pictured the regular crew of sales girls at Bloomingdales. Vicky sighed and pulled a brush through her hair. Hopefully they'd received their new fall shipment, the selection lately had been so uninspiring.

After breakfast, Vicky packed a cooler with snacks and beverages and sat down with a load of towels and kids clothes in the living room. The kids had been playing on the Wii all morning, but she had sent them to their rooms to get dressed for soccer. Vicky had woken up determined to get through at least two more bathrooms, but she so far hadn't found the time. The phone rang.

"Your mother is calling," Doris chimed. "Your mother is calling."

Vicky considered not picking up. She'd never get everything done. As the last ring erupted, she picked up the phone.

"Hey Mom."

"Hi honey," Jasmine sounded tense.

"What's up?" Vicky moved the stack of Ira's t-shirts over to make room for the soccer uniforms.

"I'm just calling to check in." Vicky heard a man's voice in the background.

"Who is that?"

"Jett's here." Jasmine's voice rose to a tremulous pitch.

"What's wrong?"

"Jett wanted me to call."

"Uh, huh." Vicky pressed her hands across Ira's nylon soccer shirt.

"Jett is concerned about..." Jasmine sounded irritated. "I'm just going to let him tell you."

Vicky heard the phone being lifted through the air. She imagined Jett's attempt to deflect her mother's request.

"Hello."

"Hi Jett."

"Listen, I'm worried about your sister. I think she'd up to no good."

"What do you mean?" Vicky laughed. "Since when has Jen been up to any good? Now that would be worth a phone call, if my sister suddenly took a turn down the straight and narrow." A tight laugh burst through her lips

"Yeah, well, I'm not just talking about working at the club."

Jett reminded her so much of her father when he was like this, officially stern like she was talking to her commanding officer. "That's good," she said, forcing herself to remain calm. "Because I'd have to remind you that my sister's profession is legal in Nevada." For as long as she could remember Jett had tried to get Vicky to prevent Jen from stripping. As if Vicky had that kind of power! As if Jen hadn't been bossing *her* around since she was 10.

Vicky stood and methodically distributed the stacks throughout the rooms.

"Soccer," Doris Day chimed in the hallway. "It's time to leave for Soccer."

"I think she is doing more than just selling houses on the side."

"What do you mean?" Vicky entered Ira's room, opened his soccer bag, and placed the stack of cloths neatly inside.

"To put it bluntly, I think she is a call girl."

"No." Vicky shook her head, holding the phone in her hand. "She wouldn't do that."

"Have you seen her new condominium?"

"No."

"I checked in with the receptionist in the lobby and the one bedrooms start at 1.2 million. Your sister has a three bedroom, three bathroom."

"So let me get this right, Jett." Her insides tightened. "My sister is a successful realtor. She has worked her tail off for the past seven years hustling Nevada real estate—and your assumption is that there is no way she could afford a nice condominium?"

"There are three pools in this place, Vicky. A 24-hour spa. Maid service."

"Yeah, and what exactly is supposed to make me suspicious? The maid, or the pool because I have both of those, does that make me a prostitute too?"

A long silence filled the line before Jasmine's voice came across the line.

"Jett isn't trying to upset you, honey."

"What exactly is the problem, mother?"

"Jett heard something from one of the guys at the firehouse last night."

"What?"

"A few of the guys answered a call to 911 in Reno. A man was in cardiac arrest when they arrived."

Back in the living room, Vicky picked up another stack. She draped Iris' dresses and sweaters over her arm.

"The man turned out to be a City Council member. They knew him and his family pretty well," Jasmine continued. Vicky could hear Jett's voice in the background. Jasmine paused for an instant as if listening, and then continued. "Jen was there. She had made the call."

"What did she say?" Vicky asked. "She was probably just showing him a condo, or something."

"It was a hotel room. The Four Seasons on the River."

"I think those are time shares."

"It was 2 a.m., Vicky," Jasmine's voice lowered. "Two in the morning."

Vicky sat down with the bundle of Iris' clothes in her lap. "Well, we can't just believe some rumor. Some fire station gossip."

"Jett brought me the incident report," Jasmine responded levelly. "It's sitting right here on the kitchen table. They took her name, Vicky. It's on the report."

"Oh my god." Vicky whispered letting the clothes fall from her lap. She leaned forward resting her elbows on her knees, her chin in her palm. Her other hand lowered the phone from her ear. After a few minutes she picked up the phone from the couch. Jett was still on the line.

"I'm sorry," he was saying. She imagined he had been talking to her, consoling her, the whole time.

"I need to drive the kids to soccer."

"Sure." Jett said. "We'll figure this out, Vicky. We'll work it out."

"What do you propose we do, Jett!" Vicky demanded. "You think we should tell a grown woman how to live her life? It's not like she'd a child anymore." Her voice lowered to just above cracking.

“Soccer,” Doris chimed in her last warning tone. “Soccer games today.”

“You kids need to get in the car!” Vicky yelled down the hall. Iris came sprinting out of her room, carrying her favorite doll and headed towards the garage. Where was Ira?

“I think we will need to talk about this more, at a different time.”

“I don’t know about that.” Vicky stood up and walked down the hall towards the bedrooms. “You’ve been gone a long time. It’s not like you can just jump in and save the day now Jett.”

Vicky poked her head into Ira’s door. He was on the floor underneath a blanket with his headphones on listening to music. Vicky yanked the headset off and struggled to keep her voice calm. “We are going to be late! Your sister is already in the car.”

Ira stood up revealing his pajamas. “You are not even dressed?” Vicky fumed.

“We’ll talk more later, Vicky,” Jett said using his official Marine voice. “You need to focus on the kids.”

“Thanks,” Vicky muttered ignoring the rise of irritation in her chest.

Saturday night arrived along with the babysitter and, minus a better plan, Vicky headed off toward the mall, even though, lately, the idea of visiting the mall girls didn’t thrill her. They were always so friendly and eager to chat. And they were so cute. They reminded her of when she and Jen were young and still nervous about boys. So self-conscious. So afraid of that devastatingly important first kiss.

But the reality was that the mall clerks were nothing like she was as a teenager. Last week, the oldest one of the group, who was 23, told her about a crush she had on a boy who was a freshman in high school. The girl patiently explained “a crush” was the phase that occurred after you already had sex. In fact, now that Vicky thought about it, over the past few months the girls had revealed more information than Vicky was ready to hear. Most of them were barely twenty, but they already had more experience with drugs, sex, and electrical devices than she could ever hope to obtain. Last week, after they had inundated her dressing room with seven outfits to try on, she had overheard them talking about the discovery that they had both had sex with the same guy. This revelation led to an in depth discussion comparing their experiences, which, it turns out, were remarkably similar. “Then he put his tongue in my belly button and I was like ‘Gross’ I don’t know what’s in my belly button.” The other girl giggled loudly. “Oh my God, I know. He

did the same thing to me! And I just had my belly button ring put in and I was like that's not cool!"

Vicky pulled onto the freeway and immediately came to a halt. The whole freeway was a parking lot. She turned on the radio, and switched around the channels.

How could Jett think that Jen was a prostitute? Stripping was one thing, but Jen didn't need to prostitute herself—she was already a realtor. Salesperson of the year, supposedly.

Should she just call Jen and ask her straight out: Are you working as a call girl? Somehow the answer to this question didn't seem to be any of Vicky's business. Why did Jett still think it was his?

Vicky pressed speed dial, and listened the droning ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jen. It's Vicky."

"So I suppose you are calling to find out if Jett lost his mind in Iraq or if I really am a call girl?"

"I know you wouldn't do that Jen."

"Really?"

"You think I think you are a prostitute?"

"Call girl and prostitute are totally different." Jen snapped.

"Really."

"I might as well educate you since you are so determined to find out."

"I'm not—"

"A prostitute is a low-class, drug addict who stands around on the streets offering sex to strangers."

"I had that figured out all on my own."

"Well, a call girl only dates a handful of carefully selected men. They must be approved and the whole experience isn't just about the sex. Many times these men are prominent business men and they want female companionship, maybe there is a big party or a dinner meeting and they want to be the guy with the hottest date," Jen snapped her gum. "Maybe they work so hard, all the time that they have never met the right woman. Or maybe they have really high standards, or maybe a super bitchy wife, or something."

"Oh." Vicky said.

“In other words, if I don’t like the guy, or don’t think he really has the money that it takes to ‘date’ me, then I tell him to take a flying leap.”

“So...so you are a prostit—“

“Didn’t you hear anything I just said!”

“I...I mean. You are a call girl, then,” Vicky clutched the steering wheel despite the fact that she was parked on the freeway. “Jett is right?”

“Leave it to the Special Ops guy.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t you dare get indignant about this. I mean I’m going to be totally annoyed with you if you start coming down on me because, really, it’s not any of your concern.”

The traffic crept slowly up the asphalt. Vicky had the distinct feeling of being trapped. She wanted to push a button and fly up and over the sea of cars.

“Mom at least has an excuse,” Jen continued. “Being a Jesus lover, you know, that makes you kind of down on the whole idea of sex for pleasure, let alone sex for money.”

“I..I thought you were doing so well, with real estate, you were salesperson of the year!”

“Vicky, you live in a fucking bubble.”

Vicky grimaced. “You think I live in a bubble?”

“You do live in a bubble.”

“I think you live in a bubble!”

Jen’s gum snapped again. “Okay, then. I can see we aren’t going anywhere on this topic, and I’ve got an appointment.”

“Wait!” Vicky didn’t want Jen to think she was mad. She wasn’t. “I’m not judging you.”

“Oh, gee thanks. Listen, I really do gotta go. Oh and when you talk to Jett tell him next time he sits down to clean his favorite AK-47, maybe he should think about how many people’s lives have ended at the other end of that barrel—then tell him he needs to start worrying about his own dirty deeds, okay?”

The line went dead.

Vicky stared at the line of red taillights in front of her. Sadness pushed up from her abdomen and before she could stop it a long wail erupted from her mouth. Tears poured down her face. She reached inside the glove box locating a prescription bottle, and quickly removed the lid. She tapped two tiny blue pills into her palm and swallowed. Maybe she should call Jasmine. She must be so upset. Oh, why did Jett have to go and stir up all this trouble? They had been getting

along just fine without him. Maybe she should try to call Manny. Her eyes moved to the clock. 3 o'clock in the morning over there.

She suddenly felt very sorry for herself. This was *her* night off. This was the one night a week, when she didn't have to take care of anyone else but herself. She wiped her nose with a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. She checked her mascara in the mirror, and reached in her bag for some lip gloss. She would just try to put it all out of her mind for now. Tomorrow she would call Jasmine.

After nearly 20 minutes, she had moved less than two feet up the asphalt. 30 minutes later she had progressed to the next exit, but she was still more than 10 miles from the Beverley Center and there was nothing on this stretch of the 5 except the drive-in movie theater. Her eyes drifted over to the giant white screens. Maybe there was something good playing?

On a whim, Vicky took the exit.

Pulling between the curving white lines leading around to the entrance, she paid the fee, trying hard to ignore the strange look from the attendant, and parked along the far edge of the largest cluster of cars. Feeling slightly excited by the experience, she sat in the dark for a few minutes staring at the screen. Flashes of white light landed on her face as other cars pulled in slow and filled in the spaces around her. She was early, so after a few minutes she decided to venture across the sloped asphalt to the snack shop. The night was still and warm. A faint gleam of stars splattered the gloom overhead.

Embarrassed by the idea of being seen at the drive-in movie theater alone, Vicky approached the brightly lit yellow tile building hesitantly. One end of the open counter-style window was devoted to condiments. Several people were gathered there scooping relish and squirting catsup and mustard onto their steaming hot dogs. A few people lined up in front of the cashier to place their orders. No one was talking. Scanning their faces, Vicky decided these were the people elected to buy the refreshments while their partners, for whatever reason, had opted to stay in the car. No one would suspect she was alone. Pleased, she bought a large popcorn and soda.

Vicky picked up the tub of popcorn and balanced it against her hip, then she picked up the soda.

The movie screen lit up suddenly making it harder to see the asphalt. Vicky stopped. Waiting for the light on the screen to fade. A picture of white fluffy clouds and a beautiful winged woman filled the screen.

Vicky gripped the ice-cold soda. Brown liquid pooled on top of the plastic lid, she hugged the warm tub of popcorn next to her body like a baby and continued moving in the direction of her car. The screen bloomed in full color as the opening credits played. Music ricocheted all around. A beam of colored light streamed through the black air materializing on the screen. The MGM lion head bared his teeth, playing backwards across shining car hoods. Vicky could hear a tinny roar echoing from aging speakers as she made her way across the empty spaces near the snack bar.

Further in, she couldn't help but look in through the dark glass of the parked cars. The movie, billed as a romantic comedy, attracted mostly young couples and a few double dates, she noticed.

A silver Audi Quattro parked at the end of the row behind her car caught her attention. There was a LAFD sticker on the back bumper. She approached the vehicle slowly and holding her breath, tried to keep her eyes on the popcorn. It seemed as though there was only one person in the car. There was no one in the drivers seat, and only the passenger seat was reclined. Was there a lonely fireman opting for a solitary movie rather than another night spent in his empty apartment? Vicky felt her stomach jump with anticipation. Would she knock on his window? Thank him for his public service? She repressed a giggle. Maybe she could pretend to be suffering from some ailment—a heart attack? She could try blatant honesty. 'Hi, I noticed you were alone? Would you like some company?' That was something her sister would do. Lines like that always worked for Jen.

Vicky was just behind the bumper when she noticed the body of the car rocking back and forth slightly. Startled, Vicky stopped walking and stared at the low profile tires. All four remained steady on the asphalt, and yet the tailgate was distinctly bobbing. She peered through the back window. White flesh caught the light. Vicky's eyes adjusted to the murky interior. Feet came into view, toenails pressed on the dashboard. A man's bare ass rising and falling rhythmically in the reclined passenger seat. A woman's milky white breasts jiggled with the impact. Stunned she glanced up at the big screen. Opening credits rolled over the scene of a man walking his dog, a woman reading a newspaper on a park bench. The opening twang of music ricocheting through the parking lot through tinny speakers didn't match the passionate dance within the car. Still, she felt instantly aroused. Swallowing hard, she moved slightly closer for a better view.

Condensation dripped down the exterior of Vicky's over full soda and she suddenly felt the cup slip from her grip. She struggled to catch the wet plastic with her left hand, managing only to fling popcorn into the air just as diet coke, ice and cup exploded on the trunk of the Audi. The man inside looked up and their eyes met, Vicky turned away quickly, struggling to brush the ice back into the cup with one hand, the other still encumbered with the tub of popcorn. She didn't even like popcorn, she thought with irritation. Feeling tense and miserable she managed a futile wave of apology as she swept the liquid off his car.

The man lowered the back window and Vicky heard, "You want a better view? We can turn on the dome light." Without hesitation he flicked on the light and she could see his glistening skin. A loud giggle erupted from the woman inside the car, and then a gasp as the man resumed his position. The woman's moans could be heard now through the open window.

She felt nauseous as she moved quickly to her car. She set the popcorn on the hood, as she fumbled in the dark with her keys. Once inside she set the Coke on the dash and dropped low in the seat and realized she was breathing heavily. Her fingers jammed down on the door lock, as she punched the key into the ignition. All the movies had started now and, without turning on her headlights, she searched the void of black asphalt for the white lines she had followed in. Accelerating, she lurched forward. The car bounced roughly over the sloped asphalt causing the tub of popcorn to fly up and slam the windshield at the same time that the Coke exploded down the dashboard. She grabbed at the wipers as she turned the car around. The wipers launched popcorn into the air.

She couldn't help but glance over at the Audi. The couple waved as she sped by.

"God Damn it just take the job," she muttered to herself. She moved the rear view mirror to catch her own reflection. She was afraid. Afraid to go back. Afraid to leave her children. Afraid to leave her home.

"Right turn, quarter mile." The car said.

The dark streak of soda would surely set in the wood grain. She would need to find the orange almond cleaner as soon as she got home.

"Right turn. Quarter mile."

"You are so pathetic." She reached and snapped the mirror back into place after she pulled back into traffic.

"I'm so fucking pathetic." Vicky said again hitting the steering wheel with her fist. A hard pressure built behind her eyes. She needed to clean up the soda, the incessant nag of chores

made her feel even more alone. Without warning, she suddenly opened her mouth and emitted a low wailing sound. The noise sounded distant and sad like howl. A second later she was sobbing. Driving and sobbing in the dark.

An hour passed before Vicky stopped the car in Studio City. 310-939-0022. The numbers leapt into her brain and before she could acknowledge them— before the incessant chime of the Christian Coalition, Cal Osha, the family council, the logical and practical dimensions of her psyche could register their complaints—she called him.

“Mark?” She asked when he answered.

“Vicky?” He responded.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Are you busy?”

“No.” She could hear a quiet rustling on the other line and then a door shutting. “I’m on my way to the Super for a gallon of milk.”

“Do you still have your studio downtown?”

“Yep.” He answered without hesitation.

“Can you meet me there?”

“Sure.”

“When.”

“15 minutes okay?”

“Great.”

When she reached Highway One she lowered all the windows. The ocean rumbled along the wide stretch of sand to her left, and on the right a cliff rose craggy and rough revealing the crumbling foundation of the multi-million dollar neighborhood perched high overhead. She turned right onto Santa Monica Blvd. and dodged the traffic emptying from trendy restaurants and headed towards where gold lights from the downtown sky rises signaled like beacons to the black night sky. In between two of the tallest buildings, she found a parking lot and walked four blocks to the mid-rise art deco building with the numbers 4669 printed across the top. He was standing on the front steps, smiling.

“Hey, Vic.” He said pulling her into his arms. The thickness of his embrace reassured her.

She looked up at him briefly, but longed to be tucked away inside the building away from the onslaught of traffic noise and lights. The nameless, faceless people in the cars and on the streets all looked like villains in a video game. They climbed the stairs in silence. Vicky breathed heavily at the top of the stairs. He pushed open the metal door and the view of the city filled the space in front of her. Skyscrapers blocked the night sky. Columns of windows rose up around the roof. A collage of green gold glass made patterns up and down the dark walls of glass. Vicky peered at the internal chambers illuminated in the lighted windows. Dark shapes of office furniture could be seen through the glass.

She ducked inside the rooftop studio—the place where they had already broken all the rules. The place Vicky had woken up dreaming about. Only in her sleep there had been stars all around and a moon overhead. Tonight the sky was charred black and there was only the faint smell of roof tar on the breeze. Still she was glad they were there. She felt time crushing in on her along with her thoughts of all the reasons why she should not have gone there, shouldn't have called, should never have let it happen that one time because now faced with him in his own space there was no way out.

Vicky felt the familiar hesitation filling her. The need to talk. To doubt. To question his intention, her own. But she shut it down until there was only silence inside.

“So what's up?” His voice was friendly, always. Never too forward. Too brash

“I..nothing, really.”

“What are you doing?” He leaned against the bar in the kitchen. “You out prowling tonight?”

“I went to a movie.”

“By yourself?”

Vicky nodded. “A drive-in.” For the first time she allowed herself to notice the décor in the room. Star Wars posters, surf memorabilia and a dusty collection of antique cameras provided the boyish definition of Mark she had suspected all along.

“Oh, now that is sad, Vic. You can't go to a drive-in by yourself. You should have called me.”

“I can't call you.”

“At work. We could have arranged to meet.”

Vicky shook her head and picked up a figurine of a Hawaiian girl wearing a grass skirt. Her torso wiggled when she lifted.

"I'm glad you called," he said, his voice dropped to just above a whisper.

She wondered if shame or regret had driven down the volume. As though a whisper would make everything less...wrong. She set down the Hula girl and looked out the French doors that opened onto the roof. The black tar roof glistened in the a half-moon light. Vicky could hear the faint chant of the Christian Coalition. She wanted to block them out some how.

"Do you have any music?" She asked suddenly.

"Sure. What do you want to hear? I have a little bit of everything here."

"Whatever is in the CD player." She answered without thinking. "Just turn it on and play whatever is there."

He moved across the room and a minute later Madame Butterfly played across the hidden speakers.

"Opera?" She laughed.

He shrugged. "Pavorati."

"I don't want to think."

He moved toward her and she wasn't sure that he had heard what she had said, the music was loud and building, but he didn't stop until his arms were around her, his mouth pressed hard onto hers. She returned his kiss and pressed her body against him. Her fingers rising to the back of his hair. Her lips parted and she felt the soft warmth of his tongue filling her mouth. The kiss was long and hard. More like a long awaited dance than anything else, and their bodies responded to the prolonged heat. She felt his hands reaching for her breasts, and she bent her head just long enough to unbutton her blouse. He watched as she shook the thin fabric from her shoulders, and then his embrace closed around her again, and there was only the pulse and thrum of her body. Her mind shut down, as she allowed her body to be lifted and carried to the couch. In that brief instant everything she longed for was there, and then there was only the flare of desire and the intensity of her body taking over, her mind free of all thought outside of sensation. He filled her completely and didn't let her go until she had burst, and burned and melted afterward. She knew then that she would be back here again asked for more.

Monday morning after dropping off the kids at school, Vicky scanned the housecleaning section of the phone book. Shannan had given her a short list of phone numbers, but not one of

the women had called her back. Shannan assured her it was only a matter of time before someone lost their job, or house, or both or the kids moved away to college—and then she'd get the nanny call back, but after weeks of struggling to keep up with everything, Vicky was willing to admit defeat. She just didn't have time to fit everything into the day. If she took care of the house and the kids, she didn't have time for herself, and in Los Angeles personal maintenance was not an option. Showing up to a bake sale with exposed roots or stains on her blouse was a great way to get people doubting your sanity. If she took time for her routine grooming, exercise and shopping, then she didn't have time for the house and the kids. If she came home to a chaotic house, she felt like tearing her hair out. Cleanliness and order had always been crucial to her success. If the house was a mess, so was she. Only to her therapist did she admit the truth: if she had to choose between herself and the house, she would choose the house. The personal maintenance—bi-monthly hair and facial appointments, pedicure, manicure, gym trainer and massage combined with the shopping for requisite grooming and fashion supplies—felt like chores that needed to be enforced with a vigor that didn't apply to the care and order of the house. Organizing in the home came automatically—the house was just too big to conquer alone.

As she listened to the phone ring, she was thankful that she had also given up on the Positive Discipline meetings. Admitting that she couldn't clean her own house was embarrassing, and she couldn't deny the sense of failure lurking in the furthest reaches of her mind as she set up the Merry Maid schedule. Manny was the one who had put her in this enormous box in the first place, she told herself when they placed her on hold. She never wanted a house this big—that was all him, and now he can't even be bothered to live in it.

After employing the cleaning service, Vicky's next phone call required a trip to the master bedroom. She pulled out the top drawer of her dresser, and removed the envelope where she had stashed Jack's card. A nervous flutter rose up inside of her. Could she really do this? Was she really ready to take the next step?

In the bathroom, she took one Xanax and forced herself to wait a few minutes. Staring into the mirror, she practiced her speech to Jack. "Jack darling, it's Vicky Anderson, listen Manny was a little slow on the whole idea of me going back to work" —yes that would be good—bring up Manny's name immediately. No one wanted to piss Manny off right now—not when he was at the top of his game.

“What’s that?” Vicky cocked her head to the side examining her chin for any sign of sag. “I told you to fuck off? Oh wasn’t that funny, that was a joke, of course. I thought you’d find that amusing.”

“What? Oh I just needed to buy a little time. You know, it’s hard for a modern woman like myself to admit that I need to discuss details like career changes with my husband, but the truth is that I just needed a little bit of time, you know, to work it all out.” Vicky smiled at herself in the mirror. “I just needed to work out the details,” she repeated trying to adjust her tone to sound less angry, more friendly and a little bit sexy. She drew in a deep breath.

After five minutes of deep breathing to fill her brain with oxygen. She walked back into the bedroom, held her breath and dialed the phone.

“Trident, can you hold?”

“Sure.”

Vicky forced herself to stay on the line. No backing out, she told herself sternly. She was not going to become a pot smoking merry maid. No way. Even her children had looked at her differently since she started to clean the house. Besides Mark had assured her it wasn’t too late. He said Jack had asked him about her just the day before. Timing was everything in this business. The guilt gates of the studio loomed in her thoughts. She wanted to be able to dip her fingers in that fountain. She wanted a little piece of her life back, and she was finally ready to fight for it.

“This is Vicky Anderson and I’m returning Jack’s call,” she replied briskly when the secretary came back on the line.

Five minutes later Jack’s voice boomed across the line, “So you tell me to fuck off, and now you want the job, is that what you are going to tell me because I’m not interested in apologies. I’ve got work to do.”

Vicky forced air into her lungs and lowered her voice to insure a smooth pitch. “That was just a term of endearment, Jack. You know that. Of course, I want the job.”

“Ha! Ha, ha ha.”

Unsure of how to interpret his response, Vicky continued according to plan. “I just needed to buy myself some time to work out the details and I wanted to make sure you were serious. Are you serious Jack?”

“We need you on Wednesday. Welcome aboard. Studio 215. 9 a.m.”

“Great. I’ll see you there.”

Vicky's heart fluttered like a monarch in her chest. Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! She wanted to call someone to share the news. She dialed her mother without thinking.

"Mom?"

"Is everything all right? The kids? Manny?"

"I have some good news."

"What?"

"I've been offered a job on a new prime time television show, and I've decided to take it."

Vicky pictured Jasmine standing in her kitchen, holding her old fashioned phone with the cord attaching her to the flowered wall paper. "Well, Vicky! That is very exciting. I'm so surprised!"

"Yeah. I know, me too. I just...it was an offer I couldn't refuse. You know, timing is everything here, Mom. If I passed up this opportunity, they probably wouldn't consider giving me another one."

"Praise Jesus!"

"I'm pretty excited." Vicky stared out the window at the Pyracantha bush. Sunlight shined on the deep green leaves.

"Manny must be very proud of you."

"I haven't told him yet."

"What?"

"It's so hard for us to connect lately. His schedule is crazy and they are 8 hours ahead."

"You need to tell your husband, Vicky. This is a big deal. This is a life changing event."

"I know." Vicky felt empty whenever she thought of Manny. To be honest, she could care less what Manny thought, but she was excited to tell Mark. A flash of guilt woven with remorse struck her at this realization.

"You should hang up right now and call him, Vicky," her mother said firmly. "You need to give him the chance to be happy for you."

"I'm not sure he is going to be happy for me."

"Well, you need to give him the chance to decide how he feels," Jasmine's voice stopped and the line crackled slightly. "He loves you, Vicky. I'm sure he'll be excited."

"Maybe," Vicky looked at her hands. Her wedding ring really needed cleaning. All the solvents she'd used on the house had dimmed the shine.

“Well, I’m excited for you!” Jasmine’s voice came across with a forced enthusiasm. “I think it’s great that you aren’t afraid to get back out there—you and your sister are so brave, I just don’t know how you do it.”

“Please don’t compare a job in Hollywood to what Jen is doing,” Vicky snapped.

“Oh, Honey,” Jasmine said. “That’s not what I meant. I just mean you both know how to take the bull by the horns—when life gives you lemons, make lemonade, kind of thing.”

“Mom, Jen has chosen to have sex with men for money,” Vicky said. “I write scripts for television. Those are two very different things.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasmine sighed. “I just wish you wouldn’t be so hard on your sister. You know she’s been on her own since she was—“

“Since she left home after sleeping with a married man and started working as a stripper!”

“I know,” Jasmine said.

Vicky always found it strange that Jasmine had only kind words for Jen despite the fact that Jen was a sinner destined to burn in hell, according to the Gospel her mother lived by.

“I’m excited for you Honey. It’s just—“ her mother’s voice faded off.

“Just what!” Vicky demanded.

“I thought you were so happy staying home. I thought that’s what you always wanted.”

“I did. I am...I mean—they are older now,” Vicky felt frustrated. “They don’t really seem to need me, anymore. They are both getting so independent.”

“Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”

“Corinthians 7.”

“You are listening to your calling, Vicky. The Lord will guide you. Besides, children grow up faster now. Nothing is the same as it was when I was raising you and your sister.”

“That’s for sure.” Vicky was surprised at the tears that filled her eyes and she wiped them away before they had a chance to fall.

“I am very proud of you. Now, call your husband.”

Vicky hung up the phone and paced up and down the halls in the house. Freed from the endless list of cleaning jobs, she suddenly felt like a caged lion. Pressure built up in her chest until she thought she might scream or cry. Maybe she needed to celebrate. Her mind automatically flipped to last night’s orgasm. She wanted another one. Just one more, she told herself. She deserved one more.

“Mark Anton,” He picked up on the first ring.

“It’s Vicky.”

“Hey. Good to hear your sexy voice.”

Vicky smiled and felt a warm gush inside her chest. “I have some news to share.

Are you free for lunch?”

“Sure.”

“Where?

“Your place?”

“When?”

“One hour.”

“You got it.”

Mark Anton’s studio was in warehouse district just south of West Hollywood and only a 20 minute walk from the Studios. Her car GPS had malfunctioned the entire way.

“Left turn, quarter mile.” She must have fried the electrical with the Coke, Vicky thought grabbing in frustration at the knob, but instead of turning off the device the knob popped off and flew through the car landing somewhere between the seats.

“Left turn, quarter mile.” The car repeated.

Vicky breathed in sharply and pushed the air out through her nose. The annoyance of her nagging car replaced any trace of nervousness she should have had at the prospect of seeing Mark. She wasn’t just going to see Mark, she told herself.

“I’m going to have sex with my lover in the middle of the afternoon.” She said out loud. The statement caused her to glance in the rear view mirror. Rubbing her lips together, she reached for the lip gloss inside her bag.

“Left turn, quarter mile.”

Vicky turned the volume up on the radio, and pushed scan. Snippets of commercials played across the speakers as the receiver automatically searched for a station playing music. As she dotted the lip gloss across her lips, a slight tremor of excitement rose up from her abdomen. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror before tucking the tube bag inside her purse.

Vicky pulled the SUV onto Mark's street and immediately started looking for parking. She didn't want a spot too close, but then again someone might see her walking, so maybe closer was better. She could always explain that she and Mark would be working together on the same show next season...what the hell good would that do? The bottom line was that if anyone from the studio saw her walking on this 20 yard stretch of sidewalk, they would know that she and Mark Anton were having an affair. At least no one from the school ventured to this side of town, and since no one at the studio had kids—she was fairly certain the rumors wouldn't circulate far.

"This is the last time," Vicky told herself, reapplying her lipgloss and checking her makeup in the visor mirror. Already the urge to celebrate had been displaced by a nervous whirl of emotions. Was she really expecting sex from Mark? Was that why she had ventured into the sewing room before her shower and emerged with Sea Salt scrub and Mango body butter, both of which turned out to be two successful non-toxic non-allergenic acquisitions. Only yesterday this would have counted as an enormous accomplishment, but today the decision to return to her career had already diminished much of what had taken precedence in her life. Vicky's acknowledgement of her old life, the way things used to be, followed her like a shadow as she walked down the uneven surface of the sidewalk toward Mark's studio.

A nervous tremor shimmered through her at the sight of blue door. "Sex is good," she whispered to herself looking down at her pink painted toes and flip flops as she rang the buzzer.

"Sex is good," she repeated when the buzzer sounded and the latch released.

It was possible that they both had decided too much conversation would be detrimental to the overall goals of each party. One thing Vicky knew as soon as he opened the door: she was very attracted to Mark. Looking at him sent shivers through her insides. His body was so much bigger than Manny's, so much stronger, so much leaner, and more muscular. There was nothing delicate about this man. His wide face held substantial features—not thin and refined like Manny's—but thick and boyish as if crafted out of Playdough. Vicky had always held a certain confidence that Mark was attracted to her. It wasn't that he had ever said so, but that she felt him like a magnetic force coming at her.

"Would you like a beer?" Mark said lifting his Foster's from the counter.

"Sure."

And when he approached her with the beer, instead of taking the beer and launching off on a discussion that would inevitably center on the all the reasons why they shouldn't do what they both really wanted to do: Mark handed Vicky the beer and without so much as a blink of

hesitation moved in close to her face with his mouth, reached for her chin with his hand and placed his beer wet lips on hers. She responded, passionately. There was really nothing more a verbal discussion could accomplish at that point. Vicky's body took control, and her mind, surprisingly, relinquished command. Mark led Vicky to the couch, where he pulled her on top of him. After only a few minutes of mutual crouch rubbing, and full-mouthed kissing, Mark pulled away long enough to remove a condom from the drawer beneath the coffee table, and Vicky watched with a fast-rising chest as he unzipped his jeans and extracted his full length in front of her. Ten seconds later they were 'having sexual intercourse,' and within 60 seconds Vicky could feel the imminent explosion catching fire. Mind empty, hips rising and falling, she closed her eyes and let the eruption overtake her. Fire transformed to water as she crested, and let the wave lift her and carry her. Head back, back arched, the wave crashed, frothy and pulsing all over her body.

"I want to stay here all day with you," Mark said after they had both recovered their breath. He rolled over onto his side to watch her. "Can you manage that?"

His voice jarred her back from the long quiet shore, where she had been pleasantly reveling in the post-orgasmic delight.

The day's schedule automatically started up and ticked through her mind. Today was one of the days when both Iris and Ira had afternoon activities at the school. Ira had basketball practice and Iris went from dance to soccer, so technically she was free until 5:30. Of course, as Doris Day would have reminded her had she been home, the day was jammed full of all sorts of necessary errands like: Pick up Iris' recital costume. Facial. Therapy. And several items in the house were running low: toilet bowl cleanser and laundry soap were both precariously close to empty. That morning she had noticed that Ira's pants looked too short. He must be experiencing another growth spurt. And then there was the shopping trip to procure her new career wardrobe. Oh! And they were nearly out of milk! And Iris had made her promise to buy more Teddy Bear snack crackers for her lunch—

"I have so much to do—" Vicky nearly groaned under the burden of the familiar rapid beat of her thoughts. She rested her arm over her face, trying desperately to stop her mind from its incessant plotting to get back to the peace of that long wide beach where he had left her only moments before.

Mark laughed and reached for her beer. "Are you sure, you can't take the day off? I thought we were celebrating."

Vicky reached for the beer and took a sip. There was a pleasant smell in the studio. She glanced at the tropical tree growing in the corner by the window. A leafy, earthy smell, and a sweet coconut smell. Was it the plant?

“Is that a coconut tree?”

Mark laughed.

“I mean a palm tree?” Vicky corrected herself, embarrassed.

“Banana.”

“Why do I smell coconuts?”

“Surfboard wax.” He answered matter-of-factly, reaching for a white disk on the coffee table. He handed her the wax. It was the size of a hockey puck and she held it up to her nose, surprised that the scent hadn’t made her sneeze. Mangoes and coconut, two scents she could withstand, she kept a mental note. Maybe Manny was right and she should consider a tropical location.

Her eyes moved to the surfboard leaning against the wall. Surfboard wax? Who knew a surfboard needed wax? “What’s the wax for?”

“To make the surface sticky, grippy, so you don’t slide off.” The final accent of his words had that Australian curl to them.

“Hum,” she set the wax back down on the coffee table. Why hadn’t Manny ever told her that? She’d never noticed the coconut smell on the new surfboard he had recently purchased and stored in the garage.

“Why don’t we stay right here all day?” Mark said, pushing his fingers through his hair.

“I can’t,” she replied automatically.

“Let yourself.” He stretched out on his elbow and propped his head up with his hand.

Vicky thought about being high yesterday. The panic over driving to pick up the kids, she now reflected, had been mostly her own paranoia. The smooth drive down the canyon had proven that she was more than capable. In fact, she had driven more safely than ever. She couldn’t even remember the last time she had thought to follow the posted speed limit. Still, she reminded herself, the freeway would have been terrifying.

“You need to play hooky with me today.”

Vicky swallowed and tipped the beer back. A blush crossed her cheeks and she hated herself for being so easy to read. “I’ve never played that before.” She said after swallowing the cool liquid.

“Come on!” He looked at her in disbelief. “What did you do when you were a teenager?”

Vicky laughed. “Homework.”

“Such a good girl, Vicky.” He said reaching out to box her lightly in the chin.

He moved his body closer to hers again. She could feel the warmth of his breath on his face. “I’m gonna make you feel like a teenager again. A naughty teenager,” his hand slipped inside her unbuttoned blouse and cupped her breast. His thumb rubbed slowly across her nipple.

She moved away quickly, her breath coming fast into her lungs. A dull throb beat between her legs. “I can’t.” She said, annoyed with the memory sparked by the familiar words. ‘I can’t’ was her mantra as a teenager. “I can’t.” Over and over and over. Jett never let on how much she must have frustrated him. Not once in three years did they ever succeed in having sex. How strange it was that she had never once said “I can’t” with Manny. Not once. Her silence had led to Ira, to marriage, to Iris, to... here.

Panic overtook her emotions and she pushed him off of her. “I...I...” Her palms felt sweaty. She glanced at her watch.

“Alrighty then,” Mark sat up slowly and shook his head back and forth. “You really turn me on, Vicky.” He said looking over at her.

She felt anxious and slightly annoyed. Their eyes met.

“Is there some kind of fantasy?” His mouth opened, then shut. “Something you’ve always wanted to do, but never had the guts to try?”

Something triggered the memory of Danny O’Shay. The stainless counter. Sex at gunpoint.

“There is one thing,” Vicky said, her eyes dropping to her bag on the floor.

He grinned widely. “What?”

“It’s in my bag.”

He reached for the bag and handed it to her. Vicky reached into the bag. And then shook her head and removed her hand. “It’s ridiculous.”

“You just need to relax, Vic,” Mark said. He placed his hand on her thigh. “That’s what I noticed when I saw you at school the other day...”

“What?”

“You don’t seem as relaxed as you used to.”

“I’ve got kids, now. Responsibilities...”

“Oh, I know. You don’t have to explain all that to me. My wife is in law school, don’t talk to me about stress. For the past four years, I’ve been Super Dad. The camera work, that’s my easiest job by far. Going to work is like a fucking vacation.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Could I have one more beer?” She asked.

Mark got up and went over to the fridge.

“Would you like a Xanax?” She asked tapping the pill into her palm.

“No, thanks.”

She just wanted to relax. Relax, she told herself. She took a long sip of the beer and leaned her head back against the couch and closed her eyes. She was really not very good at this. She felt like her head was going to explode.

Mark moved over to the stereo, and turned up the music.

The rapid fire tick of Vicky’s mind slowed to a thick drift of thought. Ideas moved languidly through her like a ship moving toward the horizon. The image of her children at school emerged first and she settled on the picture of them in their classrooms happily for a few minutes. She was vaguely aware that Mark had moved across the room. Music eased across the room from the speakers. Guitars and drums filled the space.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she heard him call, but she didn’t respond, she let the music fill her head and for what seemed like a long time there was only that.

When she opened her eyes, she was sure hours had passed, but her watch reported only 25 minutes had gone by. Mark appeared in the space immediately in front of her. His hair slicked back and wet from the shower.

“You ready to feel like a teenager?” He asked, grinning.

Every sense in her body felt magnified as thought she had become aware of the nerves floating just underneath the surface of the skin. Nodding, she reached up for his hand and they stood next to each other, their bodies moving to the music, dancing.

By three o’clock Vicky was feeling the rapid advance of anxiety and paranoia again. Adding to this stress was her own acknowledgment that she was a complete failure as an adultress. Mark had disappeared into his office, and she could hear him on the phone. After a few phone calls, he re-emerged from his room wearing surf trunks and flip flops.

In this short space of time that he was gone Vicky had convinced herself that he was nothing more than an industry Playboy. Jessica had warned her. Why hadn't she listened? The beer had left her with a dull, aching feeling in her head.

"I need to go." She said abruptly after he sat down.

"What's up?"

"I can't stay here all day. I don't know what I was thinking. I have so much to do today." She rose up from the couch and started gathering her shoes, and articles of clothing from the room. Mark leaned against the kitchen counter, watching.

"I thought you said you would play hookey?"

"I tried. I'm not good at it. I just keep thinking of all the things I'm supposed to be doing." She struggled to fasten her sandals. "I have this annoying calendar at home that sounds just like Doris Day," Vicky said, placing both hands on her head. "It's like she's inside my head, scolding me."

Vicky looked at him and immediately sat down in the desk chair. "I know," she felt panic creep into her voice. "I..I'm just starting to feel crazy sitting in here. I'm thinking too much."

Mark nodded and crossed his arms across his chest. "Well, why don't we go down to the beach?"

"The beach?" Vicky swallowed the last sip of the beer he had opened for her three hours before. "What if someone sees us?"

"We can go to Venice. No one goes to Venice that we know. Besides it's great people watching."

"I know someone in Venice," Vicky said trying to remember who she had been talking to recently who said they lived in Venice. Someone. Who was it? An image of the mall loomed in her thoughts. That's right. Two of the salesgirls said they lived in Venice. Did that really matter?"

"No one in Venice is gonna care about seeing us together, come Vicky, you are just being paranoid. It's not like we are a couple of celebrities."

Vicky nodded. "But I can't be late to pick up the kids."

"You said 5:30 right?"

Vicky nodded. "What about your kids?"

He laughed. "They are on the same schedule today. Jonica has band practice and Eric is at Science Lab."

Vicky blanched. The idea that their kids were at the same school was very disturbing. How could they have never seen each other before? What would they do when they all went to the same family function? How could she ever introduce Manny to Mark? Oh my god. Oh my god. What had she done?

Her hands rose to her mouth and she felt her heart racing. "I don't know what I was thinking." She exhaled and spoke through her fingers.

He picked up her bag and looked inside. Their eyes met as he pulled out the gun.

"Were you going to kill me, or is this just part of the fantasy?"

Vicky's voice caught in her throat. "Fantasy," she managed after he handed her the gun.

"You are a nasty girl, Victory Anderson," he said, dropping the towel on the floor at her feet. "I hope that thing has a safety."

Vicky nodded. Then she turned the gun, and showed him the red clasp on the side of the trigger.

"Well, then," Mark whispered in her ear. "Show me what happens next."

After her third orgasm of the day, Vicky felt terror rising in her chest. She leaped up from where they had ended up on the floor by the front window and got another beer out of the refrigerator. "I'm going to hell." She said, recrossing the room. She took a long drink from the bottle. "We are both going to hell."

Mark pulled on his swim trunks. "Stop wiggling out on me, will you? This is supposed to be fun." He grabbed his shirt from the couch and pushed his arms through the sleeves. Without taking the time to button the front, he walked through the room shutting off the lights. "You just need some fresh air. It's going to be fine." He crossed the room and grabbed his car keys. "Let's go."

Venice Beach was only about 15 minutes away from Mark's studio. Vicky was thankful there was no back up on the freeway. Trying to explain being seen in Mark's car seemed even more awkward than explaining a random sighting at the beach. After all, she could say she ran into him. That she had gone to check on some art she and Manny had commissioned from an artist in Venice and ran into Mark on the way. It was perfectly reasonable to think they would take some time to discuss the show, the kids, the had much in common even outside of the tremendous mutual attraction. Hopefully, people wouldn't notice the magnetic connection Vicky felt towards Mark despite her suspicion and intermittent annoyance. Even in the car, she'd had a

hard time refraining from leaning over and kissing him. He drove a stick shift. His arms looked so strong pulling that stiff stick into gear. He'd still not taken any time to button his shirt, and instead of the paunchy roll Vicky had become accustomed to whenever Manny sat down without a shirt on, Mark's stomach remained smooth, ribbed, even. The warmth between her legs pulse against the leather seat. Oh my god. What was happening to her?

"You know we should go to the shooting range," Mark said. "Has Manny ever taken you there."

"No." Vicky pictured herself firing the gun at a human shaped target. "I've never even pulled the trigger.

Mark chuckled. "I've never been."

His accent was so intriguing, Vicky thought admiring his profile. Especially the way he pronounced his e's.

"Couple of blokes from Studio F tried to get me to go one time." Mark explained.

"I think I'd like that." Vicky said, thinking about the satisfaction she would feel at pulling the trigger over and over. At hearing the noise of the blast. At actually hitting something.

"Let's go on Friday morning," he said, he put his hand on her thigh. "It'll be fun."

"Okay," Vicky nodded. It did sound like fun. That's all she wanted, she told herself. Just a little bit of fun. "After we drop the kids off?"

"We can meet at my place, and then, you know, head over, whenever we are ready."

She had a date. A date with a hot Australian dude. Oh my God! She felt a trill of anticipation zing through her. They exited the freeway, and Mark turned up the radio when a song by Cold Play came on. Was it possible that this hunky man was a romantic? Did he actually listen to Cold Play? Or was he doing this to put on a show. Whenever Manny and Vicky drove anywhere together they were joined by the annoying cast of Newstalk a.m. 1040, or worse, the sportscasters at 760.

Vicky couldn't help but read the billboard out front of the Assembly of God church as they passed: "Jesus was put in this world for one reason, to destroy the work of the devil." Excitement switched immediately to anxiety. Were they really planning on walking along Venice? Her palms felt itchy and her stomach churned. How could she do this to Manny? How could she sit there in Mark's sportcar, with the sun spilling across her lap and compare Manny's radio habits to Mark's. Mark's ribbed abdomen and accent compared to Manny's paunchy belly fat and glasses. This was purely evil. Oh my god. Oh my god. What was she going to do? She

needed to make him stop the car. To turn around. To drop her off. To tell him that she never wanted to see him again that this had been a mistake!

Mark turned down the radio when the song finished playing. He looked over and smiled at her. His hand moved to cover hers, but just for an instant, then he shifted down and turned the final corner. The crowded beach filled their view. In the distance the blue gray line of the ocean blurred into the grey haze of the horizon. The anxiety faded momentarily as she scanned the motley crowd at the beach. Mark was right, they didn't know anyone who spent time here. There were so many people they would easily be lost in the crowd. She pulled down the visor, and reapplied her lipgloss in the mirror. Her eyes looked slightly red and glassy. What was wrong with her? Why did she think that pot made her relax when the both times she had smoked she virtually had a nervous breakdown afterwards? She would just have to mark this down as another mistake to learn from. Although, the sex had been extremely—

“I forgot to congratulate you on Manny's new movie deal.” Mark said scanning the mobbed streets for a parking place.

Vicky rubbed her glossed lips together and snapped the visor shut. “What?”

“No more B-movie business. He's finally made it to the big time.”

Vicky stared at the cars lined up along the curb trying to comprehend what Mark was saying.

“Shooting in Africa is going to be amazing.”

The woman in the parking lot waved as she passed by. “Are all three movies set in Africa?”

Her mind slowly churned to a stop on the reality of what Mark was saying “What?”

Mark swerved to the right and put on his blinker just in front of a car that was pulling out. “Wow. Great spot, eh?”

“Well, anyway. Even if its just one, I know I'm jealous. I've always wanted to spend time in Africa. You know the original people. The roots of humanity.” He said shaking his fist against his chest. “You must be thrilled.” A pedestrian jaywalked in the space behind his car. Mark patiently waited. “Warner's is a great studio. Lots of perks,” he winked.

Vicky looked at him, unable to speak. What the hell was he talking about?

He glanced over to her and then back in the rear view mirror, and then slowly looked back over at her. “You knew, right?”

Vicky shook her head. Mark's mouth opened. His hand shot out to cover hers, but she retracted.

"He signed a contract with Warners?" Her words came slow. When?"

"Everyone has been talking about it down at the studio, I thought he must have told you."

"For how long?"

"From what I could tell it had been at least a couple of weeks ago, Vic. I'm so sorry. The way people were talking it seemed like old news already."

"In Africa? With Warners?"

"Yeah. It's big time. They are talking about Brad Pitt being interested in the lead."

Vicky's mouth opened. "On location?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's just," Mark's words came quick as he shifted into reverse and swung the car backwards into the parking spot. "You know, a small percentage of the film."

Immediately Vicky's mind switched to her conversation with Jasmine about her new job that morning. "Call your husband," she had said clear as a bell. But that was only a few hours ago! How many times had she and Manny talked over the last two weeks. One hundred. He had just spent the weekend! He had deliberately NOT told her. That was basically lying. He had lied to her. She knew something had changed, but she just thought it was the affair. She hadn't even considered the possibility that he had signed another contract—without telling her. On location IN ANOTHER COUNTRY.

Vicky looked at Mark. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Mark tugged on the emergency brake and looked in the rear view mirror. He smoothed his hand over his skull. His hair shined like crude oil in the sun. "I assumed you knew," he said still examining his face in the mirror.

The "U" in "assumed" and "knew" sounded suspiciously British.

"I don't want to sound like a dick," Mark turned and looked at her. "But why didn't *you* know?" He looked straight into her eyes when he asked her the question as though she might not be able to see the point made by Manny's decision not to tell his own wife about the biggest deal in Hollywood last month.

"Don't you think that makes what we are doing, okay?" His hand reached for hers again. His voice was gentle. "Don't you deserve to feel good, Vicky?"

Vicky blushed and hated herself more than ever before at that moment. She grabbed at her purse and reached for the door handle. Trying desperately to look graceful, she hoisted herself

up and out of the car. Glancing up and down the crowded sidewalk, she decided not to yell, "Fuck you!" at the car.

Instead, she leaned back into the vehicle. "Thanks for the fuck." She glared at him for a minute.

"Come on," he said, his blue eyes hit her with the force of a light saber. Their naked bodies intertwined on the couch flashed in her mind.

"You knew," Vicky's eyes narrowed. "You knew that I didn't know. You asked me about Manny's schedule. I told you he would be home soon."

"I didn't know, Vicky. Honest." His face looked up at her, those eyes pleading for forgiveness like a naughty teenager. "I didn't put two and two together, come on!"

"You mother fucker!" She growled. "Leave me alone." As she said the words fear jolted her like a lighting bolt. What if he blackmailed her? He had complete control over her now. The idea caused her to straighten and step away from the car.

Leaving the door open, she backed up a few steps, hesitating for a moment over which direction to go. She could call someone, a cab, maybe Shannan would come pick her up? No. Shannan could not find out. No one. She would never admit this day to anyone.

"Vicky," she could hear his voice calling from the car, but she noticed he hadn't opened his door. He wasn't going to prevent her from storming off. She must have really freaked him out, she thought blithely, although she wasn't yet sure whether it was disappointment or relief that she felt knowing that the scene of chasing each other down the sidewalk of Venice would never happen. She squinted down at the black leather seat in the car where only a second before she had been sitting.

"Come on, get back in Vicky," she could hear his voice coming from inside the cool depths of the sports car.

She turned abruptly to the left and scanned the storefronts along Main beach. She could walk back. It wasn't that far. She still had three hours. She looked over to where his car was parked. The brake lights were on, but the car still sat idling in the parking spot. A few quick rights and lefts after that and, he'd never know where she'd gone. She jogged across the street at the first available opportunity and ducked into the alley.

Two hours later, Vicky admitted the whole plan had been flawed from the start. So she'd taken a left and then a right and then a left again. That must have been where she'd veered off

course. Her brain struggled to picture the turns she'd made, but everything seemed muddled and hard to trace. It had seemed like such a straight shot. Head east on Sunset and she'd be back to the studios in no time. Buildings lined up single story on both sides of the block. Mostly warehouses and abandoned store fronts. No landmarks. No signs. She had made a deliberate decision not to walk up Sunset. Had she taken the first left or the second? Did Union run parallel to Sunset or perpendicular? Was she headed East or South? Another 30 minutes passed before she admitted to herself that she was lost.

A distant hum indicated there was a freeway nearby, but where were the tall buildings of Studio City, the neat rows of parking meters and freshly poured sidewalks? Which freeway? Instead, she found herself in a warehouse district where the blocks all felt like a quarter of a mile long. She needed to find someone to ask directions, but for the past six blocks she had not passed one person on the sidewalk. She looked both ways down the street for signs of life. Nothing. No café's, clubs, shoe stores, nothing. A moving van was double parked half way down the block. Maybe someone was inside, she thought, heading up the street towards the van. As she approached a man and a woman emerged from a door at the top of the stair leading up to one of the loading ramps.

What the hell was she doing walking in Los Angeles? Wasn't there a song about this? In the 80's. Yes! The "Talking Seagulls" or something like that. Nobody walks in LA. The squeaky voice of the lead singer ricocheted through her head.

A shadow crossed both sides of the street. What if she was late to pick up the kids? What if there was construction traffic? An accident on the freeway? Her fingers went cold at the same time her face felt hot. Blood flooded her heart. The image of her kids standing alone on the curb in front of the school pushed her into a run. Why had she just stormed off? Why did she blame Mark for something Manny had done? What the hell was Manny thinking? Why hadn't he told her? Vicky's sandals slapped the sidewalk. Every step now was painful. A blister on the top of her foot had joined the attack of the one already biting into her heel.

Maybe he was going to divorce her? Maybe he hadn't told her because he was in love with his assistant and they had already planned their escape to Africa. But why hadn't he just told her? Vicky flashed on the night they'd last made love. How distracted he'd seemed during sex. He had avoided the conversation about when he was coming home. It all made perfect sense—except for the part about not telling her. Was he going to tell her he was leaving? Or was he just never coming home?

Dots of blood traced her path along the sidewalk by the time she reached the car. Her right foot, rubbed raw on the top, but not yet bleeding, hurt even more than the left. Her cell phone was not there. Vicky swallowed hard, picturing her phone locked inside Mark's apartment. She wanted to beat her fist on the dashboard, but instead she forced the key into the ignition.

"Right turn," The car responded as soon as the engine turned over. "Quarter mile, then left."

Vicky glared at the place where the GPS control knob was supposed to be. 5:15 glowed across the screen. "Oh my God," she whispered. Her heart chugged like a steam train up hill. Her kids would be out standing on the curb in 15 minutes. She was never going to make it. What if some psycho was there, waiting for exactly this type of situation?

"Right turn, quarter mile, then left." The car yammered.

Vicky turned the radio on full volume. Metallica boomed across the sound system reminding her of the wild joy she'd felt earlier. She slammed the gearshift into reverse and hit the gas. The SUV lurched backwards, ramming the car behind her. Without hesitation she turned the steering wheel hard to the left, pushed the gearshift back into drive, and pressed the accelerator. Gasoline raced into the engine. The hood bucked as the bumper tagged the car parked in front. Vicky stomped on the pedal, forcing the SUV into the street. A thrill of exhilaration zinged through her. What was the point of having this beast of a car if she was afraid to use it?

Half way down the block she strained to see the traffic on the freeway up ahead. The arching curve of cement held a full load of cars. The on-ramp was moving at a crawl.

"Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street." Vicky pressed repeatedly on the down volume button on the steering wheel. "Right turn, quarter mile, then left." The car repeated maintaining the same volume.

Turning right, she decided to take the short cut through downtown. Using her best defensive driving skills, she looked both ways before running the stop signs. Only once did another driver have to slam on his brakes.

"Sorry! I'm late to pick up the kids!" She hollered, waving. "Jesus, please forgive me. I am so sorry Lord, God. Please let me make it to pick up the kids on time. Please forgive me Jesus."

"Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street." There were two cross-town routes to Mount Holy Oak. One swung around the West side of town, paralleling the 405 and then cut under and through the backside of Beverley Hills. But this time of day, the traffic was thick

through the neighborhoods and many people exited 405 early when the back up was bad causing more congestion, so Vicky decided to take the route straight through downtown. At least downtown, she could jog over and around the back ups, and hopefully, most of the parking garages had already emptied out. People tended to leave work earlier downtown, Vicky thought hopefully.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street.”

Up ahead, Vicky could see a major back up, so she took the next right. Orange construction signs loomed on the next street, so she went one street further out of her way before turning. Traffic backed up at the next light, and she waited her heart racing. The image of her children standing alone in front of the school, the parking lot lights glowing orange, the sky darkening played before her eyes.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left.”

Vicky slammed her fist on the dashboard. “God damn it! You are driving me crazy!” The light up ahead turned green, and the traffic responded by moving forward at 2 m.p.h. “What is going on?” Vicky demanded after sitting through the red light, at least 50 cars still in front of her.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God. I’m going to be late. Oh my God.” Her mind reeled as the demon clock ticked off another minute. Vicky stared helplessly at the back up of cars.

The cars moved slowly through the intersection. She could see the back up extended all the way through the next light. Vicky could barely refrain from honking at the slow movement of cars pushed up the asphalt. She reached inside her purse and felt the cold metal of the gun in the side pocket. “If I miss this light I am going to kill someone!” She heard herself screaming. Pressure built her chest until she thought she was going to explode. Her eyes landed on the clock again. She pictured her children on the alone on the curb. Light slipped from the sky.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street.”

“What if there is a pedophile,” she said out loud. “What would they do?”

“Heavenly Father please protect my children,” Vicky whispered loudly, closing her eyes. She released the gun and clasped her hands on the steering wheel. “Please forgive me for sinning. I have made so many mistakes, but please don’t take it out on my innocent children. Punish me o Lord. Punish me, but not my children.”

Vicky opened her eyes, the light had turned green and she floored the accelerator through the intersection. She took the next left. Traffic was moving a little better, but she was still a good

15 minutes away. “Why doesn’t the school have security guard?” She fumed inside the car. “Why don’t they answer their phones after hours. God knows how many kids they have sequestered in that gym, surely she wasn’t the only parent to suffer through this kind of stress. God knows they paid enough to support after hours help!”

A car moved slowly in the left lane in front of her making it impossible to shift lanes. Vicky rode right up on its bumper. Flashing her lights, she waved her hand frantically in the windshield.

“Move out of the way!” The car slowed, but remained in her way. The driver, an older woman with a small white dog on her lap stared at her with a confused look on her face. The dogs mouth opened and closed rapidly.

“Move over you moron!” Vicky screamed, shaking her fist in the window.

The driver continued at the same pace.

Vicky glanced at her speedometer. “The speed limit is 45! You are going 30!” She screamed, scanning the road ahead of the car. Three cars were passing in the oncoming lane, and then there was a clearing. Should she risk passing? Vicky swerved in behind the car, and looked again at the oncoming traffic. In the middle of the city? In rush hour traffic? As soon as the cars passed, she jammed the accelerator all the way to the floor causing her vehicle to leap forward almost striking the bumper of the passenger car in front of her, she swerved just missing the bumper and raced alongside. Another car was approaching, but Vicky managed to duck back into her lane just in front of the slow moving car. Vicky flinched at the blare of the horn from the oncoming driver.

“Nice job,” urged the European voice in her rarely achieved encouraging tone. A trill of satisfaction triggered a smile on her face. With both hand gripped tightly on the wheel, she floored the accelerator.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left on Oakland Street.”

Vicky opened her eyes, the light had turned green and she floored the accelerator through the intersection. She took the next left. Traffic was moving a little better, but she was still a good 15 minutes away. “Why doesn’t the school have security guard?” She fumed tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. “God knows they paid enough to support after hours help!”

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left.” Vicky had never taken the time to ponder the voice in her car before, and so for the first time she acknowledged the woman had distinctly European accent. German. Most definitely. Suddenly the GPS switched tones. The steady nag replace by

the higher, warning pitch. “There is a traffic jam .25 miles ahead. Veer left. Left lane. Left lane. Left lane.”

How does it know? Vicky asked herself glancing nervously at the dashboard. Wasn’t it broken? Should she listen? Why would it suddenly start working? Vicky pictured the satellites floating somewhere way overhead beaming the invisible transmission into her antennae. Could the soda soaked wires read the signal? Or was it just some sort of electronic glitch. Before she could decide. The tone changed again.

“Right turn, quarter mile, then left.” The car droned.

The giant stone exterior of Mount Holy Oak loomed ahead. The school took up the whole city block. A thin swath of grass circled the building like a moat. Gold lights glowed in the parking lot as she made a sweeping right turn onto the driveway that circled the front of the school. Her eyes swept the lawn area frantically. Her fingers tingled at the sight of the empty lawn. There was no one. Her eyes moved to the dark concrete face of the building. There in the archway stood three people. Oh my god! Iris and Ira were both there. Her stomach dropped in relief. They stood on either side of an adult wearing a white suit. Nervousness tightened around Vicky’s throat as she realized it was Dr. Yancey. The principal was holding each of their hands.

Vicky jerked the car to a stop at the curb and jumped from the front seat. Leaving the door open, she ran around the car. Iris and Ira stayed by Dr. Yancey’s side as she stepped carefully down the wide steps at the front of the school.

“I’m so sorry!” Vicky called leaping up the steps, two at a time.

“Mrs. Anderson.” Dr. Yancey nodded. Her platinum hair was pulled back into a rock-sized knot at the base of her skull. The white skin on her forehead looked as smooth as a countertop.

Vicky bent down to receive Iris, whose bony frame knocked hard against her knee cap. “I...I...had some trouble—“ she said, holding back a wince.

Ira remained in the principal’s grip, glaring.

“Mama, you’re bleeding!” Iris pointed at the wounds on Vicky’s foot. She looked down suddenly aware of a warm sticky feeling between her toes. The blood soaked leather looked oily as though she’d stepped in a puddle at the La Brea tar pits.

“Is that new?” Dr Yancey nodded at Vicky’s car.

"It's almost a year old," Vicky looked up at the sky thoughtfully. "Maybe two now, come to think of it, time fl—"

"Not the car!" Dr. Yancey's red lipstick glowed orange underneath the blooming streetlights. "The damage—did you have an accident?"

Vicky started to say No, but stopped and peered around the principal's 5' 11" frame. Her eyes widened when she saw the dislodged front bumper. The broken plastic hung down all the way to the asphalt on one side. Vicky sniffed twice and rubbed her nose to cover up her sharp inhale. "Yes," she gulped.

"I think that bumper must be dragging," Dr. Yancey complained. "Are you sure the police said it's safe to drive like that?"

Vicky's hand dropped from her nose to her mouth. "It looks terrible doesn't?" Her fingers tapped on her lower lip as thoughts jettied through her mind. Had she really done that much damage? What could she say? She certainly couldn't tell the truth. What if Dr. Yancey forced her to call the police?

"Are you sure you are able to drive the children?" Dr. Yancey's green eyes were rimmed in black.

"Oh, I'm fine, really." Vicky said taking in a deep breath. "Just a little shaken up that's all."

The principal pulled Ira down a few steps before dropping his hand. "Looks like you were hit from behind as well." She walked around the vehicle, stopping at the open driver's door to poke her head inside.

Vicky held out her hand to Ira. "Come on, honey." She said softly. "Let's go."

"Where were you?" Ira asked, his voice loud, his eyes still glaring at her. "Do you know how late you are?"

Vicky dropped her hand back to her side. "I'm sorry. I had to wait...for the policeman. They wouldn't let me just leave the scene."

"Why didn't you call?"

"I lost my cell phone." Vicky felt tears rise in her eyes. Part of her wanted to lie down on the sidewalk and confess the whole ugly mess. "I'm sorry, Ira."

"You were speeding, weren't you?" Ira shook his head and slowly stepped down the stairs. "You were running late as usual and you were speeding and caused an accident."

Vicky was relieved he was moving toward the car. His latest growth spurt had eliminated wrestling as an option, but his words irked her.

‘That little shit,’ Vicky thought, as he pushed his backpack at her and climbed into the back seat. Had he ever noticed how many times she had been on time? Early? She was NEVER late. Never. Didn’t anyone remember that? Didn’t that count for anything?

Dr. Yancey came back around the car. “I really appreciate you waiting with Iris and Ira. I was so worried. I never expected you would be here so late.”

“I watched their practice this afternoon. Sunday is the big recital remember?”

Vicky blushed. “Of course. I can hardly wait.”

“How are the Positive Discipline meetings going? Are you enjoying them?”

“Oh, yes.” Vicky lied, slamming the car doors. “Very much.”

“Good.” Dr. Yancey looked her up and down again. “Are you sure you are...all right...I mean not too shaken up to drive?” She bent down and waved at the kids in the backseat.

“It was nothing—really.” Vicky said lifting her fingers in a quick wave as Dr. Yancey straightened. She hoped she wouldn’t hug her like she did last time when she left her office, and so stepped quickly back around the hood of the car. “I really appreciate your time.”

“I can’t believe you made us wait with the principal. That was **so** embarrassing.” Ira said pulling the safety belt across his chest.

“Momma did you have to go to jail?” asked Iris.

“No, honey.” Vicky glanced in her rear view mirror. Dr. Yancey stood on the curb watching them.

Chapter Break

Vicky drummed her fingers on the boardroom table before she caught herself and flattened her palm. Three weeks had passed since she had begun working on the Dirty, Sexy,

Money crew. All three proposals the writers had submitted to the network had failed. They had one more chance, or the show was going to get canceled before ever airing. Vicky cleared her throat suddenly, hoping to avoid a cough that seemed to be building from a tickle.

"You have something to say, Ms. Anderson?" Jack's gaze fell on her. He looked amused.

"Ah. No sir. Just a tickle." She said touching her throat.

"Oh, too bad. I thought you were going to enlighten us with a brilliant idea." He looked at her deeply as if waiting for some sort of revelation. He wore the Hollywood standard, loose pants and tight t-shirt. He had the prerequisite level of charm and charisma. The physique that came only after a minimum of five hours a week spent with a personal trainer. What was surprising was his nose. It was immense, like an extra appendage on his face. It was a challenge not to stare directly at it when he spoke to you.

"Nothing comes to mind, yet, sir, but I'm sure we can come up with what you're after."

An awkward silence circled the room as the team of writers stared at each other seemingly without a single idea between them. The air conditioner kicked on, ruffling papers. Think of something funny, she'd told herself the night before tapping her pencil on the blank tablet. It was a comedy, after all. Funny. Funny. Funny. She'd repeated the word in her mind a hundred times, nothing happened, except she'd eventually fallen asleep with the light on. In the morning, when she awoke to the empty page, she'd dashed off a few lines that had seemed too ridiculous to document the night before.

Vicky shivered in the cold air of the boardroom. Someone sneezed. "Bless you," Vicky muttered out of habit, but immediately felt a twinge of embarrassment. The sneeze came from Conner across the table, who nodded curtly at Vicky and rubbed a folded tissue across his nose.

"What if someone gets pregnant?" The intern suddenly bubbled from the corner.

"Pregnant." The producer mused, cupping his chin with his hand.

Vicky flashed on the brief scene she had printed out that morning, and, mostly to break the awkward silence, she chimed, "I think that might be interesting."

Reaching into her Kate Spade bag, she removed the tiny span of script from a silver folder. She scanned the words:

BRIEF: EPISODE 1/A/B:

TEASER: Ann buys two bunnies. Neighbor Jim knocks on door. Ann in the kitchen explains that she wanted one bunny, but was afraid it would be lonely, so she bought its cage-mate, another

female bunny. Jim comments on how the bunnies must be lesbians because they appear to be humping. The two watch the bunnies hump.

SCENE 1/A: Ann leaves bunnies with Jim while she goes on vacation.

SCENE 2/B: Next morning baby bunnies appear.

SCENE 3/B: Scientists arrive to document the lesbian bunny's offspring. Turns out the bunny was pregnant from a previous relationship.

SCENE 4/B Ann meets a handsome man at a fundraising event. Has a fling with the boy in the bathroom. Discovers he is there with his parents.

Of course, something else would need to tie into the bunny tangent. Pregnancy might fit nicely, she thought mentally calculating the impact:

SCENE 5/: Ann discovers the boy she slept with is 17. Ann returns home and discovers she's pregnant.

Could this be funny? No way. She prayed that the producer would ignore her. Why had she said anything? She closed the silver folder, but left it on the table in front of her.

"Interesting is not what we are after here," the producer droned. "Interesting is not what sells prime time ads. Sexy and funny— that's what it's all about. Sexy, funny, in that order, got it?" He cracked his knuckles and looked out the window. "But I like the idea anyway. It is disturbing that the only idea worth verbalizing came from the unpaid intern, but let's go with it..." He scanned the blank faces in the room fiercely. His eyes landed back on Victory.

"You're a mother Vicky," the line came out sounding more like an accusation than a question.

"Yes I am." Vicky flashed a wide smile, glancing around the table.

"Permit me if you will, we need some motherly insight."

An eruption of nervous laughter circled the table.

"Glad to help," Vicky said crossing her legs and straightened in the chair.

Again a twitch of laughter erupted, only louder. A woman. What exactly was so funny? Must be the intern. Vicky pressed her hands along the smooth fabric of her silk skirt and tried to dismiss the flash of annoyance she felt.

The producer turned to the man sitting next to Vicky. He was a relatively new writer, hired in the last couple of weeks, straight out of UCLA, but he already he seemed well liked in the group. Smart, even. His name was Jake, which caused Vicky to chuckle the first time they

were introduced although this real Jake looked nothing like Vicky's close acquaintance, Fireman Jake.

"Jake, do you find Vicky attractive?"

The question made Vicky instantly nervous.

Jake looked back at the producer stone-faced. "In what way, exactly?"

"How many ways are there Jake?" The producer smiled. "I mean we all agree Vicky is pretty, right?" There was an enthusiast response around the table. "But is she attractive? There's a difference."

Jake tilted his head slightly and glanced sideways at Victory. She smiled back at him and tapped her fingers on the table. Her stomach felt empty. She was concerned that she might be blushing; then she blushed. She thought of her highlights. She must tell her hairdresser to tone them down. Something more—rustic. Rustic, that was a good name for a hair color. Burnt-gold, like a mountain cabin caught in the last rays of sun.

"Come on people! Lighten up," Jack suddenly bellowed. "We're professionals here. This is our job. We're talking about our characters, about the possibilities, about the show. Our bread and butter. Now there's nothing personal here, Jake," he looked sternly at Victory. "Right Vicky? This is what you do as writers. Think. Talk. Interact and collaborate. I'm just giving you a 'what if' scenario. Setting it up. Fuck it feels like a mortuary in here!" He went over to the window and turned the crank letting in the heat and a pungent draft of fumes from the freeway below. "Let's get those ideas fired up! I want to hear some thoughtfulness, that's what we pay you for, remember?"

Jake turned and examined Victory head-on. When Vicky had phoned Jack last month, she never once considered the reality of coming back. It was simply a reaction to a series of actions, with little cognitive backing to it. The kids were now both so busy in school, and with Manny gone for another year, ending her affair with Mark she had freed up some time—so why not write a few shows to fill the void? But now she was reminded of how the industry was like taking a ride on the Big Zipper—part of the thrill was hoping the whole thing would hold together long enough for you to get off alive. Knowing that every spin could be your last lends a certain *exhilaration that only comes from near death experiences*. When she was young she'd thrived on the adrenaline, the push and pull and commotion of it all. Now, she just felt knocked around.

But it was too late to consider the danger of the thing. She was already locked in. The wheels were turning. She knew what she had to do. She placed her blue eyes directly on Jake,

fanned herself briefly with the silver folder before leaning forward, resting her elbows on the table, and pushing her cleavage into full view. She licked her bottom lip slowly, the pressure of looking good in the industry had forced her to abandon her search for all natural cosmetics—and she struggled to look as if she were savoring the petroleum-based shine of her Bobby Brown lipstick. Rubbing her top and the bottom lip together, she distributed the wet shine across the fullness of her mouth. Tilting her head back slightly, she pulled the two sticks from her French twist, releasing her long, brown hair down her back with a slight shake and a slow swish.

Jake smiled.

"Sure. I find Victory attractive. Who wouldn't?" He said finally turning back to Jack.

There was a cheer from the people she knew around the room. Victory smiled graciously.

"This isn't a popularity contest." Jack snapped. "Now come on people. I'm serious. I want to know if the men in this room think that Vicky is attractive despite the fact that she is a mother. Does it detract from her sex appeal?"

There was a general stirring as if the question had managed to wake up a few members of the team. One of the men seated across from her took the opportunity to polish his glasses on his shirtsleeve before resuming his steady gaze at her cleavage. Vicky felt her cell phone vibrate in her suit pocket. She pulled it out underneath the table. It was text message. "URGENT. CALL HOME NOW." Vicky felt her pulse thrum in response.

"I need to excuse myself for just a minute," Vicky said attempting to appear calm. The rest of the writers looked up from their screens and watched her go. Her mother didn't know how to text. What was going on. Her heart raced as she pushed through the glass doors.

"Jen is in jail," Jett's voice came across the line.

"What!"

"For what?" Vicky whispered.

"Prostitution."

"No!"

"She was arrested late last night."

"Oh my God," Vicky breathed.

"Your mom doesn't have enough cash to post bail. She wanted me to call and see if you would wire some money to the bail bondsman. The bail is \$50,000 grand, so \$5000 cash is enough to get her out."

"Is there some kind of mistake?"

"Apparently not."

"Just tell me where to send the money."

"Did you know she was into this?" His voice held the firm control she had been so reassured by in her youth.

"She's a realtor!" Vicky said fiercely. "I don't know any more than that!"

"Uh huh." Jett answered calmly. "Well, it seems like she has some pretty regular clients. According to the cops she has accepted some pricey gifts...like houses and cars."

"Yeah? Well I can't do anything about Jen's lifestyle choices. You know that! You go off to war and just expect everything to work itself out at home. Well, wake up! Nothing changes in that godforsaken place. You better get out while you still can Jett—I mean it."

"I'll call you later with the information."

Vicky felt numb as she hung up the phone. She reached into her bag and tapped two Xanax into her palm. She walked back into the board room and sat back down in her seat.

"Vicky, how old are your kids?" Jack asked looking out the window at the twisting freeways, the murky sky.

"Four and seven." She crossed her ankles underneath the chair.

"And did you breastfeed them?" Jack pointed his nose at her suddenly.

Victory noticed a red balloon stuck in the far corner of the room, probably escaped from a birthday or going away party, bobbing frantically against the window. Vicky pictured Jen sitting in cramped jail cell.

"Ah huh." Vicky nodded and uncrossed her ankles. She pressed her head against the back of the chair, attempting to deep breath without anyone noticing. Jen was getting married. What was going on? There must be some mistake. An image of Vicky on the witness stand rose up in her mind. Jen, her long hair tucked into a bun, sitting next to a stern faced lawyer wearing a pinstriped suit. *She's innocent your honor. I am her sister, I know her better than anybody.* Did she? A deep voice rumbled through her mind. Did she even know her sister at all anymore?

The director reached up and popped the balloon with a paper clip. Vicky snapped back to attention.

"Now, let's say, for the sake of the story, that Vicky is still breastfeeding. Is she attractive now?"

There was more silence around the room. The man with the glasses cleared his throat.

"Derek? Was there something you had to say? I'd like words people."

Frank, seated next to Derek, who was always eager to speak, answered without hesitation. "I think she's very sexy and the fact that she chose to breastfeed only makes her more so."

"Thanks, Frank," Vicky smiled warmly.

"Of all the people in this room, Frank, you are the one whose opinion matters the least on this subject," Jack responded derisively.

Frank snorted. "I beg to differ. I happen to know that in the porn industry people pay extra for lactating females. More importantly, I'd like to point out that just because I'm gay doesn't mean that I don't find women attractive. According to the ratings the high percentage of gay male viewers tune into this show because of the beauty and sex appeal of all the characters, not just the male characters, Rudy," he said the producer's first name with a note of sarcasm. "I feel my opinions on this subject are extremely relevant, unless you are saying that the gay audience is irrelevant..."

"Do you want to fuck her, Frank?" Jack slammed his fist on one end of long table before lowering himself into the only high-backed, leather swivel seat with arm rests in the glass walled room. He lowered his voice and pointed his nose directly at Frank. "That's what I'm asking here. Do you want to fuck her?"

Frank sniffed and turned his head to the side. The air conditioner switched on again and 'It's her fault,' Vicky retorted. 'She chose that lifestyle.'

"I do!" Conner exclaimed, a bit of phlegm stuck in his throat as he spoke and he cleared it quickly.

Jack clapped his hands together. "Bravo! Bravo!" The rest of the writers looked around nervously somewhat hesitant to join in the show of support. Some clapped, most kept their hands out of sight, or fumbled with pen on paper.

Jack stood and walked around the table, his arms crossed. "So, the kids, the breastfeeding, the slightly disheveled look of a full-time mother doesn't dissuade you from finding her appealing?"

Vicky blanched.

"Not at all." Conner answered.

The producer nodded. "Let's take a poll."

"Knowing that she is a mother, that she changes crappy diapers and breastfeeds her kids, how many in this room find Victory attractive?"

"We don't really need to dwell on Vicky's motherly chores," Stephen spoke up from across the table. "I mean how much of that is really going to be in a sitcom?" A chuckle rounded the table.

Rudy looked on impatiently. "Shit happens, Steve."

Stephen looked confused by the response, but raised his hand anyway.

"Do I have to keep my eyes open?" Victory suddenly exclaimed, covering her face.

"What ever you need to do Victory. Keep in mind, people, this is all about the job. There's nothing personal going on here."

Victory squinted her eyes closed and then put her hand over her face. She pictured Iris on the swings at the playground, rising higher and higher as she pushed.

"Okay, it looks like we can proceed with the baby idea. It might be just what we need to build to push this through the network." Jack gathered a stack of papers and snapped his metal briefcase shut with a two loud clicks before heading towards the door. "I want solid ideas, people. Well formed dialogue on my desk by 5 o'clock." He exited the room with a swish of the glass doors. One of the writers stood up immediately and closed the window, while the others shuffled the armless, low-backed vinyl chairs into groups around the room.

At 4:30, Vicky handed the script to the intern for typesetting and her group filed out through the glass doors. The other groups, who were still working feverishly, looked up with envy. A few of the writers threw down their pencils in defeat. "Good luck, suckers!" Called Martin, as he held the door for Vicky, who struggled to stuff her belongings back into her slim leather briefcase.

She nodded thanks to Martin and joined the others in the long corridor. They walked down the glass walled hall that linked the meeting rooms with the cubicles.

"You really got the edge on this one," Martin said as they marched by the gold doors of the elevators where people waited between two, large fake palms to ride up or down the 60-story building. The intern struggled to keep up on four-inch Prada heels.

"Don't underestimate Vicky," Martin said to the intern. He put his arm around Vicky's shoulders. "She's a hot commodity, this one!"

"Thanks Martin, but I've been out of the loop for a while now." His arm felt heavy against the back of her neck. She held back the temptation to shrug.

Marta giggled.

"Your reputation doesn't do you justice." Martin winked at her.

Vicky looked at him blankly before he disappeared around the corner into the maze of cubicles. Marta waved as she continued down the aisle, her white blonde hair bobbed above the grey felt walls.

"See you next week," Vicky called, quickening her pace.

She felt light-headed, dizzy, when she reached her desk. She clutched at the back of her chair for a minute before sitting down in front of the computer. She opened her e-mail. The usual onslaught of ads for Viagra, "Wanna cum?" and weight loss pharmaceuticals "You've never looked better!" filled the screen. A message with Park Place on the subject line piqued her interest.

Vic,

"I miss you. — Yours Truly, Mark"

She thought of Mark holding her tightly after they made love the last time—over a month ago now—still she remembered the feel of his thick fingers caressed her hair. His embrace was always so reassuring. Mark knew what women liked. He knew all about what they wanted.

Her cell phone rang.

"Vicky?" It was Jett.

"I'm here."

"I have the information to post bail."

"Thanks."

"You can pay electronically."

"Great." Vicky navigated quickly to the website after Jett gave her the name.

"I can take care of it from here." She said.

"How are you holding up?"

"It's been a brutal day."

"Yeah."

Jett didn't say anything else.

Vicky typed in the passcode on her bank account and waited for approval. She knew if she didn't say anything to him, he would sit silently on the line until the entire transaction was complete.

The screen cleared. Vicky typed furiously into the keyboard. She glanced up at the clock again. She needed to be in the car driving. Doris' voice rang in her ears. *"Pick up the kids now. You need to pick up the kids now. You are going to be late."*

"I thought you didn't want to work." Jett said.

The jolt of words startled her. Her fingers lifted from the keys. Iris and Ira stared up at her from a picture on her desk. "What do you mean?" Her fingers rested back down on the keyboard, but she did not type.

"Your dream was to stay home with your kids."

Vicky's fingers felt heavy and stiff against the keys. The transaction went through. Vicky waited for the confirmation number. "I did stay home." Her eyes lifted to the acoustic ceiling, the florescent rectangles made it feel like a giant spaceship.

"You did." Jett said.

"Seven years is a long time." Vicky responded.

Jett was silent. His silence had always irked her. Why didn't he say something? Why did he think that saying nothing was better than just speaking your mind? It was infuriating, really. Was she supposed to guess what he was thinking, like they were playing some kind of game?

Transaction Canceled flashed across the screen.

"Canceled?" Vicky said out loud. "What?"

She tried the transaction again. The same message flashed.

"It says my Transaction was canceled." Vicky said. "There is a phone number to call."

"Do you want me to call?"

"No. I can do it right now. I have the office phone." Vicky dialed the number.

"Bonds."

"Hi, This is Vicky Anderson." Three people passed outside her cubby. She should have had Jett call. She dropped her voice to just above a whisper. "My sister Jen Bell was arrested today—"

"Can't hear you."

"Jen Bell." Vicky spoke a little louder. "I tried to post her bail and the transaction was canceled."

"Date of birth."

The woman sounded like a robot, and Vicky debated whether she was a robot. "7-7-77."

"That's some birthday." The clerk said.

"Yeah. My Dad always said she'd be lucky in love, but somehow I don't think this was what he meant." Vicky wasn't sure if she was relieved or not that she was talking to a human.

The clerk didn't respond. Vicky waited, listening to the faint clicks of the clerk's fingers on the key board aware of the fact that Jett was listening to her from the cell phone. She set the cell on her desk.

"Bails already been posted in cash at the courthouse."

"What? Really? You mean all \$50,000?"

"That's what it says here."

"Thanks." She hung up the phone and reached for the cell.

"Somebody paid the bail. In cash. All of it." Vicky looked up at the clock. "Maybe she has a boyfriend. Listen, Jett. I am late picking up the kids."

"I'll let you go," he said briskly.

"Have you even asked Jen about any of this?" She asked. Her tone rose sharply.

"You need to go. I don't want you to be late."

Vicky hung up the phone.

After hanging up, she tapped closed the documents on her computer screen. The message from Mark filled the screen.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to see him once or twice, she thought quickly. Nothing regular. Nothing planned. No one would know. What could it hurt?

She opened a new message and, glancing up at the clock, her fingers flew across the keys:

"Mark,

Sorry I jumped ship.

Can we keep it casual, you know, just the sex? Nothing more.

Meet me at the park. Saturday. I miss you too, sometimes.

Love, Vic"

She sent it without thinking. An automatic response in the time frame she generally reserved for e-mail, never enough. For a writer, it was pathetic. The urge to rewrite, retract even, filled her, but the message was gone. Too late for retrieval. If only she could chase down the cyber mailman. Victory glanced at her watch. If she left now, her kids would already be waiting for her. Grabbing her bag, she walked rapidly towards the elevator.

Chapter Break

On Saturday Ira begged to play at his friend Jimmy's house instead of going to the park. Iris pouted in the backseat at the sudden change of plans.

"We can still go." Vicky's voice sounded casual, but a sickening guilt lingered in her stomach. With Ira there, Vicky would hardly have been able to talk with Mark. Now that he was gone, the whole idea of going to the park seemed like a mistake.

"I thought we didn't go to the park anymore, Mama."

"Oh, once in awhile is fine."

"But what about pedophiles?" Iris grabbed her hand. Her fingers felt warm.

"We just have to be careful."

"We can go to the movie store after," Vicky bribed her daughter.

Vicky saw Mark and weighed whether or not she should walk straight up to him, or try the more casual approach. Her stomach dropped at the idea of sleeping with him again. He was stunningly good looking. She should make the charitable contribution to all the moms who frequented that park of having his physique chiseled from stone and mounted in the center of the fountain, arms outstretched. The square patch of grass where dogs squatted to pee and chase tennis balls, where kids threw sand and cried, and foreign born nannies lined up behind the swings pushing children (higher!) toward that great wedge of sky seemed somehow beneath him.

From all outward appearances he enjoyed caring for his twin daughters, still, she questioned his motives. He was too good looking to be completely wholesome. His hair looked longer, shoulder length again, just like it was when she first met him. He was shirtless, and Vicky struggled to keep her eyes of the muscles strapping his abdomen. The sight of his bare chest and stomach triggered the memory of that other well-shaped hardened muscle he carried with him. She was instantly reminded of the quiet, responsiveness of his hands, the length and width of his fingers, his warm breath on her face. A tight gasp seized her and she was tempted to turn around. The inevitable tantrum that this action would evoke from her daughter was the only thing that kept her moving forward.

She smiled and waved at the twins and they immediately ran over. "Hi, Victory! Hi Iris!" They chorused.

"Hi girls!" Vicky said leaning down to kiss the tops of their heads. Iris looked at them smugly. She lifted her sippy cup to her lips, taking a few sucks before tossing it to the ground. Victory bent down to pick up the cup as her daughter ran in the direction of the swings.

"Can we push Iris?" The twins chimed.

"She'd love it! I'd love it! Thank you, girls." They ran off, two blonde streaks in pursuit of her daughter. She watched Iris, piggy tales bouncing, pink shirt, green shorts, yellow shoes running toward the swings, she looked like a colorful mirage above the hot sand.

"So, what brings you back around?" She heard Mark's voice call from the bench. She stood there for a minute and watched her daughter climb into the swing. The twins fought over whom would get to push first.

"After Venice, I thought I'd never see you here again."

"Changed my mind." She said blandly pushing the strands of hair out of her face. A sudden breeze knocked the wires on the flagpole twice, and then stilled again. She wondered if a storm was coming. No way. It never rained in June. Maybe April or May, but never June.

"Yeah?" He smiled.

"Did you and Manny talk about the China deal?"

"He told me he took the deal," Vicky said, trying not to register any emotion on her face. The reminder that Manny had signed on for another year overseas was almost unbearable. She'd cried for three days after she confronted him. Now, she was doing her best not to think about it. Not to think about her marriage, or their future. She felt the sun pulsing on her forehead. Her hair lifted slightly when the breeze returned. She'd like to think the burst of air came up from the ocean, but more likely it was a draft rising from the thrust of cars on the busy freeways that wrapped the neighborhood. The wind here arrived compressed and sporadic between the buildings. A vague scent of traffic lingered in the park air along with the heavy smell of hot Bermuda grass.

"There's nothing wrong with....this," she threw her hand into the air lamely. She wished she'd remembered her hat. Sunglasses weren't enough. She wanted to hide. Her hand fell back onto her bag. She pictured the gun and the bottle of Xanax inside. She took a deep breath and forced herself to look away from him.

"You're right there, Vic," a slow grin spread across his face. "There's nothing wrong with two people taking their kids to the park." He set down a copy of *Photographers Journal* and rose

to his feet, stretching to the side while he spoke as if they were in yoga class together. He brought his hands back behind his neck, and arched his back before straightening.

He leaned toward her and whispered, "I want more than this."

"Me too," she answered just above a whisper. She unconsciously lifted her hands to the side, but quickly fought off the urge to raise them above her head and join his impromptu stretching routine. He was contagious like that. Instead she blocked the glare of sun with her hands then took a few steps backwards, to where the church cast a long shadow across the grass. A dog barked. A woman in a straw hat stood, holding a yellow ball, talking to a man in tennis shorts.

"Are you sure?"

Kids starting a game of tag yelled, "Not It!"

"It's just between us, Vicky. No one else needs to know."

"I—"

A high pitched scream jolted Victory's stomach. She turned to see her daughter lying underneath the swing and she rushed over and knelt down, lifting the girl from the sand. A woman, who had been pushing her daughter on the neighboring swing, whispered quickly, "She's okay. Just toppled over when she was getting off."

"Thanks." Victory said as she gathered her daughter in her arms. Her daughter let her head fall back dramatically, and wailed as loud as she could. Victory held her to her breast, whispering, "Sssshhh. It's okay."

"I think she's embarrassed mainly. My daughter does the same thing," the woman added.

"Teeeteeeee!" Iris screamed.

"It's okay, honey. Are you hurt?" Was she wanting to nurse? All of a sudden, after so much time had gone by?

"Teeeteeeee!" Iris screamed again, shaking her head into her mother's chest. Lately, Iris had had a renewed interest in nursing. Several times in the past weeks she had reached for Vicky's breasts and asked Vicky if they "still worked." Her daughter yanked at her shirt. A button flew off into the sand. The twins backed away, frightened by the clamor. The violence of Iris's movement unnerved Victory. Vicky held her shirt closed and felt the anger fly up inside her. Did she think she was nothing more than a spigot? Something to turn on, and off again on a whim?

"No more TeeTee," Victory whispered fiercely to her daughter and then softer, "It's okay. You okay?" She asked gently, rocking her daughter back and forth in her arms. There were no scratches. She brushed some sand from her cheek.

The girl reached up suddenly and yanked the sunglasses off her mother's face tossing them into the sand. Iris stared into Vicky's startled gaze for a minute and for an instant Victory thought that her daughter was going to laugh. Victory offered a weak smile.

In response, Iris wailed, "DeeeeDeeee!"

Victory felt her blood pressure rise and her mouth clamp tight at the thought of the misplaced doll. She'd spent days calling the school, the babysitter, stores, restaurants. Despite her efforts, the doll was gone. Vicky's eyes burned from the sun. She wiped a thin strip of perspiration from her lip. The twins ran off and began playing with hula hoops on the grass. Victory struggled to loosen her jaw.

"No DeeDee, baby. DeeDee's lost remember? You're alright. Lets go look at the doggies, okay. Look there's a spotty dog."

"DeeeeeeDeeeeee!"

The woman next to her escorted her daughter from the swing and Victory watched as they walked towards the exit. The woman shook her head slightly as she passed through the gates. Vicky's throat felt dry. She needed water. She felt the sun singeing the top of her skull.

"Come on, honey. Are you hurt? Tell Momma, what's wrong. Use you words, baby."

"DEEEDEEEEE!"

"DeeDee's gone!" Vicky hissed violently and shook her daughter lightly. "Now come on. Pull it together, Iris." Her voice was fierce. She looked down at her daughter's pathetic face. Her mouth shivering with sobs. "You know what happened to DeeDee. Now you have Lulu. Remember Lulu? Let's go get Lulu," she said, attempting to regain control.

"NO LULU." Her daughter glared at her. Her voice a growl. And then she sobbed loudly again. "DeeDee."

Rage bubbled up and filled the space beneath Victory's skin. These public fits made her crazy. Why was Manny never there to help? Her whole body felt quivery from the pressure. She wanted to smash something. To scream out into the still, hot air. Too cuss violently.

"Can I help?" Mark asked quietly, suddenly he was behind her. He crouched down in front of Iris, letting her see he had the soft, brown doll. LuLu, her crisp, pink smock crinkled in the clutch of his hand.

Victory breathed in deeply through her nose. "Thanks," she pulled her mouth into a smile. Her teeth felt like rocks. Her tongue, dirt.

"Here's Lulu, baby. You don't want to hurt her feelings, now do you? She wants to give you a kiss." Mark held the doll just a few inches away from Iris' red, tear-streaked cheek. "Will you let Lulu give you a kiss?"

At home she opened a bottle of wine while fixing dinner. The kids were in plain site staring vacantly at a video, but she wasn't watching them. Instead, she looked out the wall of windows facing downtown. Streetlights burned orange along the twist of roads leading down the canyon. The gap between night and day was her favorite time. The large gray church across the street from the park loomed in her view. She thought about the prospect of meeting Mark later, but the feelings remained wrapped tightly inside her. The room darkened room. Yellow windows checked the high rise buildings downtown. As the wine loosened her, she felt her desire unfurl. She wanted to run out the door and race down the street. Bare feet on the cold sidewalk, and leap into the air, fly down the canyon, soar over the trees and between those giant pillars downtown. She'd land on the roof scale the wall, fall, breathless onto his unmade bed. They would lie together, looking out through the glare of the city to where the dark blue blur of water swelled against the dying light on the horizon.

But instead the babysitter called to say she was sick, so there was only the usual grind. Dinner cooked and on the table, the kitchen cleaned, the children bathed and read to, the cat fed, the fish and lizard after that, and then, when she was pushing the final load into the washing machine, Manny walked in the front door. She heard the kids' chime of voices greet him with excitement. His bag dropped heavily on the wood floor in the kitchen. He appeared in the laundry room a few minutes later. His angular frame looked out of place in the cramped space.

"Hi, Honey!" She called cheerfully, but her insides lurched at the sight of him. Her encounter with Mark today had left her feeling nervous. Not ready for a face to face encounter, Vicky bent over, one knee to Linoleum and gathered lint from the filter. Manny's schedule fluctuated like the tides—there was no reason for alarm, she told herself. So what if it had been years since he'd arrived without warning. The fact that he neglected to call switched quickly over to annoyance. They'd had many discussions on the subject. 'How can you be en route for 12

hours and never think to telephone?' she used to ask, but the answer— "If you start counting on me to call, then you'll be disappointed when I don't"— was so dissatisfactory that she simply stopped asking.

"Who is Mark?" Her husband's voice, despite his best attempts, wavered on the name.

"Mark is Linda's husband." Vicky answered. Her heart beat against her chest. She attempted to jam the lint filter back in, but the frame caught, refused to slid back into its place.

"Who is Linda?"

"You know, Linda. Tall, brown hair, heavy-set. She's an attorney. They have the twins." He was silent, so she continued. "You talked with her at the premier—" She yanked out the filter, tried again, this time the lint screen slid easily.

"I see. And you've been fucking her husband."

The word seared her like a brand. Her throat tightened. She straightened slowly, pulling the laundry basket up with her. Placing it between them. "What are you talking about?"

"You e-mailed me. I mean you e-mailed Mark, but you sent it to me by mistake."

"Jesus!" Her hands rose involuntarily to her lips. The basket dropped at their feet. Her fingers trembled and she lowered her hands, clasping them together in front of her breasts. "I'm so sorry," she breathed.

"Sorry for what?" He shouted at her. "Sorry for fucking someone else? Sorry I found out? Sorry for our family, our life? What are you sorry for, Vic?"

From where she stood, she could see the tall bookshelves along the far living room wall. White and cream colored texts of varying sizes spaced artfully along the birch wood shelves. The rounded sides of a Grecian marble vase and a collection of ivory bowls looked delicate next to the hard-back books. She could see the legs and feet of the children still stretched out on the white carpet. Ira's feet were soon replaced with his whole body. He stood in his Spiderman p-j's looking at them through the doorway.

"The kids," she hissed, moving the laundry basket to the side. He caught her arm as she reached for the doorknob.

"Now you're worried about the kids?" His voice lowered only slightly. "NOW?"

She tugged her arm free. "It's okay, honey," she crooned to her son. She smoothed her hair, her skirt. "Daddy and I are just having a discussion. Why don't you read a comic book to your sister?" She smiled at him reassuringly. Slowly, he sat back down Indian-style, still facing the doorway. He looked like a shadow in the monochromatic room.

"Go on." She urged him. Hesitantly, he reached for the book. She could hear Iris chanting the "Spiderman, Spiderman, does whatever a spider can" as she pulled the laundry room door shut. The space was tiny. The one small window was filled with a white blaze of the halogen light. They had made love in their once. When Ira was still a baby, driven by mutual desperation for private moments. She remembered glancing out to confirm Ira was still propped up on pillows—his tiny arms and legs wagging at the objects and colors on the screen—before responding to her husband's advances. Baby Mozart had seemed like their theme song back then.

When had it all changed? When had the effort outweighed the payoff? Was it all her fault? Or was it his?

"Are you in love with him?" His eyes were dark, his hands hung heavily by his side.

She thought about the time she'd spent in Mark's flat. The French doors open wide to the roof top. Never knowing if it would be Pink Floyd or Pavorati lilting in the background. She'd never met anyone who actually listened to Opera.

"What the fuck were you thinking? How could you throw everything away?" His voice was lower now, almost a moan. The words and tone seemed awkward coming from a man wearing light blue Armani pants, a crisp white linen shirt.

She could think of nothing to fill the silence between them.

"Does this mean it's over between us? What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I don't know." A heavy pressure built behind her eyes. She lowered her gaze to the laundry basket, the only tangible object between them. Her husband's socks, white cotton for the gym and dark rayon-blend imports for work, lined up in matched sets, neatly folded at the heel, stacks of her son's t-shirts, sleeves tucked under, pressed smooth with her hands, her daughter's dresses drape over one side, waiting for hangers.

"How long have you...how long has this been going on?"

The smell of bleach permeated the air. She knew her response was crucial to their marriage, to their life, to their children. The blank feeling inside her was disturbing. It must be shock.

She pushed open the window with her elbow. Cool air ran like water across her arm. The basket felt too heavy, even so, she held on. Her eyes lifted to his for the first time. Usually bright blue, they had gone dim and glassy. His golfer's tan looked faded and fake, like a bad make-up job. His charming smile—a key ingredient to his success in the business—dissolved into a flat line leaving deep-cut creases around his eyes and mouth.

"How long has this been going on?" He repeated.

The clothes in the dryer clanged noisily. Water poured into the washing machine. She owed him an explanation. Still, no words would come. Rather than form sentences, her mind would only recall. Like a camera tracking a scene from above, seemingly insignificant moments of the days before swooped in to view.

She could feel the gravity that had held them together for so long sucking out the window with every second that passed. The walls closed in around them.

"Answer me."

"A month," she said looking away, out the window. "But I stopped it, when things seemed...to be getting out of hand—"

"Out of hand! What the fuck! Wrecking two marriages, two families?"

"I'm screwed up, I guess. I...I don't want to wreck our marriage. I...It just seemed separate, somehow. With you away, so much—"

"Oh, here we go. It's my fault." His mouth clenched around the words. "I was waiting for you to bring it around to me." He raised his fist, pointing his finger one inch away from her face. "This is on you. This is your mistake. You did this to us! To our family. Don't you ever forget that!" He lowered his fist rapidly, knocking the laundry basket back to the floor. She instinctively turned her head to the side, blocking him with her shoulder, but there was only the sound of the door.

He called later that night to tell her he had booked a room at the Westin for the weekend. He needed some time to think. Maybe he'd take next week off from work and she could take that trip to her mother's that she'd been talking about. It was a good idea. He could decide how to proceed, call an attorney, maybe look into getting an apartment downtown. They hung up the phone like that had so many times before. Him in a hotel room, her in their bedroom. Only now she felt startlingly alone.

The morning air hung heavy across the playground. There was a low ringing in her ears. Vicky's nose was running slightly, she dabbed at it with a tissue. She scanned the park looking for her husband. A thick veil of orange haze cloaked the horizon. The stone-face of the church across the street had taken on a pallor of the dead.

Opening her bag she decided on four Ibuprofen. She gulped at the high plume of water that squirted from the fountain. She thought about the three of them together, without her for the first time. The sheet of instructions she'd left hanging on the fridge. As long as Manny kept to the routine she knew little would go wrong. With the babysitter working double time and the housekeeper coming every afternoon, they would be fine without her.

She'd felt this hopelessness before. She'd call her therapist from the car. Get back on Prozac. She still had a half a bottle of Xanax. Possibly there was some newer, stronger anti-anxiety drugs to get her over the hump. She'd promise to double-up on therapy when she returned from the desert. Maybe Manny would agree to go with her. Maybe he'd just proceed with divorce, maybe they would some day have with no further attachment just a monthly payment made by his accountant. Her title would be reduced to "his first wife." She would have to contend with the idea of his girlfriends interacting with her children. He might even decide to start another family. She gasped in a breath suddenly and closed her eyes tight. When she looked up Manny was at the swings with Iris. Ira dropped his trucks and ran to greet him. She left them there after a brief exchange. "No juice before bed. Two video limit. No playing outside alone. I'll call you from Grandma's" she trilled, her throat tight, as she kissed them both good-bye.

That night she tossed and turned in the lumpy twin bed. The porch light burned all night outside the window because "the light is always on in God's house." Her mother had redecorated. Sheer magenta curtains muted the yellow flare creating a fleshy glow on the rose-colored walls. Gold pillows lined the loveseat in the corner. There was still a crucifix on the wall across from the bed, but above the headboard now hung an oil painting, an apple, bright red.

It was far cry from the drab colors and military order that she'd grown up in. Last year they'd flown out for her father's funeral. She and the kids spent the week while she helped her mother box up his clothes, empty the garage, clean out the tool shed where he kept his ammunition. They'd emptied his gun collection from the case in the living room. An appraiser came out and her mother donated the proceeds to the church bible study fund.

Vicky wandered through the house and out into the garage. Pink shag wall-to-wall carpet now covered the garage floor—a mark down at the local carpet outlet—her mother had explained proudly. Even when her father had been alive, he had allowed Jasmine to paint the walls of the

garage a soft shade of pink. Two large card tables stood in the center of the room draped with white tablecloths. A vase of silk flowers and a King James bible, the centerpiece. Something that never would have been allowed was the new location of her father's gun case. Vicky moved across the room and ran her fingers across the wood paneling. Her mother had glued red velvet inside. On the velvet hung pictures of dead soldiers. Presumably they were the relatives and acquaintances of the women in the weekly prayer group her mother led, only they didn't call it a prayer group, it was simply called the sewing club.

The sewing club had resided in the Bell's garage for as long as Vicky could remember. Weekly the women would gather there, some brought knitting, others baskets of mending. There was a token sewing machine in the corner, but mostly they gathered to talk.

"Stitch and bitch," Jen always said behind their mother's back.

Jasmine explained to the girls that the women met in the garage because some of the military wives smoked—but the girls knew better. When their father was still alive, he never would have allowed such a thing inside the house, at least, not when he was home. Large groups of women made him nervous.

Vicky wandered back inside the house and over to the piano. She picked up her parents' wedding photograph. Her father in his uniform, already decorated with a chestful of color. Her mother looked like a child. His world was ranked and categorized like a military rulebook. Hers was organized around the bible. The two books worked well together, each with a top down hierarchy of power, an impenetrable set of beliefs matched by an immutable set of rules. Thirty years of marriage their proving ground. Victory had often marveled at their discipline. The affirmation of their beliefs like an open umbrella offering them a steady protection from the abuses of the world. She wished her life had such steady shelter.

She went back into the guest bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Her phone rang five times before she decided to answer.

"I slept with someone," Manny said.

The line crackled slightly. She looked at the clock, six-thirty. For some time now she had felt like an empty vessel. No feelings. Not hunger. Not exhaustion. Not pain. No remorse or surprise. Nothing.

"Are you on your cell phone?" Vicky asked.

"Yeah, we're at the park."

"At 6:30 in the morning?" Vicky couldn't help but feel alarmed.

"The kids were up early. I couldn't sleep. They wanted to go." He answered sullenly.

"Was it Ashley?" She was surprised by the calm that took over her voice.

"I told you Vicky, I've never slept with any of my assistants."

"Who then?"

She heard the line muffle, and then his voice came across again, "A prostitute," he said matter-of-factly.

Vicky could hear Ira yelling at Iris probably telling her not to touch his trucks. "Could you tell Ira he needs to share, please."

"It didn't mean anything," he said.

"When?"

"Release party, Atlantis: War of the Worlds II. Things just got out of hand—"

"What about the sequel?" Vicky asked.

He hesitated. "No." Then a second later. "Yes, but it only happened twice. I promise."

"Oh, yeah. That makes it better," Vicky couldn't hold back the sarcasm.

The line was silent.

"And the dildo?" She said suddenly. "Whose was that?"

"Hers," he said.

"The prostitutes? Vicky shrieked.

An affirmative silence followed.

"You used that dildo with a prostitute in our home?" The words came out with longer than normal spaces in between.

"No." His voice was raised, but level. "I told her to put it away."

"You had a call girl in our house?" Vicky sounded incredulous as if she was trying to define the meaning of the words even as she spoke them. Vicky listened to a full minute of Manny's affirmative silence. "When?"

"When you and Iris went on that Girl Scout retreat, and Ira was on the sleepover."

Vicky pictured the girls Silicon breast bouncing all the way down the hall on the way to the kitchen. The top of the refrigerator was the perfect place for a delayed discovery.

"Did you use a condom?"

"Yes," he answered immediately.

"Well, fine then." What could she do? Depending on whose story you believed, Vicky'd had sex with the biggest gigolo in Hollywood.

"You lied first."

"I didn't sleep with my assistant. Never."

"Was I supposed to ask you if you'd slept with a hooker? Gee that thought never really crossed my mind."

"I didn't lie."

"What, did you think that I banned porno mags because I didn't want the clutter? Is that it? Or did you just think that porno mags were bad, but prostitutes were good? Oh, she'll never care as long as I don't leave them lying around the house. Out of sight out of mind kind of thing?"

Manny shrugged.

"You watched too many Sopranos episodes." Vicky shook her head. "I knew Volume 6 was a bad idea. Leave it to Jimmy to think of a bad gift idea."

"What about the Hulk?"

"Oh, you know. I—"

"It's okay," Manny held up his palm again. "I don't feel like beating my head against the wall just yet, okay?" He let her hand drop, and turned his eye back towards Iris.

"I was lonely."

"I know you were." Manny said quietly. "I just," He began, then stopped. His voice thick with emotion.

"I don't know either, Manny." Vicky said, instantly frightened by the truth of her words. "But I know the kids want to get to know their Dad. And I know I'm going to need help." Vicky's eyes landed back on her daughter. She looked like a fragile doll in the full sized bed.

"I'm sorry." Tears filled her eyes. The drops fell and rolled. She sniffled and reached in her bag for a Kleenex. After blowing her nose, she brushed her hair back off her forehead. Manny caught her arm, and she turned to look at him: the man she thought she would love forever.

"Me too Victory. I'm sorry too."

"Do you love this guy?" He asked. "I mean, this Mark guy? Do you have feelings for him?"

She thought about his skin on hers the feeling of just that between them. Nothing else. "It was easy. It was an easy way out," she finally managed.

"Yeah. I guess so."

"So what are we going to do?"

They both let the question hang there between them. There was no getting around the answer. It was like standing in a doorway. Eventually she'd either go in or out. She felt the hard plastic of the phone in her hand. Heard the electronic hum of the clock. Stared at the crucifix on the wall. It was only a matter of minutes before the decision needed to be made, but she lingered there, unsure of which direction to go.

Chapter Break

The pool at her mother's house always looked so much whiter than the pools in Los Angeles. Bleached white. As if the blast of desert sun had erased the very essence of blue from the water. Vicky walked out the back door, dropped her robe and her sunglasses on the lounge and stepped into the water.

Her careful tan took on a greenish-gray cast, ghostlike, as she lowered herself into the water. Cold on her thighs and stomach, she held her breath and dropped beneath the surface. From underneath it was just another summer day at her mother's house—sleeping past breakfast, the day stretched long and empty ahead of her. She closed her eyes and imagined that she was a young girl in the swimming pool again, her sister and the neighborhood kids sure to show up soon. Dark forms gathered around the edge, pushing each other, raucous laughter interrupting the watery silence, looking like blurry monsters before falling into her milk white room. Kicking off from the bottom she swam underwater into the deep end. Bubbles streamed as she pushed the last of her air out through her nose and rose toward the surface. The water sounded like applause when she broke through.

Gripping the side, she kicked her legs out behind her and looked through the metal fencing. Straight behind the house a swatch of the grey desert remained. Vicky looked west across the undeveloped real estate that stretched all the way to where soft rounded mountains rose up at the California border. She remembered looking at those mountains as a child and dreaming about California—blue-grey ocean and yellow beaches full of movie stars eating avocados. Every one else she knew hated avocados. This fact confirmed to Vicky that she alone was destined for California.

Her freshman year in high school, Vicky discovered a bird building a nest in the avocado tree in their front yard. She had checked out a video camera from the school library and after

three weeks of filming the bird family, she decided to make a documentary. Her first film was about the nesting habits of the Mountain Bluebird, *Sialia Currucoides*, which won her an award from the Nevada State Nature Conservatory. That documentary was the reason she applied to UCLA. Vicky stared at the dismal swath of landscape in front of her, surprised at the recollection of the bird documentary. She hadn't thought of it in such a long time. If it wasn't for that Bluebird, she might not have moved to Los Angeles. Never worked in Hollywood. Never met Manny. Never lived in an 8,000 square foot house overlooking downtown LA. Never met Mark. Never destroyed a marriage. Never had to leave her kids.

A low pulse of panic filled her lungs and she decided to swim laps to fool herself into forgetting why she had come home. Vicky ducked down under the water, tucked her legs underneath her and pushed off from the edge of the pool. She jetted across the length. Her hands sliced through the water, pulling her body, her head turned to the side capturing air. She held her breath and flip-turned at the deep end, forcing her arms to pull harder, her feet to flutter faster. She flipped again at the shallow end, and shot back across the pool taking air on every stroke now, but still feeling like she wasn't getting enough. Pressure built in her chest. She slowed her pace, and took more time to fill her lungs. Three laps passed with her mind stuck on her breath and body, but beginning with the fourth lap the staccato beat of panic pulsed through her again. Would Manny demand custody? Of course, he would. Vicky's heart beat rapidly. What if he tried to take them from her? What if he said she was unfit? There was evidence. What would Mark say?

Manny wasn't the type to fight, but even if he opted for shared custody, he would still take them, maybe even for a whole weekend, and she would be left alone. Every other year she would spend Halloween, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter without them. What if he wanted to take them to Indonesia with him? Halfway across the deep end of the pool, an uncontrollable sob rose like a tsunami from inside her causing her to breathe too late on the stroke and she sucked in a mouthful of water. Vicky jerked up out of the water, thrashing and choking as she struggled to cough and inhale at the same time. Anxiety and chlorinated water gagged her throat, closing off the airways. Coughing and sputtering and sobbing she made her way over to the side of the pool. She sucked at the air like a fish out of water. A low moaning erupted from her throat when she tried to breathe inward. Her hand slapped the side of the pool and she held on with one elbow up on the concrete, gagging on her own tears.

“You okay?” She heard a familiar voice calling from the other side of the yard. Heavy boots clomped across the pool deck.

She lifted her hand and waved, “I’m fine.” She coughed again and struggled to clear the sobs from her throat. “Just inhaled—“ she coughed again. “A little water down—“ she coughed again, struggling for air. Her lungs felt asthmatic suddenly and she worried she was having an anxiety attack. “Wrong pipe.” She managed, gasping for breath.

Jett knelt down beside the pool and offered her his hand. Vicky clung to the edge her legs dangling in the deep-end, praying her airways would open and she wouldn’t feel like she was breathing through a clogged straw. She waved him away, but felt dizzy and nauseas. Choking had effectively stopped her sobbing, but there was still the trouble with air entering her lungs and she continued to cough and sputter. Jett reached underneath both of her shoulders and in one smooth motion, lifted Vicky completely out of the pool. He carried her to chaise lounge and placed her across the faded plastic straps. He went into the house through the sliding glass door, returning a few minutes later with a pink bath towel.

Vicky dabbed her face. The heat of the morning settled on her back and shoulders. She was breathing now, thankfully, and managed to swipe the towel underneath her eyes to erase any streaks of mascara. Her lungs hurt when she took in a deep breath, but she was relieved that the closing down feeling was easing.

Jett pulled a chair over to the lounge and sat down next to her. Vicky was vaguely aware of his eyes on her face, her body, her hair.

“You okay?” He repeated. His brown eyes were flecked with amber that caught the light of the sun and glittered.

She smiled. “Hi. Thanks. Yeah,” she said.

“Did you forget how to swim?”

“For a minute, I guess.” She glanced down at her suit and straightened the strap of her top. After clearing her throat a few more times, she stood up and Jett stood too. The plastic legs of his chair screeched loudly along the concrete. He looked down at his boots as Vicky pulled the towel around her tucking the ends in at her chest.

“Good to see you,” Vicky said splaying her arms out awkwardly. They embraced quickly.

“You too,” Jett muttered.

Hugging Jett was like hugging a mountain or at least a large boulder. He had always been tall and strong, but she had forgotten how solid that felt up close.

Jett stepped back from their embrace and walked over to the back door and for a second Vicky thought he was leaving. At the steps he bent and picked up a black duffle bag and carried it back over to the chair.

"You haven't gone back yet?" Vicky stretched her legs out on the chaise, but decided not to unwrap the towel. She looked at Jett who was wearing long pants and a dark blue t-shirt seemingly unaffected by the heat.

"I told you I'm not going back."

Vicky looked at him. "We've heard that before."

"This time I mean it."

"Why is it different this time?"

"I want to try to make things work around here now."

"That's why you were there?"

Jett flashed her a look of annoyance.

"Why stop now?" She asked.

He shrugged, then shook his head. "Maybe I've just had a enough."

Vicky knew better than to press him on a subject that she knew nothing about. "So, what are you doing here?" Vicky asked, trying not to stare at the new scar on Jett's neck. It ran behind his ear and disappeared down inside his t-shirt.

"Didn't your Mom tell you I was coming by?"

"I haven't seen her." Vicky sat back down on the lounge. Her throat burned from the chlorine. "She left a note. Church, then groceries. I guess the sewing club is due at five."

"The grand tribunal."

Vicky looked at him, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"She hasn't told you?"

Vicky shook her head. She thought about the last few conversations she'd had with Jasmine. She couldn't recall any big news. The water evaporated from her skin leaving a dry tight feeling. The towel felt hot and confining against her chest.

"Gladys is telling everyone that your Mom has allowed the devil into her heart."

"Since when does anyone listen to Gladys?" The plastic straps underneath felt hot and felt slippery with sweat.

"Since Jen was arrested."

"And that is supposed to be Jasmine's fault?" Vicky stood up and unwrapped the towel.

Jett shrugged. "Tolerance isn't a big hit when you are right wing religious fanatic."

"If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?"

"You got it."

"Romans 15:27," Vicky said, standing she removed the towel. Taking her time, she carefully spread it across the chaise, very aware of the fact that her ass was less than 7 inches from Jett's face. As she pressed one corner smooth, she suddenly realized that she'd never gotten around to checking her spray tan from behind. How many times had she gone back because the overhang of her butt had blocked the spray resulting in an unsightly white line? Despite one more wrinkle in the corner of the towel, Vicky spun around and plopped down, trying to make up for this panicky move by stretching her legs out slowly. She turned to look at him, trying to remember exactly what they were discussing. "No one takes Gladys seriously," she said finally.

"They are now." Jett said, reaching down to pull the duffle bag onto his lap.

His wide lips made a straight line across his face. His skin was tan, but his olive complexion handled the sun well. Other than a few lines reaching out from the corners of his eyes, his face skin was smooth as if forces like age and war had no visible hold on him. Except for the scar, but even that didn't take away from his rugged good looks.

"How can they blame Jasmine?" Vicky turned back to look at her legs in the sun. The heat pulsed on her skin. Sunbathing in Sparks had always been a test of courage. As a teenager she had regularly braved the oven-like heat. Back then, tan lines had been symbols of heroic suffering and determination.

"Has your mom told you that she's been hearing devil voices?" Jett looked down at the duffle bag on his lap.

"What?" Vicky turned to look at Jett trying to decide if he was kidding.

"During meditation."

"You mean, like as in yoga?"

"You know she's taking yoga, right?"

"Of course." Vicky felt slightly irritated by the conversation. She had never liked how Jett acted as though he were somehow responsible for the family dynamics whenever he was around.

"But she hasn't said anything to me about...devil voices," Vicky said the last words after exhaling an impatient huff of air.

Jett shrugged. "She says she enjoys the conversation." He shook his head. Vicky expected to see a smile, but his face remained somber. "Last week she said, 'I find conversing with Satan stimulating.'" Jett did his best Jasmine imitation which made Vicky laugh.

"You aren't serious!"

He wasn't smiling.

"Oh come on, you know my mother has been hearing voices her whole life! I remember when I was a kid she used to try and convince me that I could hear them. She is a veteran God talker."

Vicky closed her eyes trying to ignore the burning heat on her skin.

"But she's never said anything about the *hearing* the devil before." Jett said bleakly.

"Actually talking *with* the devil."

Vicky sat up and laughed at him. "You aren't really worried about this?" She studied his face. "Are you Jett?"

His eyes remained somber. "I care about your mother." Jett looked at Vicky steadily.

Vicky turned away and leaned her head back on the lounge. "Everyone cares about Jasmine," she said, not bothering to mask her annoyance.

"She can talk to the devil all she wants," Jett continued, ignoring Vicky's dismissive tone, "You know I could care less about all that bullshit, but she doesn't seem to understand that you can't go spouting off that you are enjoying your conversations with the devil to a bunch of Southern Baptists. Gladys especially."

"So what? Is Gladys going to do lead an exorcism?" Vicky's eyes were closed now. It was so odd that Jett would care about any of this. Her mother's sewing circle had always been like a Christian soap opera stuck in the 1950's. Who sinned? Who should repent. Who had 'strayed from the righteous path.'

"I'm sure it didn't help that she invited her yoga friends last month," Vicky said. "Who would have guessed that they'd show up wearing saris and bindis?" Vicky laughed again.

Jett looked down at the bag in his lap. He fiddled with the zipper.

"I can just imagine Gladys' face when they walked in," Vicky laughed again. Hindus in the inner-circle was definitely cause for alarm in Gladys' world. Gladys had zero tolerance for non-believers. Islam, Muslim and Hindu belonged to a world that both frightened and annoyed her. How could they think someone name Ala could be more important than Jesus! It was unthinkable really. Gladys loved Jesus with an unmatched fervor. At the Colonel's funeral Gladys

had explained that God would overlook the Colonel's many sins. "There will be a place for him in heaven," she had said, "because he had carried out the task of ridding the world of evil and for that he would be forgiven."

Jett was silent.

"That's almost as bad as the time she tried to get them to start a book club and picked the Da Vinci Code." Vicky laughed at the memory.

"Right," Jett said squinting. "I think she wrote to me about that. Wasn't that the argument about Mary Magdalene?"

Vicky turned to look at him, surprised. "Jasmine wrote to you?" Vicky felt instantly guilty. Not once in the 10 years he was away had she written Jett a letter.

"All the time," Jett nodded.

Vicky studied his face briefly. "Did you write back?"

"Of course," he answered.

It was odd and she and Jett had gone from seeing each other every day for nearly as long as she could remember to hardly speaking for nearly a decade. Twice she had started to write him a letter. Both times she never finished. She wondered how many he had written her. She wanted to ask him about the scar on his neck, but decided against it.

"She told you about Francine, right?"

"Just that she had invited her into the sewing club," Vicky replied. "I don't know why she takes on these projects. Anybody can see Francine is trouble."

"Not your mother."

Vicky reached for the tube of sunscreen she had brought out. Squirting two lines across her chest, she slowly rubbed the cream all around her bikini top.

"I bet she didn't tell you they saw her pick up Francine at the abortion clinic in Reno last month."

Vicky inhaled sharply. "She wouldn't."

"She did." Jett nodded.

"But," Vicky's face drained of color, her words sputtered. "But that's...that's Romans 17!"

"What the fuck is Romans 17?"

"Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned;" Vicky swallowed hard. "and avoid them."

“Now you are starting to get the picture.” Jett said. A few minutes passed while Vicky considered the situation. She had never worried about her mother. She had always been a pillar of strength, and had spent her whole life to serving the church and ‘doing the Lords work.” No one could have questioned her devotion, but supporting abortion was the like eating veal in Hollywood, worse even! You just didn’t get caught doing it.

Jett’s voice sounded heavy with emotion. “Your mom and Gladys have known each other for so long that I don’t think they even consider the fact that they really don’t like each other.”

Vicky looked at him. “They’ve always had an interesting relationship.” Vicky said finally.

“Gladys thinks Jasmine needs to repent.”

Vicky suddenly didn’t find the subject entertaining. She had enough to worry about in her own life. “Why are we talking about this nonsense anyway? The whole thing is ridiculous!”

“The real problem is that Gladys is a bitch,” Jett said. “Plain and simple. Jasmine is finally happy, and Gladys just doesn’t like it.”

Vicky cringed.

“She won’t let anything drop.” Jett continued. “She’s like a bulldog. She’s been after Jasmine ever since Jen’s arrest.”

Vicky scoffed. “As if Jasmine had anything to do with that.”

“Right, but Jen is a heathen. Did you see that new plasma television in there? They are mad at her for accepting a gift from her own daughter—because you know Jen is Lucifer, or Beelzebub or one of those fucking demons.”

Vicky laughed, “I always liked Beelzebub the best. What a great name.”

Silence filled the still air between them. Vicky watched the pool sweep swoop along the bottom of the pool

“So what else is going on Jett,” she asked, turning he gaze on him. “Sparks must have more gossip to offer.”

“You know that Pastor Rick is after her?”

Vicky glared at him. “What do you mean?” More talk about her mother wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind. Beside the idea of fitting an image of Pastor Rick operating anywhere outside the pulpit was unpleasant. He had been the minister ever since Jasmine’s father retired. They’d always been close, but Pastor Rick wasn’t her mother’s type. What is my mother’s type? Vicky realized she’d never once considered this. It was impossible to imagine.

Jett smiled. "He was hot on her tail until I came home."

Pastor Rick? Could that really be true? "I can't believe she didn't tell me that!" Vicky said, shaking her head.

"He made a few house calls even after I got here."

"Really?" Vicky's eyes turned back to study his face. "I'm sure that was just on church business."

"He's backed off now," Jett looked out at the lawn.

Vicky shrugged and leaned back against the lounge. "Who cares, anyway. I think it would be great if my Mother dated. It would be nice to see her with a man that does more for her then hand her a bag of laundry."

Jett looked down at his hands and Vicky wondered what he was thinking. Was he trying to watch over Jasmine? Was he feeling territorial? "Why do you care if Jasmine dates the minister anyway?"

"I don't" Jett responded. "She can date whoever she wants."

He stopped talking, but Vicky could sense he had more to say on the subject. His fingers fidgeted the zipper of the duffle bag.

"It just shows you how hypocritical the whole thing is," he burst out a minute later. "Pastor Rick came over to talk with her about repenting!" His voice raised with emotion. "Do you realize they are accusing her of being a false prophet? Is he really trying to save her?" Jett spit onto the sidewalk. "Or does he have other motives? My guess is— he's after a lot more than her salvation."

"So?"

"Isn't it a conflict of interest?" Jett shook his head. Was he joking? Jett had never bought into Jasmines' church drama. Was this a symptom of PTSD? She'd read somewhere that any soldier who'd endured more than two tours in the Middle East had the disorder. Jett had completed four.

"Who cares?"

"Well, at least he should stop supporting Gladys' ridiculous accusations," Vicky didn't know what to say. "She's really stressed out about all of it and I think that's partly why she is having this devil-talk."

Vicky laughed.

“You should ask her about it. You won’t think it’s so funny.” Jett shook his head. “Last week she told me she had a vision at the “firey lake.” Jett kicked his feet out in front of him.

“Yeah,” Vicky said holding up her hand. “To be honest, Jett, I don’t really want to hear about all that. I’ve got enough of my own problems right now and my mom has always been able to handle all that religious fervor on her own.”

Vicky stared at the pool. She had noticed several changes in her mother since the Colonel died. Yoga was only one of her suspiciously non-Christian activities. There was the book club, which was halted after four books because Gladys insisted they study scripture. “The greatest literature ever written!” Jasmine had explained. The remodel of the garage was definitely colorful, and the fact that they now drank wine at sewing club. For years Jasmine had insisted no alcohol be served. Surely, that wasn’t enough to get her in trouble at the church though. Wine was permitted as long as it was in moderation. Then news about Francine was disturbing. That act alone could easily cause the congregation to turn against her.

Vicky suddenly remembered her conversation with Jasmine the day after the tree fell. How her mother had explained that Jett had been staying at the house. She had thought it was strange that Jasmine had even thought an explanation was necessary, but now it didn’t seem so strange. Vicky’s eyes turned to study Jett’s profile. Now her mother’s concern made more sense. If they were already suspicious of her, then any little infractions could easily snowball into a full blown revolt.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing you came home to show your support.” Jett said, his tone had returned to civil and he actually smiled. “Jasmine needs you on her team right now. With you here, Gladys doesn’t stand a chance. For some reason they’ve always revered you.” He looked over at her and smiled. “You’re like the fucking Virgin Mary, or something.”

“Gee, thanks, Jett. Coming from you that’s a real compliment.”

“I mean it.”

“Friends Forever was their favorite show, you know.” Jett said. “They were convinced that you had embedded all kinds of biblical references in the story line.”

Vicky nodded “It was probably the last clean show on television. If it wasn’t for the Christian right, we wouldn’t have made it passed the first season.”

He looked at her. His eyes were dark and wide. “There is something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a long time.”

“What?” Vicky’s stomach tightened and she turned away from the intensity of his gaze.

“Did Jen and Clay spend time together?” His hand rose into the hot air and then lowered back to the bag on his lap. “I mean at the house, when you were still kids.”

“You know, Clay was always lurking around whenever the Colonel was home. He was a creep.” Vicky said. The mention of Gladys’s ex-husband triggered a twinge of shame, but she couldn’t immediately pinpoint the cause.

“What about when the colonel was away.”

“He’d stop by a few times, you know, to check on us.”

“Anything else?”

“What else is there to say? He’s dead, right?” Vicky turned her eyes back to the sky. Her sunglasses felt hot on her face. Her eyelids were sweating.

“Nothing I guess.” Jett fidgeted with the bag again.

“Except that Jen’s arrest for prostitution means that everyone is sure what happened with Clay was her fault.”

“Who cares whose fault it was! That was eons ago.” Vicky said refusing to let her mind drift in that direction.

“Gladys cares. I think it’s part of the reason she seems to focused on crucifying your mother.”

“Clay was a philandering jerk. He’s dead. End of story.”

“Huh. I guess so.”

Vicky felt impatient and wanted to jump in the pool. Beats of sweat formed on her lip.

“Did Jen ever talk to you about what happened—I mean how it all started?”

“No.” Vicky snapped. “The question is why would anyone still be talking about it.”

Vicky’s scalp felt hot and she wiped a drip off of her forehead, not sure whether it was water or sweat. It must be well over 100 degrees already, maybe 110.

“Did you ever think that maybe he had started...” Jett paused, “that something had been going on for a lot longer than anyone ever guessed.”

Vicky glared at the pool. Gawd! All of these question! She was suddenly too hot and impatient to care. Didn’t he know she had her own trouble? She gritted her teeth into prevent herself from snapping at him to shut-up. She had lived through enough of Spark’s drama to carry her through a life time, and more of it was the last thing she needed right now.

“I should have done something.” Jett continued.

“There was nothing you could have done.” Vicky tried to control her irritation, but the combination of the heat and Jett’s persistence was beyond annoying. Her tone sharpened. “My sister was going to do exactly what she wanted to do, no matter what anyone did.”

“But what if...” Jett let his words trail off.

“What if what?” Vicky sat up on the lounge. Sweat dripped down her neck and chest. Her hair felt combustible.

“Nothing.” Jett unzipped the duffle back and pulled out a long-barreled handgun and clicked a cartridge into the magazine.

The black gun looked alarmingly threatening up close. “What do you have that for?” Vicky screeched, fighting back the instinct to jump up from the chaise. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Come on, Vic,” Jett stood up. “I’d think you’d be used to the Glock 9mm. It’s the most popular handgun in your husband’s movies.”

Vicky stood up, clutching the towel to her chest. She felt instantly nervous. Had he lost his mind? First his incessant babbling about her mother and now he was pulling a gun on her!

He waved the gun at the piles of dirt dotting the lawn. “Didn’t your Mom tell you my new occupation as chief gardener? I’m a regular Dirty Harry to these gophers.”

Vicky felt her breathe refilling her lungs. The gun was impressive looking. Wide black metal with a sturdy looking grip. Why hadn’t Manny gotten her a gun like that? “You aren’t going to shoot them are you?”

Jett set the gun on the patio table and pulled his shirt off over his head. “Our negotiations fell apart last week.”

Vicky gawked at his muscle-ribbed abdomen. He picked up the gun again and yanked back on the cartridge.

“You can’t just shoot them!” The words came out in an involuntary burst. If she’d thought about it, she’d known better than to admit her horror over killing gophers to a U.S. Marine.

Jett shook his head slightly, and gave her a look that Vicky thought might be pity. The gun glinted in morning sunlight. “I call this one the exterminator,” he said stroking the barrel. He looked like a Chippendale cop standing there shirtless, stroking the pistol.

“Does Jasmine know about this?” Despite her shock, Vicky felt a warm tremble in her groin at his ready position. His arm crossed over in front of his chest, the gun rested on his zipper. She forced her eyes back on the gun.

Jett nodded, turning to study the mounds on the grass. “She wants me to tear up the lawn next week.”

“What...what are you going to do...I mean, do you have to shoot them...right now?” Vicky realized she was still clutching the bath towel to her chest. She forced her arms down and let the towel drop back onto the chaise.

“Morning’s the best time. Besides I ordered 50 drought-tolerant perennials and low maintenance grasses. They’ll be here any day and they can’t stay in pots in this heat.”

“I had no idea you were a horticulturalist,” she said for the sake of conversation, but the combination of annoyance, shock, fear, and now arousal had left her feeling faint. The heat pressed down on her and she felt like she was going to collapse. “I need to get in the water,” she said weakly.

“There is a lot to like about plants.” Jett said, moving over to where the garden hose sat coiled on the patio. He walked the hose over to the lawn and jammed the nozzle down one of the gopher holes. He cranked the faucet to full blast. He walked across the grass to the side gate and returned a minute later with three more hoses.

Vicky stepped into the pool. Cool water soothed her skin. She dropped her body down into the water. Her eyes closed as her head and shoulders slid beneath the surface. The curved walls of the pool looked smooth like white petals under water. She used to picture herself inside a Lotus flower when she was a girl. Swimming through the petals while the flowers still submerged and then she would burst through and float along the surface imagining her legs and arms the leaves holding her afloat, a giant bloom sprouting from her chest, reaching up toward the sun.

Vicky stayed under for another minute until her chest felt tight. Hard pressure built in her lungs. Her legs pushed off from the bottom, forcing her body through the water. Air filled her lungs and she felt revived.

She had forgotten how powerful the heat was in Nevada. The waves of emotion she had felt during their conversation seemed distant now that the cool water soothed her. Even she had trouble understanding her mother’s lifestyle. Church four times a week seemed absurd. Talking to God? Laundering sheets for the homeless shelter? What about the lice! It was hard to comprehend that kind of madness. Then there was Gladys— who made Jasmine look liberal. At least Jasmine didn’t speak in tongues! And her sister’s antics added to the mix. Really, it was enough to make anyone crazy!

Vicky felt that familiar buzz of anxiety inside her chest. The most important thing was to not get wrapped up in all this drama, she told herself firmly. She had enough on her plate.

She watched Jett stalking the grass. His bare-chest glistened in the hot Nevada sun. He had wrapped his t-shirt around his head, tying it in the back like a turban. His trousers fit tight, like army-issued fatigues. The red glow of the tracer moved across the grass. She shouldn't be so hard on him, Vicky thought, admiring his strong back and shoulders.

As she watched she slowly became aware of a warm tremor building between her legs. What the hell was wrong with her? Was she really feeling aroused? There was no denying the pulsing warmth in her groin. Yes. Yes. Oh my god! Ever since her spate of sex with Mark, she had noticed her body had been charged with a new mission. Desire operated at the very core of her rational mind, uprooting every possibility of reasonable thought. She could be reading the newspaper one minute, and the next she'd be tempted to sneak in a quick orgasm underneath the pages. She had recently attempted to masturbate in the waiting room at the dentist's office, but the secretary had returned just at the crucial moment. The car was another favorite. Speeding down the freeway with the music blasting. Riding up high, just out of view had given her a totally new appreciation for SUVs. She'd even locked herself in a bathroom stall at the gym, but the room hadn't been quite clean enough for to succeed in getting off.

Sex no longer seemed like a distant possibility, or a lonely construct of mental fantasy. Sex seemed possible, even probable. Even with her ex-boyfriend? Vicky waited for the familiar chorus of the Christian Coalition to chime in with their opinion on the moral ineptitude of her question, or the Commission on Rational Decision Making—but there was only silence. A blur of blue choir gowns passed before her eyes followed closely by a team of men wearing black business suits—the defenders of all things moral and rational in her mind—amorphous and breezy more like a sensation than a vision, Vicky imagined the two teams floated away in the still desert air leaving her all alone.

Maybe it didn't need to be just a fantasy, Vicky thought, nervousness instantly replaced desire at the idea.

"Maybe you could start a new business Jett?" Vicky said, her voice high and light in an effort to make up for her obvious panic earlier. "The Garden Hunter. I can think of a few neighborhoods in LA where you could charge big money for this kind of service. Maybe you could star in your own show. The Home Channel would love it!"

Jett flashed her a no nonsense look and held up one finger to indicate that he had identified his target. He held the barrel up level with his eyes.

Vicky leaned back in the water and pushing off from the side. She floated backwards across the pool. She wished Jett hadn't dredged up those old memories. The reminder of Uncle Clay sat like a bad taste in her mouth. Stop! She warned herself. Do not let yourself get wrapped up in this nonsense! She attempted one lap freestyle to clear her mind, and then gripped the side to catch her breath.

Jett lowered the gun and straightened. "False alarm," he called walking back over to where he set his bag on the chair. "You sure you remember how to swim?" He paused. "I don't want to have to save you again."

"You don't?" Vicky asked, smiling. She stood with the water around her waist in the shallow end skimming her hands across the water. Jett watched her silently. She stared back, happy her dark glasses shielded her eyes. She couldn't help but wonder if he still thought she was pretty. Even though she knew that it didn't matter anymore. Jett had always adhered to a strict moral code that had nothing to do with religion, just his own odd sense of right and wrong, which Vicky had always found even more perplexing.

Vicky thought about telling him she and Manny had separated.

"Have you called your sister yet?" His voice interrupted her trance.

Vicky dipped her head underwater back and re-emerged. "Not yet." She said smoothing her hands over her scalp.

Jett walked back to the edge of the pool, and looked down on her in the water. "Have you even talked with her about, you know, about what she is doing?"

"No." Vicky tried to ignore his line of questioning and focus the way his trim waist entered his tight pants. He should have moved to Hollywood. He could have been a star.

"Don't you think it's time to address the issue of her being a whore?" Jett raised his voice.

The word startled her and her eyes shot up to his. "Don't use that word!" What kind of thickheaded Neanderthal used a word like that? She pushed off from the edge away from him and noticed a greasy stain on his left thigh. "That isn't okay with me," she said loudly.

"It's okay for her to be a whore, we just can't call her one?" Jett's wide lips curved up. He looked amused.

"She is a real estate agent," Vicky corrected.

“That’s bullshit,” he said, shaking his head.

“The only thing I know,” Vicky snapped, “is that she hasn’t asked my opinion on her lifestyle. Has she asked you?”

“Why is everyone so afraid of her?” Jett shook his head.

“Jen doesn’t care if people approve.”

Jett tucked the gun back inside his belt. “She has other options.”

“I can’t do anything about it,” Vicky sounded annoyed. A bee swam in a circle in the water. “Besides, what options? She loves living the glamorous life. She’d been an exotic dancer since she was 17. 16 maybe. Who knows when she really started? She told me she makes \$1000 a day.” Vicky flipped her hands in the water, pushing the bee back towards the edge. “What is she going to do now become a secretary? A substitute teacher, maybe? She drives a \$70,000 car for Christ’s sakes! Do you really think she’s going to give all that up? For what? What kind of job is she going to get in Reno, Nevada?”

“She could go back to school.” Jett knelt down and put his hand in the water, cupping the bee in his palm and lifted it from the water. He flattened his palm, and slipped the bee to the concrete.

“Right,” Vicky rolled her eyes, “because she was such a good student.” Vicky said sarcastically. “Come on, Jett, she never even finished high school. I guess she could join the military, huh. Isn’t that where you found your path to enlightenment?”

“She always wanted to be a dancer, a real dancer.” Jett’s eyes remained on the bee.

“She is a dancer.”

“Pole dancing doesn’t count.” Jett glared at Vicky.

“Why not?” Vicky felt that familiar defensiveness over her sister. “Pole dancing requires all kinds of talent. Strength, agility, grace. Not to mention style and creativity. Who do you think makes up all those routines? She puts in hours of practice.”

“I noticed she installed a pole in her new condo.” Jett said grimly.

“I hope it’s not in the living room.” Vicky replied automatically. “That would upset Jasmine.”

“Jasmine is already upset, Vicky.”

“She’ll get over it.”

“We aren’t kids any more, Vicky,” Jett said looking deep into her eyes. “You can’t just pretend you don’t know what is going on.”

Vicky felt anger rise up in her chest. “What do you mean by that?” Her mouth tightened as she looked at him.

“I remember what you told me.” His voice was quiet.

“What are you talking about?” Vicky’s eyes fell to the undulating surface of the water.

“About that fight— between the Colonel and Clay.”

“They were just drunk. A drunken brawl between two brutes.” Vicky looked over at him. Her gaze hardened. “I’m sure you know that is just standard military behavior.”

“You said they were fighting over her.”

“I have no idea what they were fighting over!” Vicky’s voice raised a pitch. “I told you that!”

“You said you heard her name.”

The memory was bleak and watery like a scratched dvd. The picture faded in and out of view. Crackling lines ran through the image of two grown men on the floor. Rolling around on the carpet. Knocking down the floor lamp. Elbows moving jaggedly back through the air.

“I can hardly remember now.” Vicky said, dismissing the image from her mind. “We were kids.”

“That’s my point.”

“What are you saying?”

“You don’t think there is any connection?” Jett’s gaze moved back to the bee. A faint buzzing sound could be heard. “She ran away the next day.” The insect hobbled around the puddle, trying to lift it’s saturated wings.

Vicky watched the bee, but couldn’t think of anything she wanted to say.

“Maybe you think it’s completely natural to progress from ballet and cheerleading to brass poles and platforms by the age of 16? Is that it? Nothing out of the ordinary there.” Jett straightened, but remained standing by the pool.

“Everyone makes choices.” Vicky said looking at bee still fluttering near the toe of his boot, and feeling the anger rise again.

“Right,” Jett nodded. “Having sex with old men that’s a choice most 16-year olds make.”

“Listen, I came home to relax Jett. Not to get wrapped up in this small town drama.”

“Oh, I forgot. These people don’t really matter.” Jett’s eyes narrowed. “It’s just your *family*.”

“Right. My family.” Vicky’s voice hardened. She felt a dagger of hatred pierce her heart when she looked at him. “Not yours.”

Jett turned and stared at the grass, but said nothing. Vicky too watched the grass. Several minutes passed between them. The memory of her sister as a girl was tightly clutched in the dark corners of her mind. She rarely let herself glimpse back so far. The past felt cold and hard like a steel ball. Jett took a few steps toward the grass. His eyes focused on one of the dirt piles.

Vicky looked up at the sky. Frustration shot through her. Why had she come home! She pictured the sea of homes stretching across the flat land all the way to the Interstate. Heat churning above a million asphalt shingles. Strip malls and strip clubs alternating with Walmarts and McDonalds. This place was a fucking nightmare! Vicky fell back in the water and floated on her back across the pool.

The irony of Jen’s arrest was that prostitution was legal in this hell hole! You just had to work in some low down brothel. Freelancing was not allowed. Jen was far too proud to work in one of the two-bit establishments sandwiched between the airport and the military base. She had always been a free-spirit, an entrepreneur! Vicky thought about her sister growing up. Her long braids and freckles. Jen had always been independent and sure that what she said and did was exactly the right thing to be doing at all times. One time she followed Jen on a walk along the back fence way before the tract homes had filled in the void of desert. Back when ranches with acreage made the desert space seem endless. They had gone nearly a mile before she stopped behind a house with a large green pasture that wrapped like a mote all the way around. Sprinklers squirted cool fountains of water through the oven hot air in the pasture. Vicky remembered how content she had been to admire the beautiful horses nibbling from buckets of grain in the open-air stable. Jen had moved down the fence to where three horses grazed in the next pasture.

“I’m going to ride that one,” Jen had said pointing at the biggest blackest horse in the field. His mane was long and tangled with burrs. He was the stallion and the others were mares.

Vicky could still remember how the electric wire stretched along the fence. Porcelain wheels wrapped with wire stretched for as long as you could see.

“How are you going to get in there?”

Jen gave her that ‘you are so stupid look.’ “Duh.” She reached both hands up on the top rail of the fence and without putting her foot on the middle board with the electric wire, she pulled herself up onto the top rail and then gracefully jumped down onto the green turf inside.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

The sudden blasts of the gun shocked Vicky back into reality. She stood, covering her ears, screaming.

“You know there is such a thing as gopher baskets,” Vicky yelled at Jett when the gun was quiet. “They are really quite effective!”

Jett ran over to one of the mounds on the grass and pushed the nose of the gun down into a hole. He fired three more times before looking up at her. “Is that what they taught you at that fancy college you attended?” He straightened up his back and sat on his heels. “To care more about a fucking gopher than you do your own sister!”

A sleek brown rodent charged across the strip of grass separating them. Without hesitation Jett pointed the gun and fired.

Vicky screamed and dived under water. Her heart beat rapidly and she stayed under water until the gun was silent. Those poor gophers! How horrible to be hunted in your own home!

“You are an asshole Jett!” Vicky yelled as soon as she emerged.

The gopher lay on its back on pool deck. It’s big teeth bared towards the sky.

“Sorry,” Jett shrugged and tucked the gun inside his belt. “It’s not like I was going to hit you, or anything.”

Vicky watched in horror as another gopher ran across the grass. For a second she thought he wouldn’t see it, but he moved like a soldier, quick and agile. There was a natural motion connected to the extended gun as if the sleek black metal was another appendage. Blam! Blam! Blam!

Vicky ducked back under water. Tears pressed hot against her lids. A nervous flutter in her stomach made her press on the skin there.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Her eyes burned from the chlorine, but she opened them and swam to the other side. She had always defended her sister. Jen wasn’t hurting anybody, she had said so many times. Prostitution is legal in Nevada, she reminded herself, but something had shifted inside her now. Manny humping the lingerie clad blonde zoomed into view again. God Damn it, she thought.

The vision of her house in Los Angeles rose up in her mind. What were her children doing? Were they safe playing in their rooms? On the Wiii? Or were they outside, in the tree house? A lurching, jerking, opening feeling opened up inside of her at the thought of them so far away.

Anxiety pressed down on her as mind scanned the rooms like a camera. The bedrooms were all empty. The lights automatically flicked off in the silent kitchen. Doris chiming at no one in the halls. The house stood like a Mausoleum in her mind, haunted by the family that had once resided there. She lifted her fingers up to the surface of the water and she examined her wrinkled skin. Would they be safe without her? Would he watch over them and make sure nothing happened?

The image of Iris on the swings at the park came to mind. The chains seemed suddenly so delicate, propelling her body into the sky. The sky looked orange and stretched tight over the city like the roof of a circus tent. Ira climbed the ladder of the slide. The silver metal glinted in the sun. His hands raised in the air as he slid. Manny was so easily distracted—what if he didn't watch them—and—Vicky forced the dark thoughts out of view, but she could feel them, a heavy panic pressed up in her throat. Please God, she found herself saying in her mind. Her hands clasped under the water, an old habit. Please protect my children, Lord. Please watch over them while I am gone.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

Vicky popped back up to the surface for air, and held her hands up over her ears. Jett was lying on his stomach now. The gun pressed down into the earth. Had she really thought coming home would be any different? How could she have forgotten?

Vicky remembered the sound of the rifle firing that day Jen rode the stallion. Scared, Vicky had ducked down in the tall grass. The sound of Mr. Thompson's voice filled the air. The crack of the rifle ricocheted off the side of the barn like a thunderclap. Back then hell had been as real a destination to Vicky as California, but the things that terrified Vicky as a child now seemed like nothing more than dark fairy tales. Vicky had found plenty of her own real demons with which to contend.

Chapter Break

Vicky awoke from her nap to the sound of Jasmine chopping in the kitchen. A growing feeling of dread mushroomed inside her chest as she realized Jasmine was preparing for the

sewing club. Vicky stared at the painting of the apple, and told herself to get out of bed. Her eyes fell to the prescription bottles she had lined up along the dresser. She had doubled up on the Xanax and Ambian at night and taken a couple more doses of Prozac here and there—mostly because she couldn't remember if she had already taken her daily dose—and now she nearly out of pills. Vicky forced herself out of bed. She found her cell phone and stood in front of the mirror dialing the number of her pharmacy in LA. Her eyes looked swollen and her skin was puffy.

After reciting the prescription numbers, the pharmacist informed her that the refill could not be filled for another 10 days.

"I can't wait another 10 days!" Vicky's tone hardened. She studied her reflection checking to see if the Botox was working. The frown line was faint only near her temples. "I am completely out." Vicky glanced at the door realizing she hadn't bothered to shut it completely. The knife smacked the breadboard rhythmically in the kitchen. It was one having to leave the gun behind, but something else completely to have no meds.

"Well, you shouldn't be out already," the pharmacist said sternly. "You should have exactly 7 more days worth."

"My purse was stolen," Vicky lied, lowering her voice. "Besides I don't need you to refill the prescription," Vicky forced 'sweet' and 'reasonable' back into her tone. "I just need you to call it into one here in Sparks, where I am, and then let them worry about it."

"We need authorization from your doctor."

"You don't need authorization to call it into another pharmacy." Her voiced raised and she moved away from the door and over to the closet.

"If it's before the refill date, we do."

Vicky's neck tightened around the base of her scalp. She rubbed her fingers into the skin. Her eyes lifted to the ceiling as she tilted her head back and massaged the aching muscles. She held the phone in her left hand and rolled her head to the right. A soft clicking sound came from her neck like a roller coaster climbing the track, only muted. Luckily, she still had some Vicoden tucked away in her suitcase because, obviously, she was going to need it.

"My doctor is out of the country."

"It's not just your insurance policy, Mrs. Anderson, it's the store's insurance. There is a liability issue in case," the pharmacist hesitated, her voice drifted off.

"Nothing is going to happen as long as I get my prescription." Vicky demanded, opening the closet door, and shutting it quickly behind her.

“We cannot—”

“We aren’t talking about heroin here, for God’s sakes! I’m not going to kill myself.” Vicky said, holding the phone in one hand and waving the other in the air above her, searching for the pull string in the dark. “I’m only trying to take the dosage recommended by my doctor! What about the liability of NOT giving my medication? What about that! How can you justify withholding my proper dosage?” Vicky realized she was yelling.

Sometimes she and Manny would argue about what the exact definition of yelling:

“I am not yelling,” Vicky would say.

“You are!” Manny would yell.

“You are!” Vicky would snap, loudly.

But there was no arguing about this instance. ‘I am definitely yelling.’ Vicky told herself as the pharmacist repeated the reasons why she no longer needed to continue the conversation with Vicky.

“But—” Vicky tried to interject, still waving her hand over her head trying to locate the pull string, but the pharmacist refused to be interrupted and repeated the liability insurance clause causing Vicky to wonder if they had the document posted by the phone to combat just these sort of callers.

As the pharmacist droned on in legaleze, Vicky weighed the options of her final plea. Yelling, it seemed, had not been at all effective. But it felt so good to yell. It was possible that the therapeutic effects of yelling would help counteract the inevitable outcome of not obtaining her prescription. Vicky’s hand tapped the string with her fingers, causing it to swing out of reach.

By the time the pharmacist completed the liability paragraph, Vicky had concluded that she had nothing to lose.

Vicky felt her teeth clench. “You realize then that you alone will be responsible for any number of the terrible acts I might commit if I’m off my medication!” Vicky yelled into the headset. “Did you hear about the guy in the Santa Suit last Christmas? Do you remember what he did? To his own family? You know they discovered that he was off his meds. Some pharmacist probably read him that same fucking paragraph!”

“You are going straight to hell!” chorused the Christian Coalition. The re-appearance of the Christian Coalition signaled to Vicky that this time she had really gone too far. She had lost respect for everything sacred—even the dead, but she was desperate. Her mother was chatting with Satan and her sister servicing the governor of Nevada!

“Do you want to be held responsible for my going on a murderous rampage? I know plenty of people with guns. I am in Nevada for Christ’s sakes! I need to speak to a supervisor!”

The pharmacist hung up the phone.

Vicky opened the closet door and stepped back into the lighted bedroom. The dark closet gave her the creeps, so she turned around, and yanked on the string. The bulb glowed yellow. Vicky kicked the door shut with her foot and looked at the message icon on her phone. Nothing. Not even a text.

Vicky had already left three messages with her therapist. There was no explanation for why she hadn’t called back. “It’s ridiculous,” Vicky muttered, snapping the cell phone shut. “I’m firing her as soon as I get back,” she said, dropping her cell phone into her purse on the floor. A minute later, she reconsidered and reclaimed the phone and slipped it into the pocket of her hoodie. As soon as she tucked it in her pocket it rang.

“Hi Shannan,” Vicky said, dabbing cream around her eyes.

“Don’t sound so excited.”

“Sorry,” Vicky cleared her throat. “It’s just that I’m just nearly out of Prosac and Ambian and they were just starting to work. I was just starting to feel—not so—panicky and awful.”

“You said you felt panicky and awful just yesterday when we talked,” Shannan said.

“Really?” Vicky cocked her head to the side trying to remember yesterday, and where had she would have been when they talked. There was a blank hole in the memory canvas. For a confused moment she couldn’t even remember how long she had been home. Her thoughts swirled between 1 day and nearly a week. First Sign of Dementia!’ The Health Critique squealed.

‘Oh my God I’m getting dementia!’ Vicky thought looking in the mirror. “Where was I?” Vicky said into the receiver, trying not to panic.

“Yesterday?” Shannan sounded confused.

“When we talked!” Vicky shrieked.

“Oh my gawd, you are losing it,” Shannan laughed loudly into the mouth piece. “Yeah, well good luck with that. I sure hope you get those meds.” Her tone was sarcastic. “Anyway, the reason I called is that I’m dying to hear the latest.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on Vicky. Don’t hold back on me now. You’ve surpassed Days of Our Lives at this point!”

Vicky could hear drawers and cabinets closing in the kitchen. She regretted ever calling Shannan, but after her conversation with Jett she had been weak. "I can't talk now."

"That's not fair you told me to call you and wake you up from your nap."

"My mom needs my help. She's having guests over, any minute now."

"You promised!" Shannan sounded genuinely disappointed. "I'm just dying to know the rest of the story about your sister. Is she actually fucking the governor for money?"

"How should I know?"

"That's not fair."

Vicky nodded and rolled her eyes. "Who cares?"

"It's summer. There's nothing on but sequels and reruns. What more do have to keep me entertained?"

"I told you Jett said she did. That he heard it from the Chief of Police at the fire station. I guess the fire chief and the police chief are long-time friends."

"Of course they are. It's like a fucking Western out there. Whores and bible thumpers. Have you ever seen that Governor? I Googled him and he looks just like Jed in Beverley Hillbillies. And what about your benefactor—Gladys—is she going to be at the sewing club?"

"Probably not." Vicky squinted.

"Why?"

"She thinks my mother has been abducted by satan."

Shannan squawked into the phone. Vicky felt slightly nauseas.

"And your sister really seduced her husband when she was a 16 year old cheerleader?"

"Did I tell you that?" Vicky thought back trying to remember ever having a mentioned Jen. She had taken a Xanax and a Vicoden in order to fall asleep and she must have babbled on more than she intended.

"Huh!" Shannan sounded completely thrilled. "Don't those people know there are laws about that sort of thing?"

"My mother married the colonel when she was 17, so I guess not."

"Wow!"

"I'm glad you are so entertained by my pathetic life."

"A pathetic life is what you had here, scrubbing the fucking travertine with a toothbrush!"

"My life was not pathetic!"

“Only because I coerced you into finally getting a job.”

“I was having great sex.” Vicky said. A smile rose to her lips at the thought of her afternoons in Mark’s apartment. It was hard to feel shame over something that had given her such physical pleasure.

“Poor Manny.”

“Right. He is a real Prince.” Vicky sat down on the bed.

“I stopped by the house and he’s doing a great job with the kids.”

“Huh.” Vicky felt a twinge of anger.

A brief silence filled the line. “So when are you going to call your sister?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I’d like a full report, please.”

“You know that you can’t tell anyone about my sister, right?”

“Whoever would I tell?”

“Don’t play stupid, Shannan

“Oh and have you e-mailed Martin, yet?”

“No.” Vicky glanced down the hall. She could hardly stand to think about the show. “I really need to go.”

“How do you know whether or not they’ve picked your script?” Shannan’s tone was somber. “Isn’t the deadline on Friday?”

“Uh huh.” Vicky sighed. “I’m sure they are going to cancel the show, Shannan. They’ve sent back every single one of our ideas.”

“Don’t give me that horseshit!” Shannan’s sounded like a mean kid. “They always send back scripts for revision. It’s just part of the process!”

“I have a lot on my plate right now.”

“Don’t act like a spoiled brat, Vicky.” Shannan’s voice came loud across the speaker.

Vicky’s ear felt hot.

“You committed to Jack. If you blow this off, you are never going to work again.” Shannan hesitated and then added. “From the looks of things you might need a job.”

A prickly feeling erupted in her stomach. “I can’t check my e-mail.” She practically hissed into the phone. “I’m living in the dark ages here. There’s no fucking Wi Fi!”

“Well, call Martin, then and let him know what’s going on then.”

Vicky looked at her fingers. They looked strangely swollen like little sausages. Her whole body was reacting to the heat. Her nose felt itchy. "I'll call...later."

"Oh my God!" Shannan yelled. "I'm going to call him myself and let him know that he needs to call your cell phone. Check your messages!"

"Fine. Thanks." Vicky looked back at the prescription bottles on the counter. "Hey, do you think you could send me a package with at least some sleeping pills. I'd—"

"I'll see what I have around the house." Shannan sounded exasperated. "I thought you were only going to be gone a week. Listen, I got to go. I'm late for the trainer."

"You can Fed Ex them—"

The phone went dead.

"Did you have a nice nap, Honey?"

"Yeah, thanks." Vicky hugged her Mother. "You look great, Mom." Vicky said stepping back to admire her mother. She wore a knee length brown skirt that flared slightly at the knee, a pale yellow top, and fashionable flats. Jasmine had always been pretty, but lately she had blossomed. Her cheeks and lips were a natural rose color and her skin was lightly tanned from the sun. She looked healthy and relaxed.

"It's the yoga," Jasmine said blushing slightly and turning back to her chopping. "I feel 10 years younger!"

"I thought meditation invited the voice of Satan into your head." Vicky said, picking up a slice of cheese. She looked at it then, set it back down again.

"Devil worshipping." Jasmine giggled. "That's what my father always said."

"You're not worried about Satan, anymore?"

Vicky looked up from the platter of cheese and crackers, just as Jasmine cupped her chin in her hand. "With Jesus in my heart, Satan can't hurt me."

"I heard Gladys doesn't agree." Jasmine's hand dropped, back to the tray of food. Vicky leaned against the counter trying not to let the heavy exhausted feeling take over. A part of her wanted to stretch out across the cool linoleum like she used to do as a child.

Jasmine looked at Vicky. "I guess you and Jett have been talking?"

“He mentioned that he’s worried, that’s all.” Vicky pulled out a chair, and sat down at the kitchen table. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried to tell you some of it—you have enough to worry about,” she answered emptying a package of crackers into a neat line across the plate. “Gladys has a great, protective love for God’s word. And I don’t judge her for that.”

“Jett said she wants you to repent.”

“She believes the devil is taking hold.” Jasmine reached into the sink and removed a large bunch of red grapes from a copper colander.

“What do you think?”

“That I am changing, and it makes her nervous.”

“Changing? You still go to church four times a week, and aren’t you still volunteering at the homeless shelter.”

“I’m also in charge of the Africa First Aid kits project.”

“Really?”

“Yes, our goal is to send 2000 First Aid kits this year.” Jasmine’s eyes always lit up when she talked about her ‘work for the Lord.’ “Evelyn and I are working on the project together with the ladies from the Assembly of God church.”

“You never told me that.”

“You have been so busy, Vicky.” Jasmine pulled a cluster of grapes from a bag, and snipped at the stalks. “Besides I know you and your sister are tired of hearing about all of the ‘church lady’ stuff.”

Vicky smiled at hearing her mother use of the term she and Jen had invented as kids.

“I know, I was a little overboard with both of you when you were younger, and I just...I just don’t want to turn either of you any further away from the love of God.”

“Come on, Mother.” Vicky glanced down at her red painted toes on the green flowered linoleum. “I still say my prayers.”

“You do?” Jasmine turned and looked into Vicky’s eyes. Vicky leaned forward and kissed her mother on the cheek. “I just prayed an hour ago.”

Jasmine smiled and tears glossed her eyes. “It means so much to me that I haven’t...that you still...that you remember Jesus’ love is always with you.”

“Okay,” Vicky held up her palm. “Let’s not get too deep, just yet, mother. I just got here, okay?”

"I'm also doing some work at the homeless shelter," Jasmine said. "Did you know that the abortion rate among women living below the poverty line is more than four times that of women above 300 percent of the poverty level?"

"Not surprising," Vicky said, letting her eyes drift out the window. The Camilia bush was in full bloom. "Where did you hear that?"

Jasmine went to the refrigerator and pulled out a copper mold filled with crab dip. "I had a divine visitor," Jasmine said, setting the dip on the counter.

Vicky's eyes switched back to her mother. "What?" she asked, hoping she had misheard.

"An angel of the Lord came to me and told me exactly what to do." Jasmine turned back to look at Vicky. Vicky suddenly became aware that her mouth was open. She forced it shut. Her teeth clicked. Jasmine's eyes sparkled. There was something different about her expression. Something had definitely changed. "What are you supposed to do?" Vicky asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

"My mission is teach the members of the congregation that fighting Roe v. Wade should no longer be their objective," Jasmine said matter of factly. She turned back to the counter, lifted the copper mold and flipped the crab dip onto a silver platter. "We need to support the women in our community—provide for them—especially single mothers. It is only through love and understanding that will we combat the devil."

Vicky stared as her mother lined up Ritz crackers on the platter. Had her mother finally lost her mind? What the hell was she thinking? First the Da Vinci Code and now this? Abortion? She had to be crazy! How would they accept her, once they knew about her new mission from God? The church was her whole world. What would happen after they kicked her out? Maybe she could just switch over to Methodist, Vicky told herself calmly. But she would lose all of her friends. She had given her entire life savings to that church. Vicky gulped. "Did you tell them why I'm here? About...what—a" Vicky realized she was stuttering. "About Manny and I."

"Whatever for?" Jasmine opened the refrigerator and handed Vicky a bottle of cranberry juice cocktail and a bottle of cabernet.

Vicky felt relieved. At least she would still be in good standing. There was no way she wanted to take on this battle. Vicky was more than happy to continue living up to the Christian innocence Gladys and the sewing club members had always bestowed on her. "Are you going to leave the church, because," Vicky straightened. She thought about the sewing group arriving. Not one member would ever consider supporting abortion. "The whole idea of fighting them on this

issue—of even bringing up the issue is complete insanity and I don't think I can handle that right now."

"I'm not going to say a word." Jasmine flashed her a reassuring smile. "Not tonight."

"You promise?"

"I promise dear."

The interior of the garage had evolved more than any other section of the house after the Colonel's death. The new carpet had been a Christmas gift from the flooring store owned by Gladys's family. Jasmine picked out the hot pink shag. White tablecloths with hand sewn ruffles covered each of the three tables. Centered on each table was a basket of supplies. Pincushions, thimbles, needles and thread in one basket. Knitting needles and yarn in another. A third held crochet and bamboo frames used for embroidery. An old chandelier, wired with an extension cord, dangled from the ceiling truss over a coffee table where three couches covered with bright fabric formed a half circle on one side of the room.

Vicky set the cranberry juice and wine on one of the tables and went over to the gun case. Robert, Jr., Jimmy, Ricky and Patrick stared back at her. Vicky stared at them and tried to imagine them alive again. What they would say. How they would joke around with each other and roughhouse. There wasn't a room big enough to contain them once they had hit puberty, except maybe the school gymnasium. Robert, Jimmy and Patrick had been on the same All Star Little League team and won the State Championship the year Vicky moved to Los Angeles. Patrick had been her favorite. He always had a smile on his face and asked her how she was doing. He waited for an answer, sometimes even after she had given him one as if he wasn't quite satisfied with the one she had provided.

"Have you talked to Manny today?" Jasmine's voice interrupted Vicky's thoughts.

"We talked this morning, and again after lunch. I tried again just before I came out here, but he didn't pick up."

"How is everything?"

"Horrible."

Jasmine stopped lighting the candles on the piano and turned to look at Vicky. Tears filled Jasmine's eyes and she set down the matches. "Oh, Vicky. Woe unto the world because of offences, but woe unto them through whom the offence cometh," Jasmine said. She reached over and hugged her.

Vicky breathed into her long dark hair. Her mother's hair had always impressed Vicky. Long and shiny, with a slight wave only near the ends, Vicky had often thought Jasmine's hair make her look like an Egyptian princess. Wound tight into a French Twist for church, but loose around her friends and family, Jasmine's hair was as much a part of Vicky's childhood as Jasmine herself. So many times as a child, Vicky had lain across the carpet looking up to where Jasmine sat at her desk brushing, or braiding or oiling her hair. The smell of almond oil and the soapy scent of tea tree oil always reminded her of these moments.

After Jasmine went back into the kitchen, Vicky sat down on the piano bench and dialed the home number again. Still no answer. That was odd, she thought. The image of the black mountain lion lurking in the backyard came abruptly into mind. She dialed Manny's cell phone again.

Shannan said they were all fine. That Manny was doing a great job. She knew she should be happy at the glowing report, but Shannan's statement struck her as oddly unnerving. Of course, she wanted them to be safe, and happy, but how could Manny just step in and know how to manage the children? Every time she called, she had expected them to report some misdeed or major catastrophe, but other than some whining about running out of Iris' favorite cheese, there had been no such calamity. All three of them seemed in good spirits, and this seemed horribly unfair.

Every time she tried to break down their established routine into details for Manny, he interrupted her and said he could figure it out. This infuriated Vicky. How could he think that years of practice in the home as mother and planner and overseer of all things family—that he could just step in and seamlessly take over? Vicky felt her jaw tighten at the thought of how unfair his hostile take over of her children had been. How dare he force *her* out! How dare he saunter back into their lives just when they had reached the age capable of reasoning! Where had he been when they were two? Three? Running around like little monsters wreaking havoc on every trip outside the home—would they remember the care with which she had attended to them when they were little more than blobs in diapers. How many diapers had she changed? How many nights had she woken up to lovingly feed and burp them? Would they even remember? Vicky tried Ira's cell phone.

"Hello?" Ira's voice came across the line.

"Hi honey," Vicky said, immediately smiling. "I miss you. Are you okay?"

"Fine, Mom."

“Well, what have you been doing?”

A long pause ensued during which Vicky could hear a faint beeping sound.

“Honey, did you hear me? What have you been doing?” The familiar annoyance exploded the sweet recollection she had only seconds before. “IRA!” Vicky squawked.

“I said fine.” His voice trimmed in irritation that he seemed to reserve specially for her. “I already answered.”

“I asked what have you been doing.”

“Dad bought me the X-Box G500 gold series.”

“Wow.” Vicky struggled to keep the sarcasm out of her tone. “That was nice.”

“So what else is going on?”

“Nothing. Zachary came over yesterday and he’s been showing me how it works. I’ve got to go I’m on level 5. Iris wants to talk to you.”

The phone sounded muffled and then clunked against something.

“Hi Momma! I miss you!”

“I miss you too, baby.” A warmth radiated through Vicky at the sound of her daughter’s voice.

“Daddy took us to pizza and we got ice-cream sundaes afterwards and we went to bed without brushing our teeth!”

“Really.”

“Yeah, and Zachary and Shannan came over for like all day yesterday and Zachary and Ira were on the X-Box for like 13 hours and Daddy let us stay up late to watch a movie. They watched Titans of Steel, but I didn’t watch it Momma because I knew you would say that it was too violent.”

“What did you watch?”

“Hanna Montana. The one where she flies to Las Vegas!”

“Oh.”

“How is your cough?”

“Fine. And we got to go to the toy store. I got a new G768 Doll with a stroller and 2TCZ baby!”

“I thought we agreed that the robot family wasn’t the best choice for play time, Iris?”

“Dad said it was okay and he said he might even get me the 25gbz Sports Coupe and Out-and-About clothing kit!”

Vicky's face went white. A tight angry feeling filled her throat. "I don't think you need all of that, honey. You already have the Webkins world that we just upgraded, remember? As long as you manage your Web money, you will be able to save up for some special outfits and furniture for your WEB house."

"Yeah, but it takes sooo long to save up for the things I want in Webville. It's so boring."

"I bet they might even have a sports cars option."

"That would take me foo-rrr-eeev-err!"

"No, honey." Vicky pressed her voice into a patient monotone. "You just might not be able to buy so many shoes, or you might have to get a new job, or you could always invent something and get the patent!"

"I think you have it set up all wrong because I was talking to some of my friends at school and they don't even have to work in their Web World. They said that they just go out and buy whatever they want. They have a budget that's like \$500 a day! They've never had to wash dishes at the restaurant."

"Well, it is possible that they have different terms set up on their accounts, but remember I said it is important that you learn how money works in the real world so you don't get unrealistic expect—"

"They said dishwashing wasn't even a real job."

"It is, honey, but there are many job choices. You didn't have to choose—"

"They said that they have giant machine that wash the dishes in restaurants and when Daddy took us to the Four Seasons for lunch—"

"You went to the Four Seasons?"

"Uh huh. He met Uncle Jimmy and I went into the kitchen to see—"

"You were in the kitchen? Where was Daddy? Oh he and Uncle Jimmy met some friends and they were talking so I went into the kitchen—"

"By yourself?"

"Uh huh. And they did have a gigantic machine, so I want to change my job—"

"That's a good idea, Iris. I've told you there are many, many job choices and so many of them pay more money than dishwashing."

"Daddy says we could get the robot housecleaner. We looked at all of them on the Websight and he says that there isn't any problem with robots. Daddy says robots make perfectly fine toys and that the batteries aren't really a problem and Daddy says—"

"Can I speak to Daddy, please," Vicky could feel her entire body tightening like a rod of steel.

"Sure," Iris said matter-of-factly. "He's right here." Her lisp made her 'S' sound thick.

"What makes you think that it is okay to spoil those kids?" Vicky's voice lifted to an uncomfortably high pitch. Vicky heard the doorbell ring.

"I'll get it!" Jasmine called from the kitchen.

"I'm enjoying spending time with them." Manny's voice sounded relaxed and Vicky hated him for it.

"Do you think that's what parenting is all about? Just giving them whatever they want. Letting them do whatever they want?"

"From the looks of the toys already in their room, that's what you've been doing."

"That is not true." Vicky recoiled. "I am constantly telling them no. Constantly telling them things are inappropriate—like the new X-Box! Didn't we have a conversation about that?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, that's not saying much since half the time I'm talking to you about the kids you aren't listening!" Vicky smiled and stood up as the sewing club ladies entered the room. "I've got to go. We'll talk about this later." She snapped the phone shut and as she slipped it back inside her pocket, she noticed her hand was shaking, and she realized she forgot to ask about Iris' cough, which was the whole reason she had called.

Vicky took a deep breath to recuperate. Her eyes lifted to a banner posted on the wall above the piano. "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities."—1Tim 5:23

Vicky poured herself a glass and pictured her house perched at the top of the canyon. She could see herself driving back and forth on the freeways. Rushing through grocery stores. Under hat and sunglasses at the soccer field. The wine caused the images to flow like electricity without ebb or flow, in a steady stream. She saw herself sitting in the conference room with the other writers. The clock ticking close to three on the wall. Panic rising over being late to pick up the kids. None of the other writers had kids. How simple their lives seemed in comparison.

Jasmine arrived back in the room. "How is your new job going, honey?" she asked setting a pitcher and a stack of paper cups on one of the tables.

"Who was that at the door?"

“Just someone from the church.” Jasmine said quickly. “Are you enjoying the new group of writers?”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for the whole sitcom thing anymore,” Vicky hadn’t put voice to any of her recent feelings at the studio. This was the first time she had acknowledged the dread she had begun to feel when she thought about work. The shine and glimmer of those golden gates had ceased to impress her. Especially now, she thought. How could she write comedy now that she was officially depressed? “I’m not really liking the whole concept behind the show I’ve been working on.”

“I don’t think you’ve even told me what the new show is about.”

“No one knows,” Vicky answered. Jasmine sat down next to her on the piano bench. “The producer pitched one idea and the network is turning it into something else all together.”

“Dirty, Sexy, Money.” Vicky started.

Jasmine’s laughter interrupted her thoughts.

Vicky flashed her an impatient look.

Jasmine lowered her head. “I’m sorry, Honey, but you must admit that title is provocative.”

“Provocative sells.” Vicky smiled, forcing a smile to her lips.

“After Trixie left *Friends Forever*.” Jasmine said. “I just lost interest.”

“You know, they never should have killed her just because you were pregnant.” Jasmine said.

“Mom,” Vicky said softly. “That’s an old story.”

“I guess you could be flattered that they killed Trixie, instead of just hiring someone else to write her part,” she said.

Vicky nodded and sipped her wine.

“Trixie was the best part of that show,” Jasmine continued. “She reminded me of Edna in *The Awakening*.”

“Mrs. Pontielier.” Vicky nodded, smiling back. “I’m surprised you’ve read that, Mother.”

“Book club,” Jasmine responded. “Right before *Da Vinci Code*.” Then she shook her head. “No,” she said waving her finger. “After *The Awakening* came *Secret Life of Bees*.” She smiled. “I Remember now. Oh, everyone loved that book!”

Vicky smiled. “Too bad they couldn’t handle the *Da Vinci Code*.”

Jasmine nodded, but remained silent. Vicky suddenly noticed that no one had arrived. She glanced at her wrist. It was almost 7:00. "What time do they usually arrive?"

"6 O'clock," Jasmine said.

"What?" Vicky stood and walked to the window. The street was empty. "Aren't they coming?" She looked at her mother.

Jasmine's skin looked unnaturally pale.

"Who was that at the door?" Vicky asked

"The church has told them that my house is no longer a House of the Lord," Jasmine looked up and smiled. "They aren't coming." Jasmine laughed, but tears shined in her eyes.

"What?" Vicky's voice switched upon seeing her mother's tears. "Who?"

"I think I mentioned that Gladys is very upset with me." Jasmine said, shaking her head. "She went to see Pastor Rick about some things after services on the Sunday. I guess this is the result."

"Why would she do that?"

Vicky studied her mother's face. The gentle slope of her forehead, the rosy curve of her cheeks. Her brown eyes had always been so reassuring. Now they looked bloodshot and worried.

"Someone saw me at the clinic."

"What clinic?"

Jasmine looked down at her hands.

"The abortion clinic?" Vicky breathed.

Jasmine nodded.

Vicky looked at her mother. "How...did you....why?"

Jasmine reached for the Kleenex box on top of the piano. "Francine has no support," she said after blowing her nose. "She was just starting to get herself back on her feet."

"Francine is a white trash drunk."

"Vicky!" Jasmine said. "Francine is a dear friend of mine. She has accepted the Lord into her heart and she would do anything for those children."

"You mean the two she lost custody of because she failed a drug test three times in a row?"

"That was before she found the church," Jasmine picked up the knife again. "She has found Jesus Christ, Our Savoir and is back on the path to righteousness."

Vicky narrowed her eyes and gazed at her mother. “You told me she had a relapse just last month.”

“I know!” Jasmine wailed. “How can she take care of a baby?” Jasmine sobbed harder now and Vicky hugged her tightly. “How could she do that—to her child!” Jasmine cried.

After her mother had stopped crying, Vicky got up and poured herself another glass of wine. “So they think you helped Francine get an abortion, and now they won’t even come to your house?”

Jasmine shook her head. Her shoulders slumped, and she held the Kleenex up to her nose. “It wasn’t the first time,” she said in a quiet voice.

“What?” Vicky demanded.

“I’ve done it before.” Jasmine responded.

“You mean you’ve gone to the clinic before?”

Jasmine nodded. “Several times.”

“With who?”

“Juana,” Jasmine sighed heavily. “And two other women you don’t know.”

Vicky stared at her mother. She was starting to doubt her sanity. First there was the business about conversations with Satan and now this! Southern Baptist don’t do abortion! What had she been thinking? That church meant everything to her. Her father had started the church, and she had given them her whole life savings! How could she have made such a huge mistake? Vicky forced herself to say nothing. The two women sat in silence for a few minutes.

Vicky looked around the empty room glumly. The sight of the crab dip and veggie platter was depressing. Vicky smeared some crackers with dip and stacked up some vegetables on a plate. She set the plate next to her mother and sat down.

“You’ve always had so many friends,” Vicky said finally giving up trying to say find something appropriate to say. She looked at the plate, but couldn’t bring herself to eat. “I’m used to be alone, but you—” she turned to look at her mother. “You aren’t going to like it Mother. You are going to have to repent.”

Jasmine nibbled on a carrot. “I can’t,” she said, turning her gaze to the pictures in the gun rack. “I’ve changed.”

“Well, you don’t have to tell them that!” Vicky said.

“I tried not to tell them, and that’s how I wound up in so much trouble—”

“You would have been in more trouble if you’d told them,” Vicky corrected. “At least this way there is a shadow of doubt.”

“Not really.” Jasmine shook her head.

“What do you mean?” Vicky said. “You could tell them you were just there to try to keep Francine from going through with it. They have no way of knowing why you were there.”

“I told them.”

“You what!” Vicky swallowed her wine down the wrong pipe and choked. Once she was breathing again she asked. “Why did you tell them?”

“I’m not going to lie, Vicky.”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Heaven forbid.”

“The Holy Spirit is guiding me, Vicky,” Jasmine smiled and reached over to touch Vicky’s arm.

“Tell me you had nothing to do with Francine’s so-called miscarriage,” Vicky said.

“Sweetheart,” Jasmine’s voice was calm. “You don’t need to worry about all this. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Mother—” Vicky squinted her eyes and look suspiciously at Jasmine. A blush crossed Jasmine’s forehead and spread to her cheeks.

“I did have something to do with it,” Jasmine’s eyes lit up. “I also helped Juana a few years ago. And there were a couple of young girls who were sent to me as well.”

“Sent to you?” Vicky took in a deep breath. “So you are the...the...baby killer.”

“The Lord spoke to me, honey,” Jasmine reached out and touched Vicky’s arm. “He is guiding me every step of the way.”

“Mom!” Vicky snapped. “This is insane! There are nearly 600 attending members. That church is not going to change their ways just because...just...over—” Vicky looked away. She knew arguing with her mother’s conviction was useless. I complete wasted of time. “Why is all of this happening now?” she whined miserably, then looked down at the streaks of purple inside her empty plastic cup.

“I didn’t want you to have to get involved,” Jasmine dropped her hand back into her lap. “I’m so sorry, Vicky.”

Silence filled the room. Vicky gulped her wine. “Maybe you *should* start a book club,” Vicky said finally. “Maybe its time you met some women outside the church.”

“Oh, I’m way too busy for that, Dear,” Jasmine responded. She stood up suddenly and clapped her hands together. “Let’s just forget about all of this nonsense for now?” Jasmine smiled, her eyes gleaming. “What do you say we play some cards? Or Yatzee. We could call your sister. Maybe she isn’t busy?”

The side door opened suddenly, the hinges creaked loudly as Gladys’ large frame filled the doorway.

Jasmine immediately stood up to greet Gladys. There was an awkward silence in the room. “Gladys!” Jasmine called. “So glad you decided to come.”

“I came to say Hello to Vicky. You didn’t say how long she was staying in your message and I thought this might be my only chance.”

Vicky felt a warm flush bloom on her cheeks. “Hi Gladys!” She felt herself rising up off the couch. Gladys clutched her to her large bosom in a warm embrace.

“Hallelujah!” Gladys said raising her arms high above her head. “Praise Jesus!”

Vicky laughed as she hugged Gladys bulk.

“How is the brightest star in Hollywood?” Gladys said, leaning back to look at her. “The good lord has looked after thee I see.”

“We are all fine. Thanks.” Vicky smiled and stepped back a few paces. The wine seemed to have suddenly rushed up to her head and she felt like she was levitating.

“I hear you are working on a new show.” Gladys bellowed. Her voice had always been loud, but in the empty room it seemed all encompassing.

Vicky nodded.

“Joy! Joy!” Gladys said moving across the room. Her eyes swept across Jasmine’s face. Jasmine responded with a weak smile.

“We are still in the preliminary writing stages,” Vicky said quickly. “It might not ever make it to the network.”

“What’s it called Vicky?” Gladys looked her squarely in the face. Her dark eyes shined. Two rosy splotches glowed on her doughy cheeks.

Vicky felt her stomach drop. Hesitation filled her. The words Dirty, Sexy, Money buzzed in the circuitry of her mind. Vicky gaped at Gladys purple moo moo style smock. Her large hands hung like two thick limbs alongside her thick trunk.

“Funny thing about Hollywood,” Vicky said struggling to keep her eyes steady on Gladys. Vicky cleared her throat. “They don’t like to pick the title until the show has been cast.”

Vicky shrugged. Christian guilt jangled through her at the idea of saying the title out loud. *'Liars will burn in Hell!'* chanted the Christian Coalition. "Something to do with marketing. I don't really understand it all." She took a sip from her plastic cup.

Gladys nodded.

"Can I get you some soda, Gladys?" Jasmine asked briskly. "We have cranberry juice. I could make you a spritzer."

Gladys turned to face Jasmine. The two women smiled at each other, but there was an undercurrent of animosity in Gladys voice. "No. I won't be staying long."

Jasmine nodded and returned to her seat at the table.

Vicky felt her knees bend underneath her as she sat back down next to her mother. The old springs squeaked as Gladys sat down on the couch across from them.

"I'm not going to lie to you," Gladys said, boring her eyes straight into Vicky. "Things are not right with God around here."

"Oh really?" Vicky's face felt hot.

"But yeah there were false prophets also among the people," Gladys' voice raised even louder as she quoted the bible. "that bring upon themselves swift destruction."

Jasmine's eyes lowered.

Vicky felt a pressure rise in her chest. She met Gladys' gaze and remembered the shame she had felt so often as a child. How many times had Gladys condemned them to hell for playing with the wrong toys, or missing bible studying or skipping a line on the Lord's prayer? How many times had Jasmine apologized on their behalf?

"To miss or ignore the advice given in these words," Gladys had switched her gaze to Jasmine, "is to ensure God bringing perilous times on His children."

"My Mom is already upset—" Vicky interrupted, her voice as polite as she could muster.

"Your Mother is going to be left behind," Gladys said. "She will not be taken up until she is right with the Lord."

Jasmine's hand raised slightly up from her lap as if to bear the brunt of the blow from the words.

Vicky cleared her throat, then cleared it again. Her mind was blank, and she was angry at the blankness.

"I have always supported you Vicky, haven't I?"

"I appreciate all you have done for me Gladys," Vicky smiled, feeling the familiar guilt invading the blank space inside of her.

"Ever since the Colonel died. I have done my best to look out for your Mother," she continued. "We have been friends for so long now." Her eyes remained on Vicky.

"It was not easy for me to come here tonight and tell you this," she said. "I know you love your Mother, and it is important that you know I love her to, and Jesus loves us all!" Gladys' voice raised up again.

"Praise God!" Jasmine declared next to her.

Vicky's guilt receded and now there was only an impatience. The tortured impatience that had been such a regular companion when she was a child.

Gladys leaned her bulk forward on the couch. Vicky's eyes dropped to Gladys' red lipstick that was badly in need of blotting. "The devil has made his way into your Mother's heart," Gladys said, lowering her voice. Her eyes were directly on Vicky.

Jasmine sat silent next to her, and Vicky wished she would just stand up and ask Gladys to leave, but she knew that would never happen.

"How do you know?" Vicky said carefully.

"Look at her Vicky!" Gladys declared hoisting herself back onto her swollen feet. She pointed her finger at Jasmine. "Can't you see the devil there? Look into your heart," Gladys moved closer to them. Her finger still raised. "Expel him! Repent!" Her voice filled the room, her eyes were wide, and Vicky worried that at any moment she was going to go into a frenzied rant. When she was a child, her mother had taken her once to a church in the foothills near Carson City. It had been a much smaller congregation, and Jasmine had never explained why they went, but they had never gone back. By the end of the sermon people were hollering out loudly, yelping and wailing. Vicky had been terrified. Soon a few members were rolling in the center aisle, their bodies shaking, a mix of chirping and wailing and indecipherable words—Vicky had run terrified from the building to where Jen, who had refused to go in, was waiting in the car. Vicky had heard of Gladys' reputation for 'Speaking in Tongues,' but she'd never witnessed the phenomena outside that one day. The look in her eyes make Vicky worry that at any minute her enormous body might start to shake in front of her. Terror flashed up at the idea. What the Hell would she do! How would she react!

“That’s enough!” Vicky stood up. Her face felt flush. She set her wine glass on the bar. A quivering fury ran through her body, and her fists clenched in response. She felt like she had Super Human strength, and she gritted her teeth to refrain from saying anything more.

“It’s okay,” Jasmine said, standing next to Vicky.

“You have forgotten to be thankful Vicky,” Gladys said with a kind smile. “For his beneficent act of sending His son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sins and provide us hope in a “new life” in eternity.”

“For that I am thankful,” Vicky muttered, all of the wind flew out of her body, and she looked at her mother who looked equally deflated.

“Never underestimate God’s providence, work and timing!” Gladys boomed. “The devil has been hard at work here while you have been gone, but your own devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ will help convince your mother that the time has come to repent.” Gladys looked from Vicky to Jasmine and back again. “The Holy War has been going on for some time now—don’t you see we are almost out of time! You are strong Vicky, you can save your Mother!” Gladys’ clenched fist rose in front of her chest.

Vicky stood up from the couch. She took a step forward toward Gladys, and Gladys smiled widely as Vicky wrapped her arms around her. “Thank you, Gladys,” Vicky said forcing up the volume in her voice, she said after letting her arms drop back down to her side. “I really appreciate you coming over and letting me know you are worried about my Mom’s salvation.”

Gladys nodded. “I knew you would help us, Vicky.” For the first time Gladys looked over at Jasmine. “We know it is not too late to save her.”

Vicky felt her mother’s gaze on her, but her eyes remained fixed on Gladys. “Gladys I have something I want to tell you, but first I need to do something.” Vicky stood and walked across the room. She picked up her purse from the floor and pulled out her checkbook. After making out a check payable to Gladys, she walked over and handed it to her. “I want to thank you for helping to pay my way through college. I really appreciate all that you have done for me,” Gladys looked at the check and her eyes widened.

“I never gave you this much,” Gladys said, looking stunned.

“Interest.” Vicky smiled. “You deserve interest. You made a risky investment in me, and I want you to know it paid off.”

“I...I don’t know what to say,” Gladys said looking at Vicky.

“You could just say Thank you.”

“Praise Jesus!” Gladys said, grinning broadly and clasping the check to her breast. “I never expected anything back from you Vicky, but I am glad to accept your gift in these troubled times. I will see that a portion of this goes to the church.”

Vicky shrugged. “Whatever you want to do with it—is fine, but what I really want is for you to stop harassing my Mother.”

Gladys looked up, her mouth dropped open in surprise. “Vicky you know I love your mother, and I am only trying to save her soul—“

“We don’t need any more of your help.” Vicky said firmly.

Gladys looked back at Jasmine. “Do you know the sins she has committed?” Gladys’ cheeks bounced as the words started to fly out of her mouth. The volume increased with each syllable. “Abortions! Adultery! Conversing with the devil. The lies and deception!” Gladys pointed again at Jasmine across the room. Vicky stood in front of her, shielding her Mother from her wrath.

“You need to go now Gladys!” Vicky said raising her voice. The strange fury was filling her again. As she was writing the check out, Vicky had become aware that all the fear, the guilt, the shame had flowed out along with the ink of her pen. As she had handed Gladys the check, she felt the break between her childish awe, and her fear evaporated. “I support gay marriage!” Vicky heard herself screaming. “I support Roe v. Wade! I also support my mother, who has devoted her life to serving that church, and I resent you coming in here and telling her that what she is doing is wrong! I think you are wrong! And if the rapture comes and leaves us behind, well, good riddance!”

Gladys’ blue rimmed eyes opened wide, and for a moment she stood silent, staring at Vicky. “You don’t know the whole story.” The whites of Gladys’ eyes looked yellow in the fluorescent lighting. “She has deceived you too, my Dear. You have to trust me there is more that she is not willing to tell you. Something so dark with evil that even you will start to wonder about what I have so long been trying not to see.”

Vicky marched over to the door, and flung it open. “She has told me everything, and I support her 100 percent!”

Gladys strained as she bent to pick up her purse from the floor. When she straightened, she looked from Jasmine to Vicky. “Then you both are lost.” Gladys said her voice rumbling and shaking in her throat. “All three of you are damned to the eternal fires of Hell, do you realize in doing this you are no better off than your sister. Do you realize what you are doing Vicky?”

Jasmine rose, her arms outstretched. “Don’t say that Gladys. Vicky loves the Lord! And you know how devoted I am to Jesus Christ our savior!”

The purple cotton of Gladys’ moo moo shook as she turned and marched out the door.

Chapter Break

Jasmine agreed to take one of Vicky’s sleeping pills after they had cleaned up. Vicky peeked in on her around 11:30 and was relieved to see her mother had fallen asleep. Vicky, on the other hand, felt wide awake. The confrontation with Gladys had invigorated her. So many times she had come home and ‘praised Jesus’ this and ‘glory hallelulahed’ that and it was all such a farce. She knew she was drunk, but at the moment her honesty felt liberating. Gladys had bullied them long enough, Vicky thought smugly looking at her mother sleeping. What a relief! Now maybe her mother could start spending time with some normal people. A book club would really help to fill the gap. Her mother had always loved to read. Maybe she’d even be open to the idea of therapy. Those voices must be disturbing to deal with all the time. Maybe some medication? Of course, Vicky would offer to pay. Thank God, Manny’s movies were still selling. Even if they decided on divorce, her health care would continue wouldn’t it?

Vicky closed her mother’s door and slipped her shoes on in the hall.

Vicky called Jen, but decided against leaving a message—Jen would be so proud of her! She could hardly wait to tell the story! She decided to walk to the corner store to buy a pack of cigarettes. Despite a breeze the night was warm. The golden glow of the casino lights in Reno glowed above the roofs. Stars smeared the blue black sky overhead. The convenience store had been built when she was 16 and she and Jen regularly walked there for candy and magazines when they were girls. There were a few tables on one side where they sold hot dogs and coffee. For many years it was the only fast food available on this side of town. She was suddenly aware of how much she missed her sister. It had been so long since they’d done anything fun together.

The wine made Vicky’s body felt fuzzy as she walked up the sidewalk. Placing one foot in front of the other she attempted to stay on the center crack, but found herself veering slightly off to the right and then the left each time she tried. There was no way she could go to sleep yet, she thought staring up at the stars.

The lights of the convenience store blazed causing her to squint against the glare as she entered the store. She was desperately craving a cigarette by the time the clerk placed the pack on the counter. As she waited for the change, her eyes drifted to the tables. A man sat with his back to the counter reading the newspaper. His dark hair was cut short around his neck and ears. A scar reached around his neck. Vicky's heart jumped.

"Jett?" she asked.

Jett turned around and looked startled to see her. "Vicky?" He lowered the newspaper. "What are you doing here?"

"Recovering from the Sewing Club," Vicky said smiling widely as she slipped the pack of cigarettes into the pocket of her sweatshirt, and approached the table. "What are you doing here?" She decided against bringing up the fact that no one had showed. She didn't want to witness him get stuck on that tangent again. It was one thing to talk to Jen about Gladys—but Jett was too damn serious about the whole subject.

"This is my usual haunt before retiring." Jett smiled standing up to greet her. They hugged quickly. "I've come to think of this place as my living room," he nodded to the clerk.

"We tried to give him a badge and put him on the payroll, but he refused," The clerk responded.

"Are you still living out in that—" Vicky glanced back at the clerk and then lowered her voice, "that cave?" She grabbed the back of the chair. A sudden wave of dizziness swept over her.

Jett stood up. "Are you okay?" He touched her arm. "You look a little...pale."

"I think I just need some fresh air."

"Maybe you need to eat something?" Jett grabbed his coat from the back of the chair and they walked out side.

"Ugh!" Vicky waved her hand in front of her face. "I just need some nicotine," said Vicky, sitting down on the bench in front of the store. She opened her pack of cigarettes.

"You want me to get you a Coke or something?" Jett shook his head when she offered him a cigarette. "French, huh?" He said reading the label.

"Canadian, actually." Vicky pulled out the cigarette and fished in her pocket for her lighter. "I don't smoke," she explained after she put the cigarette mouth.

"Really?" Jett said with a slightly amused expression.

"I have always hated cigarettes," Vicky said taking a long drag. "You know that."

“Everyone has their moments.” Jett nodded. He turned and walked back into the store. He returned carrying a small backpack and a bottle of Coca Cola. He opened the bottle and handed it to Vicky.

“I haven’t had the real stuff in so long,” Vicky said reaching for the soda.

“You shouldn’t drink that diet shit. The chemicals will kill you.”

Vicky looked up at him. Her mind felt slow and dull. The argument between sugar and chemicals that replaced sugar in sodas was one she and Jasmine had engaged in frequently. Vicky argued that sugar was a chemical, and Jasmine argued that saccharine had been proven to cause cancer. Jett grinned at her as she drank a large gulp of the soda. She had to admit that a real Coke tasted so good, so blissfully good. She took another long drink before looking back up to notice that Jett was watching her with a wide grin on his face.

“What’s so funny?” She asked, remembering the time Jett had put a garter snake in her lunch box. He knew she liked garter snakes, so the trick was a gift, sort of. He used to grin like that all the time Vicky thought, smiling. At least he used to. Before he went off to war, and everything changed.

“Nothing.” He shrugged and turned back toward the street.

“You sure you don’t want one?” Vicky held up the pack again. “The combination of the soda and cigarette together is remarkable.”

Jett shook his head. His face looked somber again.

“Too good to break your own rules?” She asked.

“Naa.” Jett turned his gaze to his hands. He pressed his palms together in front of him and then leaned back against the bench. “The last time I had a cigarette I was in Afghanistan.” Jett said as he lifted his arms, resting them along the bench.

Vicky inhaled deeply and leaned her head back against his arm. “Tell me a war story,” she said exhaling a puff of smoke. “Not a bad one,” she said straightening. “A nice story. Travelogue style.” She scooted over closer to him, and lowered her head slowly back into the crook of his arms.

“I don’t have any of those.” They sat in silence. A car drove by, then another, but then the street was empty. Streetlights made half circles on the asphalt.

“Come on you must have one good memory.”

“The fields of poppies were all in bloom when I left.” He said finally.

“Sounds lovely.” Vicky closed her eyes and then quickly opened them when the world around the bench started to spin. “Oh dear,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She sat up, then stood up, stumbling slightly. “I need more fresh air,” she said fighting back a wave of nausea.

Jett tilted his head back and laughed. “You know there is an empty lot over there.” He pointed at the dark spot that bordered the parking lot. “You could just puke and get it over with.”

“I’m not going to be sick!” Vicky insisted waving her hand in the air. “I want to hear the story.”

“There’s a reason gluttony is a sin, you know.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with my mother,” Vicky waved her finger, smiling. “You’re starting to sound like her, you know?” A burp escaped her lips causing her to laugh.

Jett stood up from the bench and leaned his back against the building. He bent one knee and pressed his boot against the wall. The burp helped. She was already feeling much better. She let her eyes drift over to Jett’s taut thigh muscle. A thrill of adrenaline zipped through her. Vicky took a drag on the cigarette. She glanced down at her \$250 jeans, then she glanced at the tight fabric of her \$175 hoodie stretched across her chest. She was still pretty wasn’t she? Was she too old to be a divorcee? How long before men would no longer find her attractive? An image of Mark flashed before her eyes. Mark thought she was sexy. This fact was very reassuring.

Vicky rubbed her lips together. The silky smooth gloss felt good. She was so glad, that she had opted to bring all of her poisonous cosmetics—this Chanel gloss was so fabulous! How could she have gone so long without it?

“How do you feel?” Jett asked after she stubbed out the cigarette.

She looked at him. His face was so reassuring to look at—sturdy and well-proportioned—his lips looked smooth and inviting. Vicky decided at that moment that she was going to seduce him.

A car pulled into the parking lot. A woman yanked on the emergency brake and flung open the heavy door. She looked at Vicky and Jett before going inside the store.

“I’ll walk you home,” Jett offered.

“I want to see your cave,” Vicky said nodding to Jett’s motorcycle. Jett shook his head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Come on,” Vicky smiled. “I’ve never been inside a real cave before.”

"You've been out there." Jett said. "I took you there when we were kids. You don't remember?"

Vicky thought for a minute. She did have a vague recollection of being terrified to go inside. "I never went in, did I?"

Jett stared at her for a minute and laughed. "No, I don't think you did ever go inside."

"Do you have furniture? Lights?"

"I got a stove, and a lantern."

"What do you sleep on?"

"A brand new king-sized waterbed." Jett said, staring at her solemnly.

"Really?" Vicky studied his expression. "How did you get it out there?"

"They deliver."

"Wow. I'd really like to see that." Vicky laughed. "You've really got a waterbed in your cave?"

"Yeah, and a lava lamp." Jett shook his head and looked over at his motorcycle. "I'll walk you back to your mother's house." He repeated.

Her eyes turned to the parking lot and landed on his motorcycle. "Will you take me for a ride?" She asked. The ghost of fear floated distantly across her mind and she simply ignored it.

"On my death machine?" Jett tilted his head to the side, then looked around the parking lot. "Now I know you really are drunk."

"Why are you looking around like you are afraid to be seen with me?"

Jett laughed. "That's not why I—" He shrugged. "I was just wondering how...how you got here?"

"I walked, of course."

"That was responsible." A couple of cars sat at the stop light on the corner. A squad car pulled up across the street. Jett raised his hand and the officer nodded.

"I am very responsible, Jett, you know that."

"That's why I'm so surprised that you want to ride on my bike."

"Take me, please?" Vicky said sweetly tucking her cigarettes in the pocket of her sweatshirt. She could think of nothing more appealing than sitting astride his bike with her arms wrapped around him.

Jett looked at her for a full minute before walking over to his bike. He unclasped his helmet from the handlebar and adjusted the strap. "Put this on," he said, handing her the helmet.

His voice was low and gruff. Vicky took the helmet, sure that he felt the same surge of desire she had, but he avoided her eyes.

“Thanks,” she said, pulling the helmet over her head.

On the ride out Vicky convinced herself that they were going to have sex. With a fierce determination, she decided that she wasn't going to let his good manners, or stupid values get in her way. According to all of the men she worked with on Dirty, Sexy, Money this feat was easier than she had always thought. According to them, even ugly women could seduce men. All it took was clear communication in that regard. Men always want to get laid, they said. When she first heard this revelation in the board room, she had found it quite startling, and she hadn't believed them, but after her encounters with Mark, she decided they might be right. She had never even considered seducing a stranger, or even a man she knew—it just didn't seem possible—but this information made her look at Jett in a new light. He was a man after all. Vicky knew she was an attractive woman. Especially out here in the sticks. People looked at her like she was a movie star whenever she left the house. And Jett was Marine for Christ's sakes! Didn't all Marines like to have sex with attractive women? Wasn't that part of the contract? Didn't fucking as many women as possible and killing people without remorse go hand in hand?

Chapter Break

At first Jett had kept to the speed limit. The engine hummed steadily as they moved through the darkness up the flat highway. Stars crowded above the black desert. The lullaby, “Twinkle, Twinkle little star,” started playing in Vicky's mind. Iris and Ira's voices came at her in the dark. Wind blasted the skin on her arms and seemed to rip open her skin, tearing open the gaping hole inside.

Vicky tightened her grip around Jett's waist. She heard herself yelling, “Faster! Faster!” through the thick helmet and a moment later, she felt the bike surge forward underneath her with such velocity that her eyes slammed shut and she forgot to breathe. A minute passed and all she could feel was the pull of the engine catapulting them like a bullet through the warm air. Exhilaration trilled through her body making her want to scream, but was afraid he might slow down. She let one arm release from her tight clasp around Jett, and pushed her arm out into the wind. Immediately she felt the hard tug of air and placed her hand back around him.

Squinting, she looked at the speedometer. The needle hovered just over 100 m.p.h. She clutched her arms back around Jett's body, and closed her eyes, her body buzzed with terror. A swooping image of asphalt rose up in her mind and the scene of the motorcycle flipping across the flat dirt—a cloud of dust marking its path—forced her eyes open. The bike sped in a straight line up the highway. The dotted yellow line blurred into a solid.

Jett didn't make crazy mistakes, she told herself. Her grip loosened. He knows what he is doing, a voice echoed through her mind. Her heartbeat slowed to just above normal.

The ride took less than 30 minutes. Jett pulled onto a dirt road just passed the sign for the Reservation. Vicky pressed her body against his as the tires bounced over the rocky dirt. Heat from the engine made the seat beneath her feel warm, but her arms were cold through the sweatshirt, and so she pressed harder against him.

He parked a few feet off the road behind a cluster of tall shrubs, and they walked across the desert without talking. Vicky could see the black opening in the rocks in front of them, and for the first time she thought about how it must feel to come home to a cave.

"You have lights inside?"

"I don't sleep in the cave."

"Oh, I thought you—"

"I keep my supplies in there, but I'm not a big fan of spiders."

Vicky shivered. "Aren't there scorpions out here?"

"I'm not a big fan of scorpions either, but they tend to keep to themselves."

Vicky watched as he scrambled up the boulders. In less than a minute he had disappeared in the dark. "Jett?" Fear crept up in her throat, and she looked around behind her suddenly aware that they were on the Reservation, and there might be other people around. Jett's form appeared on the rocks above her, silhouetted by the sky. "Come on," he said hopping down a couple of boulders and extending his hand.

"It's as easy as climbing stairs, you just need to look one step ahead."

"But it's dark."

"It's not dark." He insisted, still holding out his hand.

"Don't you have a flashlight?"

"Sure, but you don't need one."

Vicky grabbed his hand and let him pull her up on top of the boulder.

"Now here." He said pointing to another boulder. "And here."

In less than five minutes they had climbed the top. He led her to a rocky outcropping. Lights from the Reno casinos lit up the sky in the south.

"I'm a little cold," she said, looking at the lights of the city. The rocks dropped away in front of her. The desert floor disappeared in the dark. There wasn't much room between the rocks, and she pressed up against him in the dark.

"I've got a blanket," Jett shifted slightly, and started to move away.

"No," Vicky said tugging gently on his hand. "I don't need a blanket. Stay here."

Jett leaned against a giant boulder behind him.

The glowing outline of the planetarium made the city look like a space station. Jett kicked at the dirt with the heel of his boot.

"You were going to tell me a story." She said finally.

"I don't have anything to tell," he said flatly.

"Why not?"

"You know it's not all that thrilling over there, Vicky," he said. "There is a whole lot of just waiting around."

Vicky rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious. Most of the time everyone is bored."

"Tell me something."

"You wanted a nice story and I'm fresh out of those."

"Come on Jett," Vicky said. She felt wide awake and rejuvenated after the ride. She turned and wrapped her arms around him. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Stop being so serious. I want to hear about your life, you know, catch up. You've been away for so long."

"You've been away longer." His body remained stiff, but he let her keep her arms around him.

"I've missed you." Vicky heard her voice whispering in his ear. The hard press of his body had filled her with an almost urgent desire.

He reached up and put his hand behind her neck, then gathered a cluster of her hair in his fist, and tugged her head back lightly. "You need to behave yourself, young lady." His voice was quiet, but thick. His eyes mocked stern.

"I'm tired of being so good all the time," she whispered, but she dropped her arms. The encounter with Gladys had left her feeling brave, and liberated. She felt like celebrating, and she was annoyed that Jett wasn't willing to cooperate.

"Show me where you sleep," she said.

Jett stared at the lights, but didn't move.

"Show me," Vicky whispered, tugged at his hand.

"It's right there," he said, nodding toward the rocks behind them. Vicky turned and looked, but didn't see anything.

"Where?"

Jett grabbed her hand and led her through two giant boulders. A wooden structure appeared behind the biggest rock. Jett pulled open a door built between two rocks. He disappeared inside. A minute later, the glow of a candle appeared in the doorway. Jett came back outside and lifted up a flap that covered a window. He fastened it back with a strap.

"This is where you live?" Vicky breathed as she walked into the tiny room. Granite formed three of the walls. The fourth was built with plywood, and there was a tin roof and a crude plank floor. A cot stretched the length of one wall. In the corner was a barrel that had been converted into a wood stove with a pipe fit into the top for a chimney.

"Home, Sweet, Home," Jett said. He pulled a tin can off one of the small shelves built above the stove. "You want some tea?"

"No thanks," Vicky looked around the room. There was a collection of photographs above the cot. She sat down on the army blanket and studied the pictures. The faces of the Marines looked young. Only a few older than Jett. A picture of Patrick wearing his dress uniform was tacked up by a nail in the upper corner of the room.

Vicky stretched her legs up on the bed and reclined against the collection of pillows in the corner. She watched Jett blow on the ashes inside the stove. He opened the kettle, and filled it with water from a five gallon jug in the corner.

"You were telling me about the poppies."

"I told you, Vic," he looked out the smeared glass of the window. The dirty glass smeared the lights of Reno so that the orange glow looked like it came from a torch. "It's not like that. I can't just paint you a pretty picture. All the pretty pictures are connected to things...that you don't want to know." His voice filled with gravel and he grabbed at a box of tea, dropping a bag into a mug.

"You were going to tell me when you had a cigarette."

Jett's teeth gleamed in the candle light. "You always were stubborn."

"Poppies bloomed in all the fields at the same time. So it was like a red sea out in the middle of a gray landscape. We had just kicked the Taliban out of a Province in three days that NATO had battled over for nearly two years." He looked back at the flames in the stove and stuck a small log in through the hole cut in the side of the barrel. "We were heroes that day. So we shared a carton of smokes with a few of the local farmers. There weren't many brave enough to join us. There were also a few reporters, and a translator, so we were actually able to communicate with them. It was good. It was a good day." His eyes clouded over and he looked back out the window.

"That's so crazy," Vicky said.

"What?"

"That's what you've been doing?" Vicky turned to look at him. "Busy being a hero?"

Jett grunted, and looked over at the photos on the wall. "We fluctuated between monsters, and saviors. They knew that. Just depended on the mission, and how things went." He sat down on the cot. Vicky curled her feet up underneath her to give him room.

"That time we just got lucky." He straightened his arms, and Vicky stared at the sculpted lines of his skin. "We knew we couldn't blow our tops. The company there before us lost it after a roadside bomb exploded and just started firing into the crowd. Killed 19 civilians. They got pulled out and the Taliban moved right back in. Every one of the farmers who helped during that first mission got killed long before we got there. These guys maybe hadn't known about, or maybe they just wanted a cigarette that bad. You never know."

"Jesus," Vicky exhaled.

"I warned you." Jett shook his head. He stood back up and went back over to the stove. He seemed nervous. Vicky wanted to stand up and pull him into her body, to stop his pacing. She could hardly fight back her desire now. She wanted him more than she had even wanted Mark on that first day. It was as if there was room for no other thought in her brain. Was this what it felt like to be man? She thought? Maybe this was some side affect from running out of the Prosac. A rush of testosterone, or something.

"You are so brave," Vicky said, her voice soft, almost a whisper.

Jett turned and looked at her. She tried to read his expression, but couldn't tell what he was thinking. "You are the hero, Vicky." He said finally. "You are a good mother." His eyes shifted to the window. "There is no pursuit more noble than that."

Vicky looked down at her hands. "That's not really how I feel," she said.

“You should.”

“Well, I don’t.” Vicky said suddenly. “I don’t feel noble at all. In fact, if I’d had any idea how difficult it was going to be, if somebody had shown me what my days would be like in a crystal ball—I wouldn’t have done it.”

Jett laughed. “That’s bullshit Vicky,” he looked up at her. “I know it’s tough—don’t get me wrong, but you love those kids. I can hear it in your voice whenever I talk to you.”

Vicky smiled at him. It was true. There was nothing more important to her than her children. “It’s like they are running around carrying a piece of you pinned to their shirts,” Vicky smiled. “It’s painfully difficult, but you’re right. I wouldn’t not have them now, it’s too late for me. I can’t imagine life any other way.”

He nodded. Their eyes met, but he looked away.

“Tell me more about your travels,” she said asked, motioning for him to sit next to her on the bed.

“Travels,” he scoffed, running his hand over his dark hair. He turned suddenly and clomped back out the door. He returned few minutes later with some larger pieces of wood. Opening the door cut in the barrel, he placed the wood on the fire.

“I’ve never been anywhere,” Vicky whined. “I want to hear more about the poppies—”

“You know, you just don’t get it.” He said. His voice had lost the gentle tone. He sounded mad, or at least irritated. “It’s like I’ve got a movie projector in my head and once I start rolling the images. They don’t stop, you know.” He dropped the logs on the floor. “I have nightmares, Vic. Almost every night. You wouldn’t think I was so brave if you heard my hollering like a baby in my sleep.”

“Does it help? I mean being out here?” Vicky stared at his face. He looked completely miserable.

“Beats waking up under fire, if that’s what you mean.”

“You could live with my Mom.”

Jett scoffed. “Fuck.” His hand ran over his hair again, and he looked at her like a caged animal. “I can’t even do that. I told you they are after her? Right? Did you think I was kidding?”

“But you are—like family—they can’t possibly blame—”

“Let’s talk about something else, okay.” Jett interrupted, “I’ve got some things to say on that subject, but I don’t think right now is the right time.”

“Okay.” The sound of the fire filled the tiny space. Vicky was relieved he didn’t want to go on and on about Jasmine’s troubles. She’d had enough of that for one night. She looked at him wondering if he was conscious of her renewed attraction for him. Was it the four glasses of wine? Vicky studied his smooth olive skin. The flicker of fire reflecting in his brown eyes—her mind visualized him sitting there naked, and she blushed at the reaction.

“Let’s just say I’m happy when I don’t wake up in a cold sweat, totally freaked out of my mind.” Jett was saying. “So, yeah, I guess living out here is working fine for right now.”

Vicky tried hard to focus on his words. “Don’t you want to be around people?” she asked, proud to have picked up a thread of the conversation. “I mean you can start a normal life now. Work at the fire station, make friends, get married, have kids, you know.” Wow! Vicky thought making the fire man connection for the first time. Jett was going to be a fire man. She pictured them at the fire station together, behind a fire truck, he was holding her up off the ground—

Jett eyes on her interrupted her fantasy “That’s what makes you so happy isn’t it?” He asked.

“I love my kids,” said Vicky, her mind instantly blank.

“What about your husband?”

“I had an affair.”

“What?” Jett straightened. His voice sounded distressed.

“I was lonely,” Vicky stood to and walked passed him out the door. She was annoyed now. Why hadn’t he taken all of her cues? What the fuck? Did she really have to make the first move? Was he really going to humiliate her like that?

She pulled the pack of cigarettes back out of her pocket and sat down on a low boulder to smoke.

“What happened?” He asked.

“It’s over now. I was lonely. That’s all it was about.”

Jett held up his hand.

“Don’t be such a prude, Jett!” Vicky scolded.

“Don’t be so cruel, Vicky.”

“It’s not like that!” she felt a flash of anger. “I never see Manny anymore, and when he comes home it’s so hard with the kids to find any time.” She shook her head and looked down at her hands. “It was more than that. We weren’t having sex. When we did, it was,” she puffed on the cigarette. “It was awful.” She blew the smoke out in a puff. She hated the honesty of that

statement. It had been awful, but she had never admitted it before. “We are separated. He admitted he has been cheating on me all along.”

Jett looked away at the black desert.

“I deserve good sex,” she said looking up at Jett. “I deserve to feel good.”

He wouldn’t even look at her.

“You do too, don’t you Jett?” Vicky stood up. She could feel her heart beating. Her palms felt moist. She pressed up against his body, and lifted his hand up to her chest. She unzipped her sweatshirt, and moved his hand inside her shirt. He licked his lips and the sheen drew Vicky toward him. Their mouths locked onto each other and she felt her insides shift like a glacier warmed by the sun. After centuries of holding together, the giant mass was melting between them. Cracks opened up inside her as his other hand pressed on her ass, and his tongue pushed inside her mouth. Then he drew back, and she was stunned by the sudden absence of the heat and desire that had burned against her. She reached for him, but he pushed at her violently. Vicky fell back against the rocks and felt her head smack hard, and then the blackness filled in.

Chapter Break

The first thing Vicky saw when she opened her eyes was a picture of a gigantic green helicopter with machine guns mounted underneath. Fire burst from the desert in front of the helicopter where an explosion had split apart what looked like an apartment building. Vicky pushed herself up. The only light came from a single candle burning inside an empty soup can on the shelf above the stove. Eerie shadows flickered around tiny room. Vicky had no recollection of how she had arrived in this strange room, and fear shot through her body. Oh my god! I’ve been kidnapped! I’m being held hostage by some right wing survivalist wacko! She screamed as loud as she could.

Jett burst through the flimsy door and rushed over to the cot. His hand clamped firmly over her mouth.

“Vicky,” Jett said over and over. “It’s Jett. You’re fine. You hit your head.”

Jett’s face was obscured in the dark, and Vicky still couldn’t recall where she was only that something tight wrapped around her neck. She started tearing at the strap. Her neck felt cold and numb. Was she paralyzed? She screamed again.

“Stop!” Jett warned, his hand clamped back down around her mouth. His face looked tense.

Vicky struggled to sit up. Her thoughts swirled around her head. Spinning images from the day hit her like a movie on fast forward. The last thing she remembered was being at her mother's. Sewing Club, then the walk to 7-11 came to mind. Cigarettes. Kissing Jett...She turned and looked at him trying to put fill in the blank sections of her memory.

The motorcycle ride flashed in her mind. She had tried to seduce Jett. They had kissed, and then...

A heavy feeling came from the back of her head and her neck felt weak. She let her head fall back down, and tapped where the weight was pressing down on her head.

"It's an ice pack," Jett said, his voice was calm. "You hit your head and blacked out for a few minutes."

"You pushed me." She said looking up at him. "You hurt me."

"I'm sorry." Jett's eyes lowered. "I didn't mean for you to fall. I...I just I lost it for a second...I'm sorry."

Their eyes met and for the first time Vicky remembered a fight they had once over something— she couldn't remember what they had been fighting about—

"Jesus," Vicky whispered, sitting up on the cot. Jett removed the ice pack and Vicky fingers pressed tenderly on the back of her head.

"It's a tiny laceration." Jett said wrapping the strap around the ice pack. "I think it was a combination of the alcohol and the impact that caused you to go under. You were only out for a minute or two. I carried you in here, put the ice pack on, and that was it, you woke up."

"Take me back." Had she taken a Vicoden after the Sewing Club? How many? Her body felt disconnected from her head. She lifted her fingers, and felt relieved when they moved at her command.

"You think you are okay to sit on the back of a bike? On the highway?"

Vicky nodded. All she could think about was going to sleep. A dark wave of exhaustion passed over her, and she struggled to keep her eyes focused. Jett's face faded into a black circle in the center of the room, then the light zoomed in again revealing his expression. Amber flecks lit up like flames in his eyes. Had he pushed her away? Why? She closed her eyes and leaned back against the pillow trying to recall. His lips and the burning fury between them came back to her, but what happened next blurred out of view. A wave of dizziness followed by nausea ripple through her.

“There is no way I’m putting you on that bike.” Jett said solemnly. He sat in ladder-backed chair at the wooden table pushed against the wall. Vicky squinted at the books stacked on top of the table, but the titles remained just out of view.

“Call my mom.” Vicky said. “She’ll have to come and pick me up.”

“Cell phones don’t work out here.”

Jett stood up. The chair legs squeaked along the floor. He walked across the room to the window and then walked back to the chair. He opened the stove with a glove that hung from a hook from the shelf. Then shut the oven again.

“I could use the pay phone at the store on the reservation,” he said. He reached to hang the glove back on the hook.

Vicky couldn’t answer. She was processing the scene leading up to her hitting her head. She remembered the lights of the city. Climbing up between the boulders. What had they talked about? She couldn’t remember. What had she said to him? A blank filled in the space where the details should have been.

“I want you to stay with me,” He looked at her, and walked back over to the cot. He knelt back down on the floor next to her. He rested his head against her arm. “I don’t want to call Jasmine.”

Vicky opened her eyes. His face loomed above her. “I’m sorry I freaked out.” He shook his head slowly, a half smiled curved his lips. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, his voice a whisper against her skin. He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you Vicky. I just...you...I just freaked out—that’s all.”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Good to be reminded about what a freak I am.”

“That’s not it—” He pulled back the blanket suddenly, and let his eyes run up and down her body. “You are so sexy.” His hand pressed on her shirt at the collar. His fingers stroked her neck, and ran down her chest. Jett stood up—fast. A guttural sound erupted from his body. He punched the flimsy wooden wall behind her. His fist went splintered the wood an inch away from her ear. Right through. Vicky jerked away, and looked at him in terror. “What the hell is wrong with you!” she demanded.

“Vicky, it’s not like you are just some hot piece of ass I met tonight at the local 7-11,” he looked down at her again. “I have a special place,” he nodded. His voice sounded thick, heavy, “on top of the mountain, under the stars.” His hand moved back up to her face, his palm cupped her jaw. “But I can’t take you up there.”

Vicky's mouth gaped open. "Why?" She had completely forgotten about the pain in her head.

"You know why."

She shook her head.

Jett turned away and stood in the doorway. "I loved you, Vicky," he said. "You were my first love."

"Why wouldn't you...how come...I just..."

Jett turned and stared at her, and Vicky felt like moving away from his penetrating gaze. "You're still married," he said finally.

"I don't want to be." Her voice was weak. She felt like he was leaving something out. Like he wasn't telling her the whole story. "Why won't you just—"

"You are confused," Jett interrupted. "From what you told me everything just happened like last week right?" Jett looked away from her. "I can't just dive right in like this. There is too much between us."

Vicky's turned her head back towards the photographs. Shame built up inside her with every moment of silence that passed between them. "You always did have some excuse," she said unable to hide the fact that her feelings were hurt.

Jett didn't say anything.

"You know how long it took me to escape feeling this way?" Tears filled her eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"You denying me!" Vicky yelled. "How many times did you turn me down? And that was when I was young and a...a... virgin! Do you know a 19 year old virgin just auctioned herself off for 3.5 million on EBay last week, and you could have had me for free!"

"You used to yell at me for trying to seduce you!"

Tears ran down both her cheeks, but she didn't bother to wipe them away. "I was so ashamed. For so long. I never even knew what it felt like to have good sex! I mean really good sex—sex that isn't all wrapped up in somebody else's drama, somebody else's rules! Until I had an affair—until now. And now here you are again making me feel like...like a...like a freak."

Jett stood up and walked back toward the door. "I'm sorry, Vicky." He turned back to face her. His eyes looked hard. "I am truly sorry. I can't even explain it to you...I don't...it doesn't make any sense," he looked down at his hands. "I think saying anything more at this point

will do more harm than good. Just know that I think you are sexy and hot and beautiful.” He moved back over to the cot, “and you could have any man you want.”

“I want you.”

Jett shook his head. “Just right now. You’ve suddenly decided after all these years. After never calling me. After never writing me. Not one letter—that I’m the one you want. You just snap your fingers and what? What do you expect from me?”

“I’m done talking,” Vicky said closing her eyes. Her head had started throbbing and now she felt like she’d been kicked in the stomach.

“You need to sleep here,” he said finally.

“Then sleep with me.” Vicky said. A wild rush of adrenaline flew through her. Jett turned around and looked at her. Vicky sat up and unzipped her sweatshirt. She lifted off her t-shirt and unzipped her pants. In less than a minute she was lying naked on top of the army blanket. The candle cast a warm glow on her spray-tanned skin.

Jett came over to her, and kissed her, but the passion she had felt earlier was gone. Vicky lifted her body up against his, but he grabbed her hand.

“God damn it!” He yelled. “Fuck!” He stood up and strode across the room. “I fucking can’t do this Vicky.” The palm of his hand ran across his forehead. Sweat darkened the t-shirt under his armpits. “I just fucking pushed you and knocked you out, and now you want me to fuck you!”

Vicky nodded. “I want you,” she said rubbing her hand down her stomach. She looked down at her body in the soft light. She looked great, she told herself. What was taking him so long! Impatience welled up as continued to stare at her. He was practically wringing his hands for Christ’s sakes!

“You are fucking drunk! This is ridiculous!”

Vicky sat up on one elbow. She could no longer ignore the feeling that he wasn’t telling her something. What was wrong with him? “Are you gay?” She asked as soon as the thought popped into her mind. She studied his expression. It was not the expression of a gay man. He was staring at her like a she was a photograph in a magazine. His eyes were hungry. Why the hell was he just standing there?

“You are still married Vicky! Fuck!” he yelled at her. The skin on his forehead glistened. He leaned over and opened a trunk by the door. “You are a wife and a mother.” His voice was softer. “I can’t just ignore all of that.”

Vicky felt shame flood her thoughts. "Some Marine you are. Jesus! You can't even let it go for a minute Jett? You can't just fucking let it all go!" She put her arm over her breasts.

Jett grabbed an army blanket out of the trunk, and let the cover slam back down. "You stay here and get some sleep." His voice was stern, but calm, resolved even. "It's almost 2 a.m. and I can't risk taking you home on the motorcycle. I've got plenty of wood in the stove. You'll be fine as long as you stay right where you are."

"I want you to sleep with me." She felt the disappointment like child, her face fell, her heart to dropped like a rock inside her chest.

"You could wake up tomorrow and have me arrested for assault and battery!" Jett's voice broke in the middle of his sentence. "Stop torturing me!" He yelled, flinging open the door, and then turned and looked at her. "Do not get out of bed," he ordered. "Call me if you need help."

Chapter Break

Vicky changed the channel. One soap opera had ended and she searched for another one. She stopped briefly on the science channel and listened as an astronomer explained how a black dust cloud had been sighted moving through the universe. She had nothing to complain about, Vicky told herself fiercely. Her kids were safe. Her family was safe. She had her health, if not mental, at least physical. A dense purplish black mass filled the black image of space on the screen. Vicky let her face fall into her hands. Her body shook with sobs. You have nothing to cry about! She scolded herself, but the sobs shook her body anyway.

After a few minutes, she flipped the channels again. Ellen appeared on the screen, and she felt a rush of relief at the sight of her familiar set. As long as she didn't get stuck on one of the news channels, she would survive. She'd been avoiding CNN since the kids were born, and she wasn't about to start now. One image from the Gaza Strip and she would most certainly be pushed over the edge. For this first time in her life, she understood what could have caused the Colonel to shop naked in Nicaragua. Farrah Faucett had done the same thing. Didn't she frolic naked in a public fountain? The edge was close, Vicky could feel it's razor sharp edge pressing against her brain.

Since Jett had brought her home at 7 a.m. yesterday, she'd been in bed. Jasmine had come and gone, but her Mother seemed strangely preoccupied, and Vicky was glad. Jasmine had always taught her if she had nothing nice to say, then don't say anything at all. It was an unspoken agreement between them. Jasmine had come in and tried to start a conversation with her several times. She'd invited her to the church, to her volunteer meeting, to lunch, to go shopping, but Vicky had insisted that she was sick, and just needed to rest. Long periods of silence between mother and daughter had always been the norm. If Vicky had nothing to say, that had always been okay. It was one of the things she admired about her mother—her ability to leave things alone, to go on with her life.

Vicky had called Manny, but he had taken the kids to the Wild Animal Park, and she had to wait all day to hear the report. After Iris told her all about the how the llama had spit at Manny and how the tigers could swim, she said she was tired and going to bed. Vicky hung up the phone and sobbed into the sheets. At some point around midnight she had fallen asleep.

Vicky spent another day in bed. Her hangover was gone, and there was only a tender lump on the back of her head to remind her of the scene at Jett's, but she had no desire to re-enter the world outside her mother's guest room. Jasmine had a full day planned between yoga and church activities, then a baptism, then she was serving at the local soup kitchen, so Vicky had the house to herself.

At noon on CNN she had watched the breaking story of an airplane crash in the Hudson. The passengers were rescued and out of the water within forty minutes, but Vicky spent more than five hours watching live footage as video streamed in from all over New York. She heard interviews from several of the people on the plane and sat mesmerized as they replayed the landing, and the splash down over and over. More video coverage surfaced as the day progressed, and by 4 o'clock scenes of the plane's take-off and the flock of birds getting sucked into the engines had surfaced and been broadcast. By the time dinner time arrived, Jasmine had come and gone three times and was back at church for some a silent auction. A plate of untouched fried chicken sat on the night stand next to a glass of milk.

Vicky checked her messages. 22 from Martin. Guilt over the script pulsed in her head. 3 messages from Mark. She'd listened to those 6 or 7 times, but after last night, she didn't feel like calling him back. Iris called asking if they could get a puppy. Vicky vaguely wondered if she had meant a real puppy or another Webkins.

At 6:30 Vicky picked up the phone to call her therapist again—she had called every hour throughout the day—but she heard Shannan’s voice yelling at her as she dialed.

Vicky held the receiver out in front of her and listened to her friend screaming at her for a minute. Hanging up was a definite option, but instead she pulled the phone to her ear reluctantly.

“Hi Shannan.”

“Oh my God! Where have you been! Martin is freaking out!”

“I had an accident.”

“What? You do realize you have to turn in the script on Friday.”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Wednesday night, Vicky. That means you only have one more day to write the thing. It’s due Friday morning.”

“I’m in bed.”

“What happened?”

“Jett knocked me out.”

“What!”

“I was trying to have sex with him and the next thing I knew I woke up with a concussion.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

“I wish I was.” Vicky flicked through the channels. “It was really humiliating.”

“Wow! It’s like a regular Jerry Springer episode out there, isn’t it?” Shannan said, panting. Vicky imagined her friend on the Stairmaster in her work out room.

“Very funny.”

“Are you going to press charges?”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Of course not.”

“Why not? I think I’d be pretty pissed off if some guy shoved me and I cracked my head on a rock—”

“It was an accident.”

“Who is this guy? Is he sane?”

“Probably not. He is a Marine. I dated him in high school.”

“Were you really unconscious? Or just drunk? Or what?”

“I remember we were kissing,” Vicky looked up at the stucco ceiling. The plaster resembled the shape of man’s face, his mouth open as if he was screaming. Her eyes clicked back

on to the television. As a child, she had observed the face every night when she looked at the ceiling. She had a blue nightlight back then, and she had told herself it was Jesus watching out for her. 'Why is he screaming?' A tiny voice always interrupted her attempt at tranquility. 'He had a tough day, but that doesn't mean he isn't looking out for you,' she had always told herself. On her worst nights she was sure the face belonged to the devil, but on those nights she moved into her sister's room.

"Really?" Shannan's voice changed. A solemn tone filled in between the panting. "Did he rape you?"

"I was the one who came on to him." Vicky responded. "I was trying my best to rape him."

"You know, you could press charges. You've got a perfect situation to prove that he assaulted you. He pushed you down, he injured you!"

"I was super drunk, and horny and I didn't want to stop."

"I never knew you were the desperate housewife type," she said. "Are you sure, he didn't do anything wrong?"

"He did everything wrong," Vicky signed. "He denied me. I was drunk and was sure I was going to seduce him and instead he pushed me away. I was so drunk I lost my balance, and hit my head on a boulder."

"A boulder?"

"We were at his cave."

"Oh, right. I forgot."

"I can't even get my ex-boyfriend to have sex with me," Vicky whined into the phone.

"Is he hot?"

Vicky thought about Jett's dark hair and the power of their kiss. "He is really hot."

"Well, I guess, maybe it was worth a concussion," Shannan said, with a slight laugh, followed by a cough. "You took one for the team."

"That's really funny."

"Well, I'm glad you are getting out and having fun," Shannan's voice switched back to her business, "but you really need to spend the rest of the day and tomorrow working on that script, Vicky. I mean it. My whole reputation as an agent is on the line here. Remember we aren't just talking about you. You're fucking with my career too."

Vicky stared at the television. Ellen was interviewing an Emo musician wearing purple rocker pants.

“Oh by the way did Manny tell you that Mr. Dooley saw the black panther?”

Vicky’s heart skipped a beat. “What!”

“Yah, I guess you weren’t stoned after all.” Shannan was huffing and puffing into the phone now. “It was in his backyard. Up in a tree.”

“No!” Vicky gasped. She thought about Iris and Ira playing in the tree house. “I have to come home.”

“You can’t. You have three more days. You can’t break the separation agreement. Besides what are you going to do? Listen, I gotta go. I’ve still got 15 minutes of high intensity and I can’t,” she huffed breathlessly into the phone. “It’s not like a lion is going to come into the house or anything. They’ll be fine. I call you later. Get to work!”

Vicky took her last Xanax and dialed Manny’s number.

“I told you there was a mountain lion!”

“And to think I thought you were crazy,” Manny said. His laughter annoyed her.

“Very funny.”

“Isn’t that a trip that it was a black one? I never even knew there was such a thing!”

Vicky felt her anger rising. He sounded like he was talking about a movie, or a rare species of plant not a living, breathing child killer that was stalking their yard.

“You need to keep the kids indoors. I’m coming home right now.”

Manny’s tone switched to his patient authoritarian tone, his producer tone. “We have a legal contract in place Vicky. You agreed to stay at your mother’s house for one week.”

“But that was before there was a mountain lion stalking the children!” Vicky cried.

“You are overreacting!” Manny interrupted. “It’s a wild animal, Vicky. Don’t be so dramatic. They don’t like people. It isn’t stalking the children. Most likely after running in to Mr. Dooley, it has taken off down the canyon and we will never see it again.”

“Oh, that is so predictable,” Vicky seethed. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you would deny the reality of this situation. That cat is the equivalent of a homicidal maniac! I saw first saw it months ago now. If it went ‘down canyon,’ then it has most certainly returned Manny!”

“This is its habitat Vicky! Don’t act like you are surprised to see an animal here. We live in a canyon, surrounded by open space. Of course, there are animals here. All over the place!”

“We aren’t talking about animals. We are talking about a predator.”

“You’ve been watching to much Discovery Channel.”

“You are an irresponsible asshole, and I’m coming home to make sure my children are safe.”

“I am taking good care of our children,” he paused, and his voice softened. “You need to trust me on this one.”

“Trust you!” Vicky felt her legs collapsing underneath her. She landed on the edge of the chair. A shooting pain shot up her tail bone. “I don’t trust you one bit! You don’t get it!”

“I do get it. There is just no reason to get yourself all worked up about this.”

Silence filled the line.

“I want you to go to the gun shop today and buy a Glock 9 mm—the one with a red laser thingy.”

“What?” Manny scoffed. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I mean it Manny. I want you to buy the gun and stash it in the pool house. Up high where the kids can’t reach it. On the exposed beam closest to the door.” Vicky waited to hear his response. She gritted her teeth prepared to do battle.

“Fine.” He said finally.

“You’ll do it?” Vicky held her breath.

“Sure.” His tone had shifted.

“I am so worried about them,” she breathed through tears. “It’s going to make me crazy to worry about this.”

“That’s why I didn’t want to tell you.” Manny responded. “I suppose Shannan has some obligation as your friend, but I asked her not to tell you.”

“You can’t keep things like this from me.” Vicky said barely above a whisper. An image of the airplane sinking into the Hudson filled the television screen.

“I’ve got it handled.” Manny said firmly.

“How?” Vicky watched the ferry boats circling the tail fin of the plane. How could this be happening now? Why now? When she wasn’t there to protect them.

“Mr. Dooley has a shot gun, and he loaned me one of his rifles and we are going to shoot the thing if we see it. I called Fish and Game and they won’t don’t anything about it—“

“Until it kills someone—then—“

“Vicky you are being irrational. There haven’t been any killings around here ever.”

“What about Orange County? They have attacks all the time. Remember that couple, hiking. The wife had to beat the thing off with a rock! The lion had her husbands head in its mouth!”

“I’m being careful.”

“Where are they right now?”

“They are in the tree house.” Manny said, his tone light.

“Are you crazy!” Vicky screamed. “That thing could be waiting for them out there! They could be killed!”

“Calm down.” Manny’s voice sounded short. “I checked out the whole yard first and I’m watching them from my office.”

“You are up in your office when there is mountain lion—“ Vicky’s heart raced. “I am coming home right now.” Pushing back the blankets, she stepped into her sandals by the side of the bed and began pilfering clothes from the stack on the chair.

“You are not coming home. I told you I have it handled.” Anger sealed Manny’s words.

“You need to be out there with them,” Vicky’s voice had raised to a shriek. “I mean it Manny, right now, YOU NEED TO GO OUT THERE!”

“Fine.”

Vicky heard the squeak of his chair and she knew he had gotten up.

“I can hardly think about you having a gun in the house.”

“It’s fine.” Manny said. “Stop worrying okay?”

“I can’t,” Vicky said. “I’m there Mother. It’s not my job to relax.”

She heard the familiar squeak and whine of the back door, and then the distant sound of her children’s voices.

“There,” Manny said. “I’m outside. You feel better.”

“NO!” Vicky yelled into the phone. “The fact that you don’t get how dangerous this is not making me feel any better. We need to hire some hunters,” Vicky felt out of breath. Her mind reeled through the possibilities. Why hadn’t she trusted herself? Why had she been so ready to believe everyone else when she had told them about the lion? What the hell was wrong with her? She’d seen a mountain lion in her own backyard and she hadn’t done anything about it—what kind of a mother was she?

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Manny scoffed. “You can’t just go out and kill a mountain lion. You could be arrested. It’s illegal.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m not stupid, that’s how.”

Vicky could tell that he was mad now, but she no longer cared whether or not she was getting under Manny’s skin. He was an idiot! He was an asshole! She thought, fury fueled her racing thoughts. It was about time he did something around the house besides deposit money into the checking account. She was tired of the only one attending to everyone’s needs. She had her own needs! “I am asking you to deal with this Manny. I want that lion shot and killed, or I want to sell the house.”

“That is absurd!” Manny said. “We are not selling this house.”

Vicky knew how much the house meant to Manny. It was his pride and joy. She could see his whole plan now. His idea of bliss rolled like a big screen movie before her eyes. He had assumed she would stay in the house with the kids. That he would continue to gallivant around the world fucking 19-year-olds wherever he could get away with it and hookers when he couldn’t, and she would just stay put as if nothing had happened between them. The house was so big, he would cordon off a wing and she could occupy the main house, and he could come home and have play time with the kids whenever it was convenient. They would be there for him in his big beautiful house on the hill and his stupid bored stay-at-home ex-wife would be forever indebted to him financially.

“I mean it Manny. If you don’t take care of this—the kids and I are out of there!”

“Are you crazy? In this market?” Manny’s voice raised an octave. “There is no way I’m going to put this place on the market right now.”

“I don’t care what you do, but the kids and I will need to relocate.”

“Because of a mountain lion.” She knew disbelief was giving way to the realm of the possible in his mind. “You wouldn’t leave this house over that.” He said. “You love this house,” he was practically whining now.

Vicky felt like smiling, but instead she pressed on. “I’ve never loved that house. In fact, if you ever bothered to listen to me you would know that I’ve hated that house from the very beginning. I begged you not to buy. I said it was too remote, and too big. Don’t you remember?”

“We are not selling this house.” Manny said fiercely.

“Then exterminate the lion.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Manny said hesitantly. “I already called Fish and Game.”

“What did they say?”

“That it is illegal to shoot a mountain lion except for self-defense.”

“Well, then there you have it. As long as you are shooting it to protect your children, you won’t go to jail.

The line was silent except for the noise of her children. “You know I could have Jett give you a call. He knows a lot about guns,” Vicky cleared her throat. “I mean real guns, not just props.”

Manny was silent.

“You want me to have him call you?”

“Your ex-boyfriend?” Manny’s voice sounded constricted. “No thanks.”

Vicky knew that Manny had always been in awe of Jett. One of his first films had been set right after the terrorist attacks in Indonesia. Vicky still remembered the DVD jacket read something like *Detective Jack Armstrong knew this time he was in over his head so he turns to the U.S. Marine’s for help. America’s elite fighting force soon arrive and with Jack’s help, the cell of ruthless murderers faces their own violent end.*

“Mr. Dooley has been hunting his whole life. That’s why he goes to Montana every spring.”

“Mr. Dooley isn’t going to want to track and kill a mountain lion. For all we know he’ll pull a Dick Cheney out there.”

“I’m sure we could do it. I could get Jimmy to help.”

“You need to hire some real, some real hunters Manny,” Vicky felt tremors of nervousness rumble in her stomach. Just what she needed is Manny and Jimmy to form a hunting posse. “You are movie producer. You certainly have no idea what you are doing out in the wild.”

“That’s not true. I was quite a hiker when I was younger.”

“You’ve never even slept in a tent.”

“I tried once.”

“You need to promise me that you will not let them play outside alone,” Vicky’s voice switched to stern “and only in the middle of the day. I think they hunt in the morning and early evening.”

“Like you know anything about mountain lions,” Manny laughed into the phone.

“I do!” Vicky yelled, her face felt hot and her heart was racing. “Don’t tell me what I know and don’t know!”

“Fine.” Manny quieted. “I’m sorry.”

"I need you to promise."

"I promise."

"Thank you," Vicky felt sick to her stomach. How could this be happening? Why was this happening?

"Don't sound so worried," Manny said. "The mountain lions have probably been here all along."

"Some how that doesn't reassure me."

"It should. No one up here has ever had a problem."

"Are you sure?" Vicky asked. "Have you done any research? It's not like we know anybody up there. For all we know they could have a weekly Mountain Lion club meeting. There could have been several deaths. How would we ever know?"

Manny sighed heavily. "Go have some fun, Vicky," Manny said. His voice was full of pity and she hated him even more for it. "Go do something to cheer your self up."

"Fuck you Manny." She said and hung up the phone. As soon as she hung up she realized she had forgotten to ask him about Iris' cough again. "Damn it!" she said getting up from the chair and moving back to the bed.

"How are you doing," Jasmine sung through the doorway as she passed down the hall on the way to her bedroom. After depositing a collection of bags in the doorway, she returned to where Vicky was still lying in bed watching television.

"I have a committee meeting to go to tonight, Vicky, and I was really hoping you'd come."

"Geez. How many committees are you on?" Vicky rolled her eyes. "Weren't you leaving for a committee meeting this morning?"

"I know," Jasmine smiled and lowered her eyes. "I admit I'm a committee addict."

"What's the subject?"

"Domestic Violence."

"Sounds fun, but no thanks." A commercial came on and Vicky flipped through the channels. "You really need TIVO, Mother. Remind me next Christmas, I get it for you."

"I don't need any more contraptions." Jasmine said, smiling. "I can hardly figure out how to run that coffee maker you bought me last Christmas."

“It’s a Miele espresso maker, Mom,” Vicky corrected. “And I can see that you haven’t figured it out because the thing looks brand new. Have you ever even used it?”

“Oh, sometimes. Jett knows how to work the thing. He tried to show—” Jasmine glanced at the television. “Anyway, I’d need to talk to you Vicky—about everything that’s happened—about Gladys and everything. I feel bad I’ve been so busy, but you just don’t seem like you are ready to talk. I just want to give you your space, if that’s what you need. Is that what you need, Vicky?”

Vicky refused to meet her mother’s eyes. She no longer cared about the church drama. In fact, she didn’t want anything to do with it. “I didn’t expect you to freeze your whole schedule just because I was in town.”

Jasmine reached out and cupped Vicky’s chin in her palm. Her hand felt warm against her skin. “I know you didn’t, but still can’t we get out of this house and have some lunch, or dinner some where together. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“I like being home.”

“That’s nice, dear.” Jasmine smile, but Vicky recognized her expression. Her eyes squinted up whenever she was worried about something.

“I’m not feeling that great, you know. I’ve got a little cold, and I just want to relax.” Vicky said pushing her voice into a convincing I’m-happy-as-can-be tone.

Jasmine squinted at her.

“I think you would really like this group of women, Vicky.”

“You mean I’d fit in with chicks who like to get the crap beat out of them? Is that what you are saying?”

Jasmine frowned. Two wrinkles appeared on her otherwise smooth forehead. It must have been her Italian lineage, but Vicky had often admired how well Jasmine aged. Her cheekbones were high and her lips were supple and full, and that skin! Olive complexions always withstood the test of time so well. Unfortunately, Jen had gotten Jasmine’s Mediterranean skin tone. Vicky had inherited the milky white Nazi German roots from her father. The Colonel’s family tree had always unnerved her. Seventeen generations of military posts had been filled by that family including 5 military officers under Hitler. Truly embarrassing, and something she would deny to her death if anyone in LA ever asked her about it. Her kids were at a Jewish school for Gods Sakes! She remembered in grade school she and Jasmine had worked together on the required Family Tree project. On the way to school Vicky had been so horrified to share her father’s Jew

killing bloodlines that she had torn the poster in half and made up an elaborate story about how she had been attacked by a dog.

Jasmine was responding to Vicky's accusation by carefully explaining each circumstance behind every member of the Domestic Violence group. Vicky tuned in and out as she flipped the channels. The monologue included stories not very different from the back to back Geraldo episodes she'd watched earlier today. Vicky's mind drifted toward her looming deadline, but she quickly reeled it back in.

"... and then there is Jill. You would really like her. She's a real go getter. A career woman with two of the sweetest kids. She left her husband years ago."

"Where's he?"

"Oh, Ted? Ted's in Solidad for the next 10 years. He got himself arrested, thank God."

"For what?"

Jasmine looked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a moment. "You know, I'm not sure what he's in for... humm. I think maybe it was armed robbery. No that was Tamara's husband..."

"It's okay, Mom. I don't really care anyway."

Jasmine looked at Vicky and blinked.

"I'm not going," Vicky repeated keeping her eyes on the television.

"Vicky," Jasmine asked after a few minutes passed. "Will you pray with me?"

"Not now, okay?" Vicky reached out and patted her mom on the wrist. "I'm watching this. Later we can."

Jasmine nodded, but she clasped her hands together with Vicky's fingers still resting on her wrist. She moved her lips, silently conversing with God. After a five minutes she stood and kissed Vicky on the cheek. "Tomorrow, you'll feel more rested, dear. We'll talk then."

"Uh huh." Vicky had settled on Animal Planet while her mother prayed. Three coyotes were hunting a rabbit on an open plain.

"There's lasagna in the fridge, if you get hungry," Jasmine said from the doorway.

"Thanks, Mom." Vicky nodded. "I'm fine." She lifted her fingers and waved.

The next morning Vicky woke to Jett pulling open the blinds in her room.

“Your mother says you haven’t been out of bed in three days.” He yanked back the covers. “Get up.”

“No.” Vicky pulled the sheet back over her bare legs.

“You aren’t sitting in here any longer.” Jett stood with his arms crossed at the foot of the bed. “I will carry you out of here if I have to.”

Vicky glared at him.

“Look,” Jett walked over to the side of the bed. “I want to talk to you about all of this.”

Vicky turned her head. “You mean about how you assaulted me?” She reached for the remote on the nightstand and flicked on the television. “I’m not interested.”

Jett didn’t move.

“I want you to leave me alone.” Vicky sat up, and angry burst filled her lungs. “It’s bad enough that you push me down, Jett. Now you are barging into my mother’s house and invading my privacy.”

“I’m sorry—“

“You should be.”

“I’m not leaving until you get out of bed.”

“If I get out of bed you’ll leave?”

Jett nodded.

“Then I’ll go sit by the pool,” Vicky set the remote on the bed. “I had planned on going for a swim anyway, but as soon as I get out there I better hear your motorcycle heading down the street.” Vicky sat up in the bed, and swung her feet to the floor. Pushing her toes into her slippers.

“I’m sorry, Vicky.” Jett stood directly in front of her, blocking her path to the closet. “I am very sorry for what happened. I never should have pushed you. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Jett grabbed her arm, but Vicky shook it free. “I think you are beautiful,”

Vicky looked at his eyes. They were red and swollen. Had he been crying? Or was he into heavy drugs?

“You are a beautiful, attractive, intelligent woman—“ The usual long pauses occurred between his words. Giving Vicky plenty of time to examine the scar on his neck. It was a smooth line from his chin and under his jaw, but the section around his neck looked jagged and uneven. They’d never even talked about what happened. For all she knew he could have killed a whole village of women and children.

“We’ve gone through so much together,” Jett continued. “I will always—“

“Shut up!” Vicky jumped out of bed and ran into the closet, pulling the door shut behind her. She checked her hair in the hand mirror and applied a coat of sunscreen. Two minutes later she emerged in her bathing suit. She grabbed her sunglasses and book from the counter. “I told you I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine,” Jett said quietly. “I’ll leave as soon as you get dressed, but you have to promise me that you aren’t going to lie around here feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Sorry for myself!” Vicky fumed as she walked past him and out the door. “I had a concussion, thanks to you.”

“You don’t need to stay in bed for three days just because you bumped your head Vicky.”

Vicky felt like slapping him, but she forced herself to continue down the hall. She had been working extra diligently on her ass at the gym lately. Her trainer was a fanatic about squats. By the end of the hall, Jett had quieted, and Vicky could feel his eyes on her ass. She turned suddenly, and he almost ran into her.

They stood less than an inch apart between the sunken living room and the kitchen. A fleeting image of Jett invading her body right on that scratchy 20 year old striped fabric couch. Her bikini bottoms flung to the carpet, and her feet spread wide, galloping in midair.

“You..you kissed me back...” Vicky’s voice came out in one breath. “You were flirting with me...weren’t you?”

Jett stared at her.

“And then you pushed me away?” Vicky noticed the dark circles that ringed his eyes. His hair looked messy.

He didn’t say anything.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why did you do that?”

“I said I wanted to talk—”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“We need to talk, Vicky.” His hand brushed her arm as he lifted it towards her.

She turned quickly and walked through the living room and out the sliding glass door. “You are such an asshole.”

“I know it doesn’t make any sense, but if you just let me explain—Jasmine and I—”

“I really think you’ve lost your mind, Jett.” Vicky said feeling all of her old anger broiling inside her. She had never understood him. Even before the war, but now he seemed even

more unreachable, untouchable, impossible to understand. "I could care less what you and my mother think! I want you to leave!"

"I don't want to fight with you," Jett said. "Remember when you were telling me how hard it is to be a mother? How people without kids don't understand. How the whole world seems to be against you, sometimes."

Vicky nodded, but her eyes shifted back to the television. Shame gripped her heart at the memory of that night. She had been so confident that he still loved her, and now it was so obvious that he didn't. That no one loved her, maybe no one ever had.

"I feel like that every day, Vicky," Jett's jaw had tightened. His face looked tense. "Like I might not make it through." The television was the only noise in the room. "I've lived...so many places...and tried to escape the way I feel in so many ways," his sentences came out with long gaps in between the words, as if he had to force them out. "You just can't imagine what that does..." Jett stopped the words. "There's more than just all of our history...between us. I wanted to explain that—but I didn't think you were in any shape to listen."

Vicky stared at the television. She really didn't care what he said, or how hard he had it. She had her own trouble to deal with and she didn't want to take on anyone else's baggage. She glanced over at Jett, her insides felt clenched, like any moment she was either going to cry or burst out screaming. He sat down next to her. "Don't get any closer," Vicky said. "I want you to leave."

Jett didn't move.

"Leave," Vicky repeated.

"I don't want to put this off—I think."

"Just leave." She said again, tears filled her eyes. The vacant hole had opened up inside her again, and she didn't want him to see her like this.

"I'm going to escort you to the pool," he said standing up and extending his arm.

"I can make it myself, thanks."

Vicky walked briskly out of the room. She slammed the door shut behind her.

Chapter Break

The phone rang an hour after Jett left.

"Hello?" Vicky sat in the shade with her head wrapped in a towel smoking a cigarette.

"Sister Vicky. So glad you made it home safe and sound."

"Where have you been?" Vicky felt too miserable to be angry with her sister. She took a swig of the beer that she had bought at the corner store. The warm glow of alcohol had revived her somewhat. At least she didn't feel like crawling under a rock and waiting for death any more.

"What you've already had enough of the 'Joy Joy Hallelujah club'."

"Uh, yeah, sort of." The cigarette ash hung precariously off the end and Vicky looked around for a place to put her ashes. "Hold on a second." Vicky set the phone down, and chugged the rest of the beer, then ashed her cigarette inside. "This heat sucks," she said into the phone.

Vicky could hear the click of a lighter. Her sister inhaled deeply. Before it had always been a shock coming back to Nevada where everybody smoked. Everyone drank. And all the churches were full on Sunday. Now she felt right at home.

"Where have you been," Vicky scolded. "I called you three days ago."

"Sorry. I've been traveling with a client," Jen said exhaling. "Working my fingers to the bone," she giggled. "Mom said you were having some trouble at home—care to elaborate?" Jen continued.

"What did she tell you?"

"She wouldn't say a thing, other than the standard: 'You'll have to ask your sister.'"

Vicky's limbs felt heavy. The water droplets across her stomach had already dried. Heat settled like a blanket.

"Manny slept with a prostitute." Victory said suddenly in a flat tone.

"A prostitute, or a call girl?"

"What difference does it make," Vicky snapped.

"It makes a huge hell of a difference, Vicky. I've told you that."

"Yeah, well, from your perspective maybe."

"Vicky a call girl is like having an expensive girlfriend. You know, it's on going. I actually do care about my clients. They care about me. A prostitute is just a one time slip. A big slip, but still."

"He said more than once." She pulled her sun hat from the cement and sat upright, feet tucked under, her face in a full shadow from the brim.

"The same girl?"

"I have no fucking idea." Vicky stared at the grey colored land on the other side of the metal fence.

“Well, okay. I’m sorry.”

Vicky glowered at the water. The irony of her call-girl sister saying she was sorry was too much to process.

“You okay?”

Vicky laughed, but the suddenness of the laugh alarmed her. It was as if the urge to laugh had bubbled up without warning, and just burst out like a hiccup. Stop it! Vicky told herself.

“I don’t know if Mom is going to be home tonight...” Vicky looked at her nails and wondered vaguely about the time. She felt tired. The memory of kissing Jett hit her like a blow to the stomach every time she let her mind drift. Crawling back underneath the mauve sheets of the twin bed sounded like a good idea. She thought of the kids. Was it still morning, she glanced at the sky. What were they doing right now? Thank God the week was almost up, only three more days to survive out here in this God awful desert. Her whole body felt heavy and limp. She remembered waking up after a nightmare about the lion. It had come into the backyard. Was skulking about—.

“She had church, stupid!” Jen’s loud voice interrupted her thoughts. “And tomorrow morning it’s bible study. You’ve got a full line up of Praise Jesus in store for you, honey.”

“Holy hell.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Ask for Jade at the front desk. Security is tight these days.”

Even when he was still alive, her father’s 1963 Thunderbird rarely left the garage. He kept a high-gloss on the paint, and let the motor idle while he spit-shined the chrome, but the Colonel didn’t like the idea of the engine running in the open air. The desert clogged the carburetor, he said.

Vicky yanked off the gray cover and shoved it into a corner of the carport. Dusty, green vinyl greeted her bare legs as she slid behind the wheel and reached for the key above the visor. The engine hesitated briefly and then turned over. Cars had never held a particular attraction to Vicky. Her only hope was that they continued to run. In fact, her life in LA had left her tired of all vehicles. When she thought of it now—driving, parking and sitting in traffic took up more of her daily life than any other activity—driving was as integral to her existence as breathing. She

opened the windows and let the hot air fill the car. It was not yet afternoon, but the temperature was already at the century mark.

In Los Angeles the freeways curved and swooped, weaving in and out of each other and offering up endless possibilities for direction. The roads in the desert ran in a series of straight flat lines intersecting at right angles, and yet something about the vast flatness confused her more. Out here, she was never sure which direction she was heading. There were so few signs to mark her way. Everyone assumed if you were in Sparks, you knew where you were going.

Heat formed a stagnant glaze sealing the land. The dark rise of mountains hovered at the edge of the blurred horizon. It was a wonder nothing caught fire, she thought, but then again what was there to burn? No trees. Scraggly tufts no bigger than a branch occasionally, but no trees. Cottonwoods in the creek bottoms and pines up high on the mountains, but out here there was only ground brush. Sage and thistle. Iron weed turning brittle yellow first in the summer heat. The occasional purple lupine and tumbleweed. A blur of drab tones from a distance; except in the spring when a brief surprise of color spread like water in the low lands. But it was the dead end of summer now and nothing could bare the heat to bloom.

She turned on her cell phone and checked her messages, suddenly aware of the fact that she hadn't checked her messages since before the sewing club. Martin's nasally voice came at her through the receiver.

"Where the hell have you been!" He sounded completely panicked. "I e-mailed you thirty times! Thank God Shannan called. They picked our idea."

"No." Vicky gasped.

"He especially liked the idea of the 17-year-old boyfriend," Martin sounded excited at first, but listed the pertinent details in a businesslike monotone. "He needs the first draft by Friday."

"Friday." Vicky screeched.

"You're writing character B. I've got the neighbors with Marta, of course. They put Jake on the kid. *That* should be fun," Vicky cringed at the idea. "Call me."

The next 12 messages were from Martin. "Call me. We need to talk," he sounded urgent. A growing sense of panic rose from her stomach causing her hand to shake. She pulled the phone away from her ear and pressed the "erase" button. How could she reassure him now? She had left her kids. Left Manny. Left Los Angeles. They wanted the script in two days! There was no way

she could write five episodes in two days. Her stomach dropped at the idea of the love scene. Her character was going to have sex with a minor! How could she write that! What would they say?

She sneezed loudly, the sudden explosion sprayed the front of her blouse. “Damn allergies!” Vicky snapped on the radio, turning the silver dial, she searched the a.m. radio for something other than a sermon. Sports talk. A debate between ranchers. Country music blared suddenly. “Mama don’t dress your baby’s up to be....” She flipped off the noise.

The wind made an echoing sound in her ears and the heat of the day pressed against her. She stared through the windshield and felt no connection with anything around her. The wind, the heat, the time passing, her hands gripped on the steering wheel felt like effects in a movie. This strange disconnection with her body left her feeling anxious. Why did her hands feel like they belonged to someone else? She reached into her bag for the cigarettes.

She remembered a conversation she’d had with Manny a few weeks ago. He had been irritated with her for complaining about her allergies. “Do you realize that we have never had a phone conversation where you didn’t complaining about something. Migraines, allergies, sensory disorders, asthma—”

“Asthma,” she interrupted. “Your son is the one with asthma—”

“I’m just saying— it’s always something with you.”

She didn’t argue. What was the point? She did have allergies. She sneezed again and looked angrily at the grey clumps of sage scattered across the desert.

Vicky lit the end on the second try and inhaled deeply. Guilt and nicotine flooded her brain. How could she smoke? She reached into her bag and pulled out the bottle of allergy medicine. At least she still had allergy pills.

She inhaled deeply and then placed the cigarette in the ashtray. She swallowed the pills and reached again for the cigarette. What about her kids? How could she tell them that she knowingly gave herself lung cancer, or breast cancer, or worse even, brain cancer? First the toxic make-up, then the pot, and now the alcohol and cigarettes. Was she out of control? Calm down, she scolded herself. She opened the phone again, not knowing exactly who she wanted to call. No signal. Another cold wave of anxiety passed through her. She sucked hard on the cigarette and pressed down on the accelerator. The needle bobbed at 85 m.p.h. The steering wheel vibrated wildly.

‘How did she get here?’ Her thoughts swirled frantically. ‘On the verge of divorce, popping pills, smoking cigarettes.’ She’d always taken pride in her own stability.

One night Ira woke her up after he had a bad dream.

"Mommy," he'd said. He rarely called her Mommy anymore. She remembered the word caused her to stop cleaning up his room. She sat down beside him on the floor.

"I had a bad dream last night." He said.

She hugged him to her chest. "Just a dream, baby." She murmured. His hair smelled like fresh baked bread.

He pulled away from her and looked right into her eyes. "You were walking along a river and...and...you fell in. People came to rescue you. Men and women and they had to swim down and dig you up from the bottom."

Vicky swallowed.

"Before you left, you gave me a towel. A white towel with swirls on it...and"

"And what," Vicky strained to keep her voice soft.

"You went away."

"Oh, honey. I'm not going anywhere." She had pulled him back into her chest.

"Momma's never going to leave you." Vicky closed her eyes faced with the immediacy of the lie. She had gone, she silently reprimanded. She was gone. And someday she was going to die.

Her son had hugged her back. At the time she had never considered leaving them for more than a few hours. She shut them out of her mind. She couldn't think about them. It as too hard. But she wasn't gone for good, she reminded herself. Just a week. One week away and she would feel much better. A voice whispered like a ghost through her mind *Would they be better off without you? Would they be better thinking of her the way she was then, not the disaster zone of woman she had become?* Maybe she could just let herself drift away. She probably had enough Valium in her purse to end it all right now. There was always the option of head in the oven? Or garage with the car running. She could never hang herself. That was way to gruesome. The gun made such a mess. Maybe drowning in a river wouldn't be so bad? Who put the rocks in her own coat pockets? Mrs. Dalloway, or was it Virginia Wolfe? The two women blended in her mind. A nice long swim would do it. She could never do that. She wasn't brave enough. No where near brave enough.

Within minutes Ira had fallen back to sleep. She too, had lost connection with that quiet moment. Sitting in his room in the dark, her hand on his back. Cotton pajamas stretched across his shoulder bones. Funny, she could even remember the day after the dream. She was late to the office. The whole team was scheduled to meet with the producer.

The dream seemed to be the harbinger of a bad day. Spilled juice at breakfast. Maybe soaked a stack of bills? Iris's oatmeal bowl up side down on the floor. Not that she would have eaten it anyway. Iris never ate her oatmeal. The only thing strange was that Vicky kept cooking oatmeal. The whole routine of a balanced meal was an exercise in futility— she thought. If she was smart she'd hand them each a box of Cracker Jacks, and tell them to eat it in the car. At least they'd get something in before school.

She remembered thinking about the dream while she was making their lunch. The realization hit that she really was going to be late for the staff meeting. Could this really be less than a week ago? Vicky dragged on the cigarette. She had looked at the clock, set the alarms and raced down the hall and into Iris' room. Neither child was dressed, and she immediately snapped.

"You need to get dressed NOW!" She screamed still holding the knife streaked with peanut butter and jelly she'd carried with her from the kitchen. They both ran around her and into Ira's room, where she discovered them jumping up and down on the bed.

Doris's voice could be heard repeating every 10 seconds in the hall. "You are seven minutes behind schedule. Seven minutes behind schedule."

Vicky's patience had already been fried by coffee, and the irritation that rises only after a series of insults, none large enough to seem at all significant on their own, but the culmination of which evoke a fury that she never thought possible until she'd been blessed with children— she yelled at them again, this time profanity reigned.

"God Damn it!" She shook her fist in the air like the witch in the Sinbad movie they'd watched the night before. Her son jumped down and ducked by her, out the door. She caught hold of her daughter and dressed her roughly.

"Get your bag and go to the front door." She said fiercely when she was done. She stormed back down the hall. In the doorway of her son's room she threatened, "If you're not in the car by the time I'm out of the garage—I'm leaving you!"

Back in her room she had gathered her briefcase and cell phone, inserting the script she'd managed to type up in the 15 minutes between her first cup of coffee and a shower, and glanced in the mirror. Her hair was unbrushed. After two swipes with the brush, she pulled the length back with an abalone clip. Despite the efficiency of her efforts, both children managed to beat her to the landing looking, surprisingly, well put together. Ira in blue jeans, an orange and blue t-shirt, brown slip-ons and a blue windbreaker and Iris sporting her classic pink and purple sweater

set pantsuit complete with bright green, plastic sandals. Probably better than she looked, she realized after handing them their respective lunch pails and opening the garage door.

The dream had come to her again as she was driving. Why had she *drowned*. How odd? What did the water symbolize? Her marriage? Her infidelity? Her family? Vicky pictured the shimmering lines of cars on the freeway in LA. How the air felt so often felt steamy. She pictured herself floating down below the surface. Farther and farther down she sunk beneath the murk.

She was an evil mother, yelling at them like that. She cringed at the memory. And what did Mr. Dooley think? Surely he had heard the frazzled morning rants directed at her innocent children? The cursing?

Maybe she had never been a pillar of stability?

Maybe she hadn't been fooling anyone? Maybe Manny was right and she was miserable all the time.

Was that how it had been? And what if there was a custody fight? Manny's attorney would easily peel back the veneer of devoted soccer mom—paint her as a sexpot, a drunk, someone who couldn't be trusted. The idea that she was playing against a stacked deck made her heart beat increase. The familiar turbulence built inside her, and she reached for the pack of cigarettes again. There was the possibility that she would have a complete nervous breakdown, she thought, for the first time in her life. Really. It was possible that she would just snap under all of this pressure. Her hands shook as she lit the end. She might wake up one morning in a pale yellow room, metal-framed twin bed, her hands strapped to the floor.

The gray stone face of Mount Holy Oak rose up in her mind. She was pulling the car into the no parking zone in front of the school and turning to watch her son unfasten the car seat for his sister. She walked around the front of the car, her daughter jumped from the seat into her arms, clinging there for a minute before kissing her on the cheek and kicking her feet to be let down. Her son hugged her too, both so easily able to forgive her, to forget the nasty words and threats of the morning.

"Bye, bye, momma!" the Barbie lunch box looked as big as a suitcase next to her daughter's skinny, pink-clad body.

"Bye, Bye, baby!" There was a great pressure on her chest at the memory of her children, her lifeblood, walking in the long shadow cast by the height of the church. How small they were against the front of that great, stone building. How diminished they seem to her from this vast distance of the desert. She looked to the west, and felt the hard tug of remorse that she hadn't

realized how precious all of those moments were. How nothing outside of those two bodies really mattered. Vicky clutched the steering wheel and struggled to remember. Had she smiled then? Had she waved and felt that lightness of heart that she remembered accompanying happiness. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and she cleared them from her face with the back of her hand.

She stared at the cigarette in her hand. When was the first pack of cigarettes? Wasn't it right around that same time she started the job. Late Spring. Yes. That's right. At the corner market. She'd been early getting in the car for once. Left work early and was headed over with plenty of time to spare before picking up the kids. She sat in the park parking lot behind the corner market. She hunched in the car near the back fence, smoking and watching the teenagers gather around the picnic tables outside.

She was alarmed now, looking back, how easy she had become part of a taboo culture. Nobody smoked in LA, at least not in public. It was an activity reserved for the privacy of ones vehicle, as long as the proper air freshener was employed, or perhaps a corner in the backyard, or the alley behind the backyard, maybe the garage. She couldn't pinpoint the reason for her purchase that day.

Maybe it was the manifestation of her guilt over the affair— destruction materialized? More likely they distracted her, filled her emptiness. Except for that night, after the dream, Ira had stopped letting her hug and kiss him.

"Not here, Momma," he had reprimanded when she tried to kiss him in front of school one day. Then he added quietly, his voice lowered to a whisper, "Wait until we get to the car." But the car was always running, and double-parked, jammed into the no parking zone. So the moment passed, with a flip of the turn signal and a gentle acceleration into traffic, and she had felt a tingle of longing, but didn't bring it up again. And not so long before that her daughter had become so busy with dolls and play dates and other things that she stopped nursing, just forgot, and except for that one day at the park, had never mentioned it again. Victory's breasts, once so lovingly fondled by everyone in her household, had so suddenly felt forgotten, this feeling progressed quickly to vacant, and then deprived. Maybe in some sick way, the cigarettes pacified her.

Her favorite place to smoke became the mall. Saturday night cigarettes in the parking lot, a private ritual. She liked the hive-like wrap of concrete in the parking garage. Layers and layers

of concrete winding around inside. She saw herself there now smoking, and remembered the feeling of being surrounded by so many people, and yet, secretly, pleasantly invisible.

Vicky stared at the flat, endless landscape in front of her. The solid river of black asphalt stretched went on and on. She blinked hard, then looked out the side windows. Fear clenched her stomach as she struggled to remember where she was going.

How long had she been driving?

The void of desert erased all sense of time and mileage. There should be buildings, at least an outline of the city by now on the horizon.

A chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire started up on her left. She strained, but could make out nothing inside the fencing. A new army base? A test facility? Land fill? There weren't very many options in Nevada. She squinted at the road ahead, hoping to see the outline of Reno. The fence started up on the right side of the road and she suddenly felt sure that she was headed in the wrong direction.

She felt her blood pressure rising. Stubbing the end of the cigarette in the ashtray, she slowed the car, the shimmy in the steering wheel eased. She considered turning around. Was there something across the road up ahead? She strained against the glare. Thunderheads billowed in the East. A glider plane soared overhead.

A barricade of some kind closing the road. She continued forward, slowing the Thunderbird as she approached the building where, from a metal pole on the roof, an American flag stretched out in the desert wind. She stopped at the red and white striped gate, and a man in full army uniform stepped out from behind a door marked Homeland Security.

"Sorry. I think I'm lost."

"Looks like it." The sergeant looked at her sternly. "Where you trying to go?"

"Reno."

"Well you overshot your mark by about 75 miles."

Seventy-five miles? How could so much time have passed?

"You out here visiting someone?"

"Actually I grew up in Sparks...I... don't know how I ended up out here." The sun slipped over the top of her dark glasses causing her to squint. The heat and the glare suddenly felt overwhelming. The look reminded her of the way her father used to look at her. Was it suspicion?

What exactly did she seem suspicious of? She wanted to ask him: What kind of person do I look like?

"Ah, well I can help you out with that one. This here highway was built just about a year ago by the U.S. government. It ain't even on the map."

Vicky felt her blood pressure settle. She wasn't crazy, just a new road. It had been awhile, after all, since she'd last been home. "Can you tell me how to get to Reno from here?"

On the outskirts of town Vicky passed several auto body shops, each with a collection of semi-demolished coupes in the dirt lot out front. A taxi-cab yard, a series of low-income apartment buildings rod-iron bars and dead grass, a couple of liquor stores, ads papering the windows. Vicky turned onto a street that pointed at the heart of the city, only a few blocks from the casinos, but there were no streetlights. No sidewalks either. No lit-up billboards.

She felt strangely overjoyed as she turned into the parking lot and pulled around the low slung adobe building. No matter how different they were, it was always good to see her sister. She lit another cigarette. Smoke curled thickly around her face. She brushed it away and gazed at the blacked out windows, the row of neatly shaped bamboo bushes, the roof tiles lined up like a red army, shiny, in full assault from the merciless sun.

She remembered the day when the Colonel and Uncle Clay returned from a training retreat with a gift for her and Jen—two t-shirts. One pink and the other blue. Both had the same logo, a man riding a round-haunched bucking horse with big lips. Horses were everything to them back then. "Future Employees of the Mustang Ranch," was printed in gold letters across the back. She and Jen were so excited about those shirts. Of course, her mother didn't know any better. She was sure now that was part of the joke. They wore them for a week straight before some kids at school told them that the Mustang Ranch was a whorehouse in Carson City. She inhaled deeply and watched as a group of men entered the building. She wondered if Jen ever thought about that t-shirt, and how by working here, she'd practically proven the bastard right.

A Cadillac backed out of one of the spaces the parking lot. Vicky waited as the driver slowly made his way toward the street. His face was gray and craggy. He wore a golfer's shirt. Who was she to judge? Even she had experimented with pornography. A couple of times right after taking the job for Jack. She thought it might help her stay away from Mark, but how would she explain that to a judge? Would they check the records at the Video store? She had had the kids with her she recalled. They had been fighting over movies. Instead of standing there in her

usual role of referee, she had slipped into an open doorway marked XXX. At first she felt assaulted by the images lining the narrow shelves. Stacked five shelves high all around, she soon became intrigued by the multitude of styles depicted on the covers. She grabbed two and walked straight up to the counter. "Hurry up, kids! Momma's leaving!" She had called.

Again she had been impressed by the ease of the transaction. The young kid behind the counter seemingly found nothing wrong with the combination of Disney and porn. Maybe it wasn't so unusual after all. She was amazed now, looking back because she remembered when she went to put the movies in the trunk and she remembered the towel she had bought for Ira. It wasn't until she saw the bag that she remembered buying it. She was sure she hadn't said anything about it to him. Hadn't even mentioned the fact that she'd signed him up for swim lessons. There was no way he had seen it, and yet there it was. The white towel, his name embroidered in black. Now—less than a month after his dream—she had left them, for the first time. But there would be so many more times, she reminded herself. She would be forced to leave them—Manny would certainly insist on custody—might want to take them to Indonesia. How could she stop him? The realization struck her like an ax, tearing through her chest wall. Blood drained from her and she felt as though she might not be able to stand. Might not be able to walk across the parking. She pictured them finding her body there on the asphalt in the parking lot of a strip club. The idea of her own publicity motivated her to get out of the car. She needed to get her sister.

"Get in, and get out," she told herself as if she was a commando.

The heavy wooden door closed behind her, exterminating the white light of day. She made her way toward the podium where a small gold light illuminated the shiny black lapels of a tuxedo. A wide man with a bald head greeted her.

"I'm here to see Jade, please." She tried not to flinch as he looked her up and down.

"Are you here to audition?"

"Uh, no. Just a visit." She shook her head.

His aftershave reminded her of someone, but she couldn't recall who—the producer, at the studio, maybe? Panic ricocheted through her at the thought of her script deadline now looming at the end of the week. Why was she procrastinating? What made her think that for the first time in her life she could write a whole scene of dialogue in less than four days.

"I see. Take a seat there." He motioned towards a nondescript wooden door with a mail slot. "I'll let her know you're here."

She stepped inside the door, quickly pulling it shut behind her. The room was small and barren. There was just enough room for six metal chairs around the perimeter. A bare bulb hung from the stucco ceiling. Maybe she'd just quit her whole life, she thought, staring at the circle of empty chairs.

A man entered abruptly. He watched as she fumbled with one of the metal chairs, struggling to pull it free from where it was hooked on the chair next to it before sitting down.

"Okay, go ahead and strip down to a g-string." He patted the clipboard in his lap. "Afterwards you can fill out the application."

Vicky stared blankly.

The man stared back. "Do you have a song picked out, or something?"

"Sorry. I'm just waiting for my sister." Vicky said looking from the man back to the door, and then back to the man. "Am I in the wrong place?"

"You're quite a peach, hon."

His smile caught her off-guard and she felt a blush spread across her cheeks. "You wanna make some cash don't you?"

"No."

His face switched to a stern expression, then a questioning glare. "Well, then—what are you doing in here?"

"The doorman told me to have a seat." Vicky dropped her hands to her sides.

"Outside." He looked at her oddly, and slowed his word as if she were a child. "There are chairs in the hall. If you come inside here, it means you're looking to be a performer."

"Oh, sorry. My eyes hadn't adjusted...I...I didn't see any chairs."

"You afraid of being seen or something?"

"No. Not at all."

"Go on into the bar, then." His gaze softened. His eyes wandered across her clothing, her hair, her hands. "Have a drink on me. Oh, and let me know if you change your mind. We're looking for girls like you right now. We got too many blonde bimbos coming in here thinking Pamela Anderson is the only archetype for erotica. We've got a real special clientele here. They prefer a more sophisticated type of seduction."

"Uh, thanks," Vicky smiled awkwardly trying to move around him to the door. She brushed up against him before he backed up a few steps and opened it for her. "Anytime you want to give it a shot, my name's T.J." He held out his hand to her.

"You're from out of town aren't you?" He said as she slipped by him back into the hall.

"Los Angeles."

"Oh. Too bad. We can't compete with LA money."

"I'm not in the business."

"Entertainment?"

"Television."

"It's all the same, honey." He laughed and let her pass. "Tell the bartender T.J. wants to buy you a drink. He'll set you up."

"Thanks." He nodded at the doorman who let her in through the brass plated door.

Vicky's cell phone rang just as her eyes landed on a woman with long, platinum hair, white go-go boots and a white, lace corset wrenched around her middle. Two mounds of flesh protruded from the top of the under wire corset. Vicky stared at the breasts in awe. They were so big, and firm and perfectly round, like cantaloupe cupped proudly in a farmer's hand.

She glanced at the number on her cell. Shannan.

"I'm so glad you called," Vicky breathed into the phone.

"How's Sparks?"

"Oh, fine." The heavy beat of the music increased as she made her way toward the bar to the right of stage.

"Where the hell are you?"

Vicky scanned the girls working the crowd. "I'm meeting my sister for lunch."

"Some music. I thought they only played country-western in Nevada," Shannan laughed, slightly breathlessly.

"Are you on your stairmaster?"

"What do you think, stupid? What do I do five days a week from 12-2 p.m.?"

"Isn't it Saturday?" Vicky looked at the face of the bartender and immediately felt the panic creep in. She could just order a beer. An amber beer. On tap. Pint glass. Her mind churned with alternatives. Cosmo. Soda water. Mineral. Pelligrino. Chardonnay. No. Pinto Grigios—

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like a beer."

The bartender nodded to the brass taps lined up behind the bar. "We got 32 kinds."

"Just order an Anchorsteam." Shannan said in her ear.

"Anchorsteam," Vicky answered.

The bartender tossed a cocktail napkin embossed with the gold outline of a mermaid wearing a top hat.

Vicky pulled a \$20 from her wallet and set it on the bar. She watched as the bartender topped off the foamy beer. The connection with Shannan was startlingly clear. Sitting in the bar with the phone to her ear was almost like having Shannan right there with her.

"I talked to Martin. He is quite upset."

"I know."

"How much have you written?"

"Nothing."

"Vicky, you need to get it together. This is your one shot. They are all counting on you."

"I can't do it."

"Stop saying that. Listen, I explained to Martin what is going on."

"I told Jack. They knew I wasn't going to be in the studio for at least a week."

"Martin needed to know."

"They are working around your part. They have only a few gaps for you to fill in the next five episodes. He gave me a list of scenes."

"I can't do it Shannan." Vicky knew she was whining, but she couldn't help it. Not one part of her was focused on that script, and she couldn't get her mind to go there. The flash of Jett's eyes as he turned away from her last night came back into her mind. She knew it was stupid, that she shouldn't care? That it didn't matter, but how could she write about a character falling in love...when all she could feel was shame and remorse, and that empty hole whenever she thought about home. It was impossible.

"You are going to do it," Shannan said firmly. "I'm going to tell you the three scenes that they need from you. It's going to be a piece of cake. They have it all worked out, and it's brilliant. They are going to drag out your character's part into the next five episodes, so there is no resolution. They just want you to set up the part. Do you have a piece of paper?"

"No."

“What the hell is wrong with you!” Shannan yelled. “You are acting like this is the end of the world.”

“It is.”

“No it isn’t.” Shannan was adamant. “My reputation is on the line here, Vicky. I’m the one who set you up with this gig, remember? You cannot blow me off!” Shannan sounded like a maniac.

“Fine. Call back and leave the three scenes on my voice mail. I can’t talk now.”

“Fine.” Shannan said. “But you need to set aside all night to work on this. It’s your last chance.”

“Fine.” Vicky said.

Shannan hesitated. The phone was quiet between them. “That is some music they are playing—sounds like a strip club.”

“I told you I was going to visit my sister today.”

“Yeah?” Shannan’s tone switched. “How is she?”

“I’m waiting for her,” Vicky said suddenly aware of how loud she was speaking. She could feel the thrum of music deep in her bones. “I’m going to let you go. I can barely hear you.”

“Remember I’ve been covering your ass over here and I want a full report as payback.”

“There is nothing to tell.” Vicky felt impatient suddenly. “Jesus! It’s not like she’s going to tell me anything anyway.”

“Don’t be so selfish,” Shannan whined. “For once you have something to share besides good advice about cleaning products, and you are cutting me off.”

“I’ll call you later. I promise.” She could hear Shannan still protesting as she hung up the phone.

Vicky picked up the beer as soon as the bartender set it down.

“You won’t be needing that—” he nodded at her money. “The manager said you could have as many as you want.”

“Thanks.” Vicky said with a weak smile. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. She was still attractive, wasn’t she? There was still a youthful glow to her skin. All of those chemical peels and Botox had literally stopped the clock. Why didn’t Jett think she was attractive anymore? Had he ever? Maybe their whole relationship had just been a hoax. Maybe that’s why they never had sex. Maybe he was gay? The idea made Vicky laugh out loud.

Her eyes lifted to the flat screen above the bar. Children in track suits ran down a street littered with chunks of concrete. A plum of black smoke filled the end of the street. Vicky realized the chunks of concrete had come from a building when another one was hit by a blast. The camera jostled still trying to capture the running children. A few adults ran past them and one reached and put his arm around one of the boys. Another blast hit and the camera veered violently around to capture a smoldering hole where a high rise that had just been hit near the boys on the street.

“Oh my God,” Vicky whispered, a sick feeling rising in her stomach. She turned her eyes away from the screen and signaled to the bartender, who was sitting on the edge of a barstool watching a small television underneath the bar. A Jack Russel Terrier jumped through a hula-hoop and then over a pole placed on the Astro turf.

“Is there any way we can change the channel down here,” she said, her voice wavered too high. Five more minutes of CNN would be enough to push her completely over the edge. Vicky felt that high trembling sense of panic threatening to invade her. She gulped down half of her beer. Oh my god, she thought. I might really lose my mind. I might really wake up with my hands chained to the bedrail. Calm down a voice inside her rose. Calm down. Breath. Breath.

The bartender reached for the remote, “No problem.”

The channels flipped then stopped on Ellen. “Great,” Vicky said swallowing down hard on the last of her drink. The bartender brought her another. Tears filled her eyes even as she focused on Ellen’s face. How could people watch the news? How could there be so much horror in the world?

“Thanks,” Vicky muttered, gripping the glass. She let her eyes wander around the dimly lit room. Cocktail tables faced three stages. Across the room a group of men leaned over the stage rail dangling money from their fingers near one of the dancers until a bouncer appeared and the men lowered themselves back to the table. On the center stage another dancer was shaking her backside, eye-level, at a table where two men wearing business suits were seated.

Vicky watched the dancer working the pole on stage. Only a fireman could truly appreciate the difficulty of this feat. Up and down the girl went, kicking her legs up and out, wrapping her whole body like a python around the brass pole. Her sultry expression unchanged. Bare breasts bouncing, their g-strings offering no protection from the metal against their skin. The squeak and slide of the inner thighs on the brass, made Vicky cross her legs. A large man across the stage threw a stack of bills making them explode in the air before falling to the stage. The girl

slipped nimbly down from the pole, her heavy plastic shoes clicking when they touched down on stage. The five-inch high platform shoes looked like hooves fastened to the dancer's thin legs. She dropped immediately to her knee and crawled around gathering up the money. With those shoes, Vicky could see the sense in crawling.

Her mind drifted back to Jett. She wondered what it was he had wanted to tell her. In retrospect, Vicky could see how sad he had looked. Like a piece of him had been taken out, and he didn't even care enough to figure out what was missing. They could have made each feel better. What was the harm in that? Shame filled her head at the idea of him pushing her away. She tapped lightly on the back of her head. Underneath her hair, she found the knot protruding from her skin. What had happened to him out there?

Jen appeared through a side door wearing tight Levi's and a low-cut white linen blouse. She leaned across the bar and kissed Vicky on the cheek.

"Want something?" Jen nodded toward the wall of liquor.

"You hungry? You look pale." Jen looked impossibly hot, as usual. She leaned over the counter revealing her Pamela Anderson cleavage—only hers were real. Jen Bell definitely had the best breasts in the building—maybe even on the planet. She could certainly hold her own in an international competition. They were impossibly large and full, perfectly smooth and tan, and totally perky. They defied all scientific definitions of gravity because they were as naturally elevated as two helium balloons. They had always been, and still were, miraculous.

Using the soda gun, Jen filled a glass with a bubbling clear liquid. The bartender glanced over at her briefly before turning back to a small television underneath the back counter. A dog jumped over a hedge and through a plastic hoop.

"They've got decent food here—it's about the only thing decent in the place." Jen winked and walked around the bar pulling out the stool next to Vicky. She folded one long leg up underneath her as she sat down. Jen had always moved with the grace of a snake charmer.

"I had a drink. Two actually. I feel kind of... dizzy." Vicky's hands fluttered over the bar.

"You need food." Jen took a long gulp of soda. "Don't you eat anymore? God girl you look like a Holocaust victim."

"Thanks."

"I know it's stylish in LA, but out here when you're that skinny we just assume you're smoking your lunch—a definite no, no." Jen's close inspection made Vicky nervous. "You okay?"

Vicky nodded. "Fine," she said offering up a smile.

"So you want to grab some food?"

"Here?"

"Don't be such a baby! I'm telling you they've got good food, and we don't have to drive—I get a discount—what could be better than that?"

Vicky's gaze moved back to the stage. She watched the dancer rub her breasts with both hands. Her fingers spread wide. One hand slid down her flat stomach, her thumb hooked on the strap of her purple g-string. She rotated her hips slowly as she tugged on the thin strip of fabric. A man in the front row flung a fistful of money onto the stage.

No wonder Jett hadn't found her attractive, Vicky thought, he was probably used to women like that.

Jen leaned over and bumped Vicky's shoulder. "What more could you want, good food, good company? Free entertainment."

"A view of the ocean," Vicky answered, she couldn't prevent her voice from sounding glum.

"Nonsense. This place is much more exciting than watching the froth of LA's sewage infected waters," Jen waved to the bartender. "Two menus please, darlin'. My sister needs to eat."

The man reached under the bar and handed them each a red velvet covered menu. "Your sister? Huh?" His eyes moved quickly over Vicky's hair and clothes. "Where you from?"

"Los Angeles."

"Huh," the bartender grunted again. "Good day for sushi," he winked at Jen. "Fish just came in off the truck. 'bout ready to have some myself."

"Thanks, Chuck."

"I'm not hungry," Vicky said glancing over her shoulder. A woman in the white lace corset with a tray full of cigarettes and candy strapped to the front of her moved through the tables. "You're the only one in here without implants." Vicky whispered, turning to survey the girls working floor area.

"You should hear them talk in the dressing room. They obsess about their boobs like you do your children. Which doctor? What size? How much? Where's the scar? Most of them go to LA for the surgery, you know. You're the one who lives in a Barbie factory. I hope you are training Iris to be a Barbie killer." Jen reached over and picked up Vicky's hand and held it in her own. "You're not still buying her those Barbies are you?"

"I'm not going to argue with you," Vicky answered, smiling.

"Of course you aren't." Jen patted her hand. "My sister Vicky never argues." Jen's eyes flashed, then she leaned over and smacked Vicky's cheek with a wet kiss.

"These are a specialty item around here," Jen said dropping her hand and leaning back and cupping her natural size D breasts through the gauzy blouse. "Rich calls them his big bazookas."

"Oh my God." Vicky said shaking her head. "I'm glad to hear you two are still an item. You had me worried after you," Vicky looked around to see if anyone was in ear shot, "you know."

"You mean when they violated my rights, broke the law and threw me in the slammer?" Jen said in a loud voice. Two men at the bar turned around to look at them.

Vicky nodded.

"If it wasn't for these babies," Jen said, still clutching her breasts. "I'm sure he would have left me in there. I've got quite a commodity here," Jen opened her and waved at her body, "and I don't let him forget that."

"I tried to bail you out, but he moved pretty quick."

"Thanks, Sis." Black eyeliner made Jen's blue eyes look mysterious. "It's nice to know you've got my back."

"Always," Vicky said.

"Yeah. I'm just trying to get him to sign my contract. You know, a girl can't be too careful these days."

"Contract?"

"I had something drawn up to protect me just in case he decides to bug out on me when I get old."

"That was smart," Vicky nodded, but she let her eyes fall to her own chest. So many times growing up she had wondered why her chest never quite stacked up next to Jen's. When she was twelve she watched an infomercial about increasing breast size and secretly ordered a book. For the next three years she performed the exercises every morning and night. By the time she turned 16, she had given up. It wasn't until she fed her first child that her small 'B' cup increased to a 'C,' but more amazing was the fact that they worked! She had been so proud of her breasts then! She nursed for as long as both kids wanted too. Giving up breastfeeding had been one of the saddest days of her life. Vicky let her hands rise to her own breasts. She still missed nursing. For

the past seven years she had loved her breasts just the way they were. She smoothed lotion over them, and dressed them up in the sexiest bras. She had loved them, even when everyone else had stopped loving them, but at that moment, for the first time, Vicky considered Shannan's suggestion of implants. If she was going to be divorced, she might need these extra assets.

She looked around the room. If only this were a baby feeding extravaganza. If only all these women came here with their babies. Big, beautiful healthy babies and showed off the wonders of breast feeding! That would be a spectacle worth throwing money at! Before she could do anything to stop it, her eyes had filled with tears. She blinked them back quickly, but instantly felt like an idiot. She'd been with her sister less than 10 minutes and she was already crying? What the hell was wrong with her?

"Sorry," Jen said, cutting her monologue about Rich short, "I get the feeling I'm not exactly cheering you up."

"No," Vicky turned back to her sister. She reached out and put her hand on her sister's knee. "It's not that. It's so good to see you. I—I'm glad I came."

"That's what they all say," Jen set down the menu.

"And you were wrong about me never arguing," Vicky added.

"What?" Jen shook her head. "No I wasn't. If there was a career in "agreeable," Vicky Anderson would be a prime candidate."

"That's not, true," Vicky sniffed. "We argued about being lost."

"We weren't lost!" Jen yelled, slapping her thigh.

Vicky nodded.

"Okay, you're right," Jen nodded. "We have had that discussion, but the fact that you have completed repressed an entire day of your life, is not exactly the same thing."

"We were hiking. We got lost. A snow storm came in, and we barely made it out alive."

Jen sucked on an ice cube and looked at Vicky. "Okay, that's your romantic version, but here is the reality: We were running away from home. We tried to hike across the hills into California, but a storm came in, so we had to turn around and go home."

"We were lost."

"We weren't lost!" Jen tilted her head back and laughed.

"I never ran away from home," Vicky said firmly. "You may have, but I never did?"

Jen shook her head.

“Why would I run away from home?” Vicky demanded. “I loved our home. We had everything we needed.”

“That’s your opinion.” Jen picked up the menu.

“What didn’t we have?” Vicky asked.

“The Colonel was a mother fucker with a capital M and if your head is more comfortable buried way deep in sand on that subject—then so be it.”

“He was a jerk,” Vicky said quietly. “But he wasn’t even home when we went hi—”

“ran away,” Jen interjected. Her voice lowered and she ran her finger down the menu.

“Yah, well. He wasn’t the only asshole in town,” she muttered.

“I’d like to order four orders of the Maguro and an order of California Rolls, please,” she said to the bartender. The bartender jotted down her order, and disappeared into the kitchen.

The dancer finished her act and bent down to pick up her discarded clothes from the stage. There was a momentary pause in the thud of music.

“Did you have some work done?” Jen asked, as the dancer walked down the steps from the stage.

“Oh,” Vicky’s hand instinctively rose to her temple. “Yeah. Just my eyes. It’s been almost a year ago now.” She ran a finger over her brow.

“Good for you. They did a nice job.”

“Thanks.”

There was a long silence between them. “You must miss the kids?”

“Not really. Not yet. I think I needed a break.”

“What about you?” Vicky asked, forcing a smile to her face. “Do we get to shop for a wedding dress together?”

“Fuck that.” Jen shook her head violently.

“I’m wearing rocker pants and 6 inch platforms to my wedding.”

“Really?”

“We aren’t really having a wedding,” Jen said. “I don’t give a shit about the whole ceremony and all that crap. I’m in this for the money, and he’s in it for the sex. It’s a pretty straight forward agreement.”

“Oh.” Vicky nodded. “I see.”

“I’ll be ready to celebrate once we work out the details of the prenup.” Jen nodded. “Now that will be a huge accomplishment.”

“But,” Vicky glanced at Jen’s face and then back at her beer.

“But what?”

“Well, I mean, do you love him?”

Jen laughed loudly. “I don’t know. Do you love Manny?”

Vicky stared at Jen.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You married Manny. Do you love him?”

“Right now? I don’t know—“

“My point exactly.” Jen smiled.

“Even after what you’ve been through in your marriage are you going to try and tell me that this mysterious concept of ‘love’” she waved her fingers in the air, “should be the basis for anything everlasting?”

“Ideally, yes.”

“Ha!” Jen slapped her jeans. “But does this world operate in the realm of ideals? Maybe you should take a minute and consider the population outside of Los Angeles when you answer that question. Maybe even really stretch your geographical knowledge and pick a region far away? Like the Middle East for example? Are we living in an ideal world Vicky?”

“No.” Vicky took a sip of her beer, suddenly regretting meeting her sister here. Jen was always fired up after she worked her shift.

“Right, so why would you base the most important decision of your life on some nebulous definition based on ‘ideals’?”

“I was just trying to be polite.” Vicky took a sip of her beer. “Actually, I don’t really care what you base your marriage on. I’m just happy for you, that’s all.”

Jen leaned over and wrapped her arm around Vicky’s shoulders. “That’s my Sis.”

Vicky smiled.

“Thanks,” Jen said sincerely. “I’m glad you are happy for me. In less than two weeks, I’m going to be the second richest woman in Carson County!” She lifted her pint and they clinked their glasses together.

Jen swiveled on her barstool. “I’ve got Rich hooked and I’m going to reel him in slowly and carefully.”

“Uh huh.” Vicky nodded. “So going to jail was part of the bait?”

Jen glared at Vicky.

"I'm just asking?" Vicky lifted her shoulders.

"No," Jen's voice lowered. "I fucked up on that one. I'll admit it."

"You already have an agreement with him? I mean about quitting?"

"Yeah." Jen looked like she had swallowed an aspirin without any water.

"But he gave you another chance," Vicky said cheerfully. "He bailed you out. He wouldn't have done that if he didn't...if he didn't want to, you know, work on the contract."

"He gave me a second chance," Jen admitted. She tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"He's being a real asshole about me working. He just doesn't understand that I have some...that some of my clients are important to me. That I can't just drop them like they never existed."

"Like the governor?" Vicky knew she was drunk as soon as she said it.

Jen looked at her. "Yeah. Like him. He's one of them." She lifted her pint glass to her lips and took another sip of beer. "I just have to tie up all the loose ends neatly, and he doesn't really buy into that."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I've got it handled," Jen smiled, and waved her fingers at one of the men who had just entered the room.

"I'm sure Mom will be happy for you too, and Jett."

Jen turned and looked at Vicky. Her expression was serious. "Why do you say 'Jett' like that?"

"What do you mean?" Vicky blushed.

Jen leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, "Oh my God what shenanigans are you involved in over there. Don't tell me the shits already hit the fan."

"What shit?" Vicky frowned at her sister.

"You said Jett like there was already some complication with the sadistic mind of the Marine in our family."

"No," Vicky hesitated. Annoyance fluttered at her sister's perception. "He's not in our family, by the way." Vicky swallowed another gulp of her beer. Jen has always been like that—as if she has ESP or something. "It's just that Jett's been worrying about you. You must not have told him—I mean that you are getting married."

"Jett is a fucking Neanderthal." Jen tilted her head back and laughed. "I take that back. He's a cross between a homicidal maniac—of course—he is a Marine after all—and an odd rendition of Jack on Threes Company." Jen laughed loudly.

“Why Jack?” Vicky couldn’t help but smile at Jen’s raucous laughter.

Jen laughed for a full minute and Vicky started laughing at the sight of her laughter. The bartender flashed a warning look at them.

“Jack Tripper, I don’t know,” Jen said. “He’s just got that nice guy gone wild look in his eye.”

Vicky looked down at her hands. She thought about being in Jett’s cave last night, but decided not to tell her sister.

“It’s just that I think he’ll be relieved to know that you and Rich are...are going through with the...arrangement.”

“Jett is such a prude!” Jen laughed. “Really! Don’t you think? I mean if you think about what he has spent his life doing, and then you think about how he relates to the women in his life, he’s a real tripper.”

Vicky nodded. “He’s worried about you.”

“Yah, and he’s worried about Jasmine too. Has he told you that line?” Jen looked at Vicky. “That Pastor Rick is out to get Jasmine because she has denied him for so many years?”

“I haven’t heard that, no.”

“Yah, well. Jett, for some unknown reason, is all wrapped up in what people in Sparks think about...” Jen lifted her beer and looked at Vicky over the top of the glass. “about what he’s been up to, and what Jasmine’s been up to.”

Vicky felt a strange burning sensation in the back of her throat. She took another sip from the beer. “Mom said there was some controversy over Jett staying at the house?”

Jen nodded. “Yah, well. What else are they going to worry about? You know? They got to have something in that town to get them all riled up.”

Vicky nodded. “It’s ridiculous.”

“What?”

“The idea of Jett and Mom—you know!” Vicky blushed, she could hardly even say the words. She couldn’t say the words. “Jett is my ex-boyfriend. Every one of those women knows that. They know he is like a son to Jasmine.”

Jen leaned back in the barstool as man approached her. She whispered in his ear, and then shook her head. The man glanced over at Vicky and smiled.

Vicky turned away and stared at the reflection of the woman on stage in the mirror over the bar. Her legs were spread a part, backside to the crowd, she bent over walking her palms out

in front of her along the floor. Vicky couldn't help but think how great she would be in her yoga class at the gym. She was like one of those women who always sat in the front row. Her spine was straight as an arrow and her hips were slightly lifted. Perfect form.

"How's your new job coming, anyway?" Jen said after the man returned to his seat at the tables. "I was so stoked to hear you were back working."

Vicky reached for her glass and tipped the final swallow into her mouth. "I think I'm going to miss my deadline."

Jen looked annoyed. "That's ridiculous. You don't fuck up."

"I'm a complete wreck, I told you." Tears flooded Vicky's eyes.

"Don't start blaming Manny for all your problems—"

"It's just gotten to the point," Vicky sniffed loudly and wiped where the mascara might have dripped below her eyes. "I just don't think I can do it."

Life is hard," Jen snorted. "Suck it up!"

Vicky sniffled.

"Fuck it's not like you are a holocaust victim, or your zip code is in south Rowanda."

Vicky looked down at her shoes.

Jen leaned over and whispered, "Do you have any idea how many harr y dicks I have sucked to get where I am today?"

"Ewww!"

Jen leaned back. "I'll stop if you tell me what the fuck is going on with the job."

A tremor of nervousness rattled through Vicky. "They picked my script to start the season. I just found out today."

"That's great!" Jen's face brightened. "Congratulations!"

"It's terrible." Vicky's eyes landed on the counter. "With everything that has happened I don't think I can focus on the script. It's due Friday. There's no way I can do it by Friday."

"Ask for an extension."

"It doesn't work like that. You either do the job, or you're out."

"Really?" Sometimes Jen's face formed an expression that reminded Vicky of how she looked as a child. Before the legs and boobs grew. Just a freckle faced tomboy, full of life, and energy.

"Do you remember that time you snuck onto that horse in the Thompson's field?"

Jen laughed. "Of course, that was the best ride of my life—until Rich of course. He's pretty feisty," she smiled.

Vicky nodded. "I was thinking about that the other day for some reason."

"I'm lucky I didn't get killed." Jen let the ice cube in her mouth slip back into her glass.

"Yeah. Mr. Thompson was pretty upset."

"Not Mr. Thomspson, Stupid!" Jen's nose crinkled up. "Falling off a 17 hand horse at full gallop—that's pretty dangerous. Especially for a 12 year old."

"I don't remember you falling off?"

"What?" Jen's eyes widened. "Now I know you have lost your mind. Don't you remember anything?"

"I remember the whole thing. You snuck in, rode the black horse—"

"—stallion," Jen corrected.

"And then Mr. Thompson came running up to the gate with a shotgun."

"You don't remember he fired the gun in the air. The horse started bucking like the star of a rodeo, and I landed on the ground?"

Vicky stared at Jen. "I don't," she said slowly. "How strange."

"I've still got the scar," she held up her foot, and pointed to a raised white patch of skin in the center of her foot.

"That's from that day," Vicky breathed. She reached out and put her finger on the skin. A flash of blood appeared around the wound. Vicky could smell the fresh cut grass. The sound of sprinklers. Ch Ch Ch, throwing an arc of water on the grass. Her sister's long hair waving in the air. The thunder of black hooves. Vicky shook her head. "I guess, I guess I remember something about that," she focused her gaze back on Jen. "I was mostly thinking about how brave you were."

Jen leaned forward and kissed Vicky on the cheek. "You're brave, too. You just don't know it."

"Thanks," Vicky said. "But I don't feel brave."

"You need to work on your script today," Jen said firmly. "You'll feel better. Sometimes when I really don't want to do something, I force myself to close my eyes and visualize myself doing it. You know really focus on picturing yourself, and admire yourself doing that thing. It really helps."

Vicky's palm rose to her forehead. "I should. I really should."

“How long do think it will take?”

“Who knows? I should have finished the whole scene in about 15 hours.”

“15 hours! That’s ridiculous. It’s one episode. What’s that like 12 minutes, or something.”

“Twenty-two.”

“Piece of cake.”

Vicky’s hands fell to her lap. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Jen snapped. “Go back to Jasmine’s. Right after lunch and just get started.”

Vicky let her face fall in to her hands. The idea of writing the script was unbearable. She could never do it. “I can’t do it,” she moaned.

Jen signaled to Chuck for another round. “Tell me what it’s about.”

“My character sleeps with a 15 year boy—only she doesn’t know that he is 15. She thinks he’s seventeen, but he tells her he is 18 and she hopes he is telling the truth.”

“Where are they?”

“She’s traveling on corporate business. She’s in advertising, and she’s at a private party. Investment people. Hedgefunders, who bank roll one of her clients. She doesn’t really know anyone, and she’s about to leave and then she meets this, this kid by the door.”

“Uh huh.” Jen looked serious. “And where do they do it?”

“In the house. Upstairs.”

“This is prime time?”

“It’s for the network.”

“Well, that seems simple enough. Pretty straight forward seduction scene.”

Vicky shook her head. “What are you talking about? The kid is 15! My character is 36 years old. That’s quite an age gap for one, and it also happens to be illegal.”

“Men do it all the time. The only thing strange is that your character is a woman.” Jen turned back around to face Vicky. “Pretty gutsy, really. I like it.”

Vicky stared at her sister. So many times she got the feeling that there was no way they could have come out of the same womb. “Men go to jail for having sex with 15 year olds,” she said weakly.

Jen laughed and reached for the full pint. “You LA chicks live a fucking bubble.”

"If I lived in any such bubble it has most certainly burst." Vicky said, without a hint of laughter.

"I know a teenager you could talk to!" Jen exclaimed. "Because that's the main challenge. You need realistic dialogue, right? That's the hard part is knowing what that 15-year old would actually say in a situation like that? You know, you could pick his brain on how he would react to a situation like that! You could get some of their lingo."

Vicky didn't feel excited at all. She watched as the bartender set down their drinks. There was no way she could write it. She no longer cared whether the show even ran. A twinge of guilt made her look up at her sister. That wasn't completely true. She didn't want to let them all down. Especially now that everything else was failing. Maybe Jen was right and she should just try, and get it over with. Write the whole damn thing in 5 hours and turn in whatever she had. Who cares! "You really know someone that I could talk to?" She asked. It was the first time she'd felt hopeful since the night she'd gotten drunk and walked to 7-11.

Jen nodded. "Rich's son."

"What?"

"He has a son. From his first wife. Don't get all snotty looking, they are divorced."

Vicky took another sip of beer.

"Adam would love to talk with you!" Jen pulled her cell phone out of her purse and started dialing.

"Wait" Vicky called, but it was too late.

"Adam," Jen grinned broadly. "Hey there's someone I want you to meet."

Jen nodded and looked up at Vicky. "Yeah, she's pretty." Jen winked. Vicky shook her head vigorously. "I don't know if she is single," Jen shrugged. "That's something you can ask her yourself--"

Vicky snatched the phone from Jen's hand. "This is totally inappropriate." She snapped. "You can't set this up like that--"

"You talk to him then." Jen rolled her eyes, and handed Vicky the phone.

Vicky put the phone to her ear. "Adam?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm sorry Jen was being so rude. Listen, I'm a television scriptwriter."

"Yeah," the tone of his voice lifted. "Cool."

“Actually, it’s not cool.” Vicky felt a tidal wave of doubt wash over her. The idea was ridiculous. Useless. Who needed more meaningless television, anyway? “It’s a totally uncool, stupid show really—that hasn’t even aired yet, and to be honest I hope it never does. In fact, it probably won’t.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I did say that I would write this particular character, and I have a deadline on Friday and I don’t want to let the other writers down.”

“Okay.”

“The problem is that once I started the script, I realized that I needed to conduct an interview first.”

Adam was silent.

“I need to interview a boy your age. You know just pick your brain a bit.”

“Sure.”

“Are you busy?”

“Right now?”

Vicky looked at her sister. “Uh, yeah. Right now?”

Vicky handed the phone back to Jen. She felt a fuzzy nervousness in her stomach. Something was telling her that this was not a good idea. That this was a very bad idea. She thought of the mountain lion creeping around her back yard. Panic struck in like a blow to the stomach. Were the children safe? Was Manny taking good care of them? When she had first told Manny about the mountain lion his eyes had sealed over, and Vicky had wondered if he was starting to doubt her sanity. ‘There are no black mountain lions.’ That’s what everyone had said. ‘It was just a big house cat,’ that’s what they all said. Even Mr. Dooley looked at her like she was crazy, but, actually that was nothing new. When Shannan told her about the mountain lion, her first reaction was terror, but now she felt vindication. She wasn’t crazy after all! Now, though, she was starting to doubt her confidence again. Maybe she was crazy? Maybe she was losing her mind? Had Manny seen the mountain lion? Had she really had that conversation, or was it all just some delusion, some manifestation of her unreasonable paranoia?

A stab of panic made her heart lurch in her chest. She needed to call home. Right this minute. She plunged her hand into her bag, looking for her cell phone. But then she remembered the kids were Tai Kwon Do tonight. They wouldn’t be home until later, and then it was a rush to

get fed and in bed. There was a mountain lion. She had talked to Manny, a calm voice came at her through the storm of chaos in her mind.

Vicky sipped at her drink and forced a deep breath in afterwards. 'Stop it,' she reprimanded herself. There was nothing she could do about a mountain lion anyway. Not now. Not while she was here. The kids were safe. She had to trust Manny. The best thing to do was to just not think about them at all.

Chapter Break

The house sprawled along a gentle rise on the West side of town. Jen stopped the car in front, but left the motor running.

"I've got an errand to run," she said

Vicky's chest tightened. "I'm not going in alone." Her hands went clammy.

"Don't be ridiculous," Jen said. "You have work to do and so do I."

"But—"

"You are grown woman Vicky," Jen glared at her. "Don't tell me you are afraid to go have a conversation with this kid."

"I—" Vicky looked back over at the house. Leaded glass windows lined up across the front. "What do you need to do? I thought we were going to spend some time together."

"We will." Jen said glancing at the clock impatiently. "You need to get your script done first. He's got a computer, Wifi and he knows you are working on deadline. I told him to answer your questions, but that mainly you were coming over to use his internet connection, write the script, ask him a few questions and turn it in."

"I don't feel," Vicky swallowed hard. What exactly was she afraid of? She looked over at her sister. "What are you doing?"

"I've got some business to wrap up down town."

Vicky looked at her sister suspiciously, she recognized that expression. "You are up to trouble, aren't you?"

"Nope." Jen tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "I've got a lot of loose ends to tie up if I'm really going to go through with this thing with Rich."

“This thing—“ Vicky said. “You mean your wedding?”

“Whatever,” Jen smacked her gum.

“You aren’t going to go see the governor are you?”

“Who told you that?” A faint blush crossed her sister’s cheeks.

“I thought you told Rich all that was over—“

“Look,” Jen snapped her gum loudly, “you need to focus on getting your script done. Don’t worry about what I’m doing.”

Vicky met her sister’s eyes. “It just seems like he is offering you the world and you, you made a promise—“

“At least I’m getting all of this done before we tie the knot—“ Jen gaze hardened.

“Doesn’t seem like you are in any position to talk to me about marriage.”

Vicky nodded and opened the car door. As soon as Jen’s car had sped down the street, her cell phone rang. It was Shannan. Vicky stared at the front door and debated whether or not to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey. Are you writing yet?”

“I’m at this kids house,” Vicky answered.

“What are you doing!” Shannan yelled. “You don’t have any more time!”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Vicky said. “I’m meeting with this kid to study his language for the character, and he’s got Wifi so I can access my files at the office and then e-mail the script to everyone when I’m done.”

“Thank God.” Shannan said. “Who is this kid?”

“Some friend—“ Vicky hesitated. “He’s actually the son of my sister’s fiancé.”

“Your sister is engaged?” Shannan sounded shocked.

“I just found out myself,” Vicky answered. “It’s not like a real wedding, or anything. It’s just this super rich guy. She’s signing on to see him exclusively.”

“Sounds like marriage to me.”

Vicky laughed. The sun dropped behind the California mountains in the West. Red and orange clouds glowed in the sky.

“So the kid is going to help you write the script.”

“He’s just a similar age—actually I think he is a little bit older than the guy in the script, but he’ll be able to give me some authentic language to use in the dialogue.”

“Now you are sounding like a writer!” Shannan’s tone brightened. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am. I might need to break my no vodka before 7 rule just to celebrate!”

“It’s not done, yet.” Vicky said grimly. Thunderheads rose up from the desert in the east. A pinkish glow lit up the mountain.

“Is Jen going to help you?”

“No,” Vicky stared down the street. Her sister’s red car moved along the flat highway heading to Reno. “She’s going to Reno.”

“What’s she doing there?” Shannan didn’t even attempt to hide her curiosity.

“Nothing.”

“What are you talking about nothing?” Shannan said. “Is she going to see the governor?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know, don’t you?” Shannan responded. “You just don’t want to let me in on the sordid secret.”

“No—” Vicky turned back toward the house. “That’s not it. I just...” she stared down at a cat that just appeared from the bushes. The cat rubbed against her leg and wrapped its’ body around her ankles. “I just can’t believe she is going to risk all of that. Rich made her sign a contract stating that she would no longer see other men. It’s a legal contract.”

“Huh, really?”

“Really.” Vicky sighed. “I guess she knows what she is doing. She said it was the last time. She’s tying up loose ends.”

“She is going to see the governor!” Shannan sounded thrilled.

“You are sick,” Vicky stated. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Oh, yeah.” Shannan sounded pre-occupied suddenly. “Listen, I got to go. Um. Uh. Good luck with the kid—the script, I mean. I’ll talk to you later!”

The line went dead.

By 10 p.m., Vicky had given up on her sister.

“I finished the script and turned it in three hours ago Jen. I really need you to pick me up. This kid doesn’t even have a car. Did you know that? He’s home from college—Rutgers. He plays rugby at Rutgers.” Vicky laughed, then switched her tone back to serious. “Mom’s not answering and I can’t get a hold of Jett. I’m too drunk to call Gladys and I really, really need you to come and get me,” Vicky said on her fifth voice mail message.

A voice cut across the line suddenly, "Messages are full. Good bye."

"Shit!" Vicky hissed as she hung up the phone. She was in the bathroom, with the door locked. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. She was drunk, but she looked good, she thought. Her lips shined from Lancome's Sheer Silk gloss, and her skin looked radiant from her time spent by the pool. "Am I old?" she asked herself, swaying slightly as she stood back to examine a full body view. "No, you look hot," she said to herself triggering a flood of sputtering giggles.

"Oh dear," she smiled at herself again. "I am drunk," she ran her fingers through her hair. Relief had flooded through her after she sent the script to Martin. "I did it! I did it!" She sang out as soon as she sent the e-mail. The whole thing only took her two hours to write. Just that alone could qualify as a miracle! She had dreaded it for so long, but then once she sat down, the words just flowed out. Her fingers gripped the edge of the counter. She tilted her head to one side, and looked at her reflection seriously for a minute. "I am a Hollywood writer," she said to herself, and for the first time since the Ira's birth, the shame that had haunted the emptiness of that statement didn't occur. She felt like a writer again. "I work in Hollywood," she said to herself confidently.

"I write scripts." She said reaching her hand out for an imaginary handshake.

The kid really had helped. There was no denying it. After two hours of shooting pool, followed by a swim and a couple of video games, Vicky felt like she knew exactly what she needed to write.

"What was his name?" she asked her reflection. A blank void filled her mind. She looked up at the plaster ceiling trying hard to remember. After a full minute, she still couldn't recall. John, Bryan, Steve, Craig, Michael, Dan, Arthur— nothing rang a bell.

Oh well, she told herself. "It doesn't really matter. He makes a mean martini," she said kissing her fingers and pressing the kiss on her cheek in the mirror. "You deserve a little celebration, honey. You've been under so much stress." She bent forward and shook her hair wildly. When she flipped her hair back over her head, she stumbled backwards a little grabbing onto the towel bar to steady herself. Her long hair looked tousled and wild. Her hairdresser had finally nailed her highlights.

"You are so hot," she told herself again. She thought about the Rutger's kid in the other room, and gave herself a naughty look in the mirror, which triggered a fit of laughter. A twinge of excitement, followed by a pulsing warmth rushed between her legs. Oh dear, she thought looking

around the bathroom. This was no place for rampant, desperate desire. She gave herself a stern look, and waggled her finger at her reflection in the mirror.

“You stop that, you little vixen,” she giggled. The kid’s wide square teeth and smooth skin played across her mind.

Panic alternated with desire, as she looked around the small room. She should just masturbate right here, she thought rapidly. This was far too dangerous a desire to trust herself to walk through that door. Why did he have to have long blonde hair, clear skin and zero body fat? Weren’t all teenagers supposed to have a weight problem these days? This kid even played in a metal band. Guitar. Ten years ago this would have been like a dream come true. Vicky had always harbored a secret desire for musicians. Leave it to Jen to drop her off at a 18-year rock star’s house!

“Do you dare?” A man’s voice echoed through her mind. ‘Where did that voice come from,’ she thought desperately? There had never been any men in her mind. When she was little she’d always hoped God would speak to her, like he spoke to her mother, but he never did. Oh my God maybe her mother was right! Vicky stared at herself in the mirror Maybe there was a hell, and she already had one foot in the down escalator. Giggles erupted at the idea. She closed her eyes and gripped the counter. The room swerved slightly, the golden lights above the mirror pulsed bright and then dim again. An image of her in the missionary position underneath the kid popped into view. His hair flipped in her mouth, and she could almost taste the strands. She pictured herself on top of him completely naked except for her high heels. Her breasts bounced as she rode him. Her fingers tangled in his long hair. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Yeah,” that’s it, she whispered, lowering her body down on the carpet in front of the double vanity. She pulled her t-shirt up and rubbed her hands over her breasts, her eyes were shut, her mind clamped on the image, she pushed her hand down the front of her pants, and when her fingers rubbed the outside of her panties, she moaned slightly, just loud enough so that she didn’t hear as the bathroom door lock clicked. A second later the door swung open wide. The kid stood in the doorway. Vicky gasped in terror. Oh my god! A kid just caught me getting off on his dad’s bathroom floor! She panicked and tugged her t-shirt back down, but before she could get up, he had dropped his trunks. His erection stood straight out in front of him.

“Oh know,” Vicky gulped. “Oh no,” she whispered as he lowered himself on top of her. “Oh,” she breathed. “O—O-O-O...”

By 11 o'clock, Vicky had consumed at least 3 more Vodka Martini's, eaten almost an entire box of Cheezits, and played 35 rounds of Wii. She walked out on the back deck to smoke a cigarette. The kid was stretched out on the couch talking to someone on his cell phone. Probably his girlfriend, Vicky muttered to herself between drags. What the hell was wrong with her? She shook her head. Her mind recalled the sex they'd had, and there were no complaints there. In fact, the experience had been amazing. She had been consumed with the same sexual energy that she had tapped into with Mark, only with this kid, she was teaching him.

She had been patient, but firm in her direction, and the outcome had been a miraculous success! He had willingly brought her to orgasm five times, and on the fifth orgasm she been blinded by a white, warm light that had flooded her whole body. Her eyes had been closed, she was almost certain, because she didn't remember seeing anything other than the light. A giant square of light surrounded and pierced her eyes like she had been strung up in front of a drive in movie screen. This light had been eclipsing like that, only physical some how, like her body had manufactured a powerful off-gas, tangible, but some how both visual and physical at the same time.

She looked at the kid lying across the couch, still naked. She was surprised that she still didn't feel any emotional connection. It had been the same way with Mark. They'd had great sex, but when it came time to go, she was done with it. There was no intense longing like she'd read about so many times in romance novels. That's what she wanted to feel. Manny was the only man who had given her that feeling, more than any other, but at some point the longing had dried up and blown away into the distance.

Vicky inhaled deeply and turned back towards the black space of the desert. The guilt would settle in tomorrow, Vicky decided with the sick feeling of dread—or maybe even tonight. It was possible, she would wake up sick to her stomach. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd had so many cocktails in one day. She tested her coordination by attempting to walk a straight line. She felt surprisingly alert, she thought, as she carefully placed her toe to heel. The night air felt good in her lungs and she flicked the cigarette down onto the rocks below the deck. The red glow burned for a minute in the dark, and then went out. She felt powerful.

Her eyes traveled East to where the lights of Sparks twinkled across the desert. "I could walk," she whispered. A chill on her skin, made her shiver. She waited for the shrill call of CalOsha to ricochet through her mind, but their familiar "safety first" mantra seemed to have died at the California border.

“Hey, do you think I could borrow a coat?” She said tugging the sliding door shut behind her.

The kid nodded. He wrapped himself in a blanket and still holding the phone, went over to the hall closet. He handed her a puffy down jacket.

“Thanks,” Vicky said.

The kid lowered the phone and pressed it against his side, “You want to do it one more time before you go?”

“Uh,” Vicky blushed. “No,” she brushed his cheek with her hand. She didn’t want to sound rude. “Thanks, though.”

His eyes dropped suddenly, and she worried she had hurt his feelings.

“You were really good,” she said, taking a step closer and kissing him on the cheek.

He lifted his eyes and a wide grin spread across his face. “Thanks.”

“Thank you.” She said taking a step back. He looked like a boy suddenly. Like he should be riding a scooter and eating ice-cream from a cone. She tried to mask her surprise, but it was stunning, and she stumbled back a little as she attempted to pull on the jacket.

When forced herself to meet his gaze and started to say, “Good bye,” but he lifted her hand and brought it to her lips, “I’ll never forget you.” He said, his eyes looked so sincere, his lips so moist and delicious. For a split second Vicky saw the twinkle of deep emotion in his eye.

Vicky’s insides lurched. She felt like she’d just been dropped off a cliff. Oh my god. He is just a child! He is such a sweet, vulnerable little boy! I am an evil she-witch! What have I done to him! She wanted to gasp and bring her hands up to her mouth, but she quickly forced her body into his. The voices of the Dirty, Sexy, Money writers filled her ears. “Men are easily distractable—all you have to do is touch their penis. Its like a switch.”

Vicky reached down, and rubbed the front of his jeans slightly, as she whispered into his ear. “You are the best.” She kissed his ear and then looked him in the eye. “Don’t let anyone ever tell you different.”

The kid smiled, and she turned quickly and headed for the door. “Is Jen coming to get you?”

Vicky nodded. “Thanks again,” she waved. Before she could pull the door shut, she saw him lift the cell phone back to his ear.

Chapter Break

After three hours of walking Vicky realized she had made a mistake. She stood in the middle of the flat black desert and wondered if she should turn back. The mountains in the West, where she had started walking had long ago disappeared into the black sky on the horizon. The twinkling lights of Sparks could still be seen ahead, but somehow they didn't seem any brighter, or any closer than they had from when she'd first set out. She checked her phone again, but there hadn't been any reception since she'd left the kid's backyard. What was wrong with these people? She felt annoyance mingling with fear inside her. How hard is it to put up a cell tower?

"Shit," she muttered, shoving the phone back into her pocket. The temperature had dropped dramatically, and she was thankful for the down jacket. What had started out as a distant howl of coyotes had suddenly grown loud and close, and Vicky searched the blackness around her, sure that any minute the animals that belonged to the voices would appear. "Coyotes don't eat humans," she told herself after a yipping sound came from just over her left shoulder. "They are looking for mice, or rabbits," she repeated. She stopped and looked around behind her, but she still didn't see them. The yips and barks came from every direction. She walked faster, determined to ignore them. Let them yip all they want, she thought stubbornly, I'm still above them on the food chain.

Another hour passed as she marched across the desert. On the stairmaster at the gym, she had topped out at five miles, but recently her trainer had had her running longer distances around the track. She'd reached her goal of a half-marathon—13 miles—only a few weeks ago, she reassured herself. The distance between Sparks and Reno was only 15 miles, so this section of desert couldn't be more than that—could it? She contemplated the geometry of the region as she walked forcing herself to try and recall the Pythagorean theorem, and the formula for distance.

"Length times width equals height," she said out loud. "Rate times speed equals distance?" she asked herself "Is that right?"

"Maybe," she answered.

"Well, how fast am I going?" she asked.

"Who knows," she whispered. For all she knew she had already lost her mind. How could a crazy person do math? The argument with Jen over their hike, echoed through her mind. How could they have a completely different memory of the same event? How did she know that what she thought had happened had really happened? "Because it did happen," she snapped at herself. "I would never have run away from home!" She yelled at the dark.

Maybe Jen was running away, and she didn't tell me. Humm. That could be it. Their childhood seemed so distant. It was hard to believe that what had once been so vivid was now almost impossible to recall with any clarity.

She remembered Jen's bedroom was pink and she had a huge Barbie collection. Some donated, some bought and traded. She wondered what Jasmine had done with all of those Barbies. Had she given them away? They must be worth some money. Maybe they were still there? A flash of Jen in a pink nightgown flashed in Vicky's mind. Jen's hair was really long then. All the way down past her butt. She was in the bathroom. The tub was running. Probably about 12, Vicky recalled. The memory went dark.

A coyote appeared less than 5 feet in front of her. Vicky stopped. For a full minute she stared into its eyes. The animal didn't move.

She waved her arms and yelled. "Get out of here," and the coyote tossed its head slightly and trotted a few feet away.

Vicky slowed her pace. What had she been thinking about? Jen. Pink nightgown. Why did that memory loom like the scene in a horror show? What had she been doing in the bathroom? Vicky had caught her doing something—masterbating probably. Vicky laughed out loud.

Her foot hit a rock and she stumbled. Another image popped up in her mind. Uncle Clay. His greasy hair pushed back off his forehead. She hadn't thought of Uncle Clay in so long. He always wore those dark blue suspenders. Even with a t-shirt. Someone could have cast him in the Beverley Hill Billies remake—he would have been perfect. Had there been a home movie with Jen and Clay in the bathroom. Viewing the old memory was like watching a scene shot with a hand held camera. No sound. Everything jerky. She could see Jen naked now, stepping into the bath. Uncle Clay was washing her—Oh! Vicky grimaced. What the hell? She shook her head. That was most certainly not any home movie she'd ever watched. Jasmine would have raised hell if she ever caught Clay near Jen in the bathtub.

Another coyote appeared off to her right. Vicky jumped, startled this time. "You scared me you mangy mutt!" She yelled angrily.

The Coyote lowered its head, but didn't move its feet.

"Get the hell out of my way!" Vicky wished she had some thing to brandish, like a stick or a club, but the desert only offered small pebbles and the occasional sage bush or tumbleweed. She waved her arms, shouting loudly as she waved her arms. The coyote trotted off into the

darkness. Was it the same coyote? Or was there a pack? Maybe they were all just wandering in the desert out here.

Vicky pictured a night vision view of the desert. Coyotes crisscrossed the sand. She saw herself, an Arial view, wandering, alone in the dark. Her heart suddenly leaped in fear. How could she have gotten herself in this position? What about her children? What if something happened to her? What would they do? Where would they live? Who would take care of them? Manny certainly wouldn't change his lifestyle, would he? Would he quit the movies, sell their house—move to Pasadena? No chance. He would hire a nanny, a cook. Iris and Ira would grow up without family, they would go away to college and then they would be all alone. Alone. Like she was. Vicky took in deep breath, but instead of exhaling the air caught in her lungs and she burst into tear. No one even knew where she was. No one cared. Her kids didn't care. Manny didn't care. Her sister didn't care. Her mother cared, but she had to—she was a mother for Christs' sakes. She had to care about her daughter. Tears ran down Vicky's face and clung to her chin, she took in a halting breathe and then sobbed some more. She had no real friends. Shannan just wanted a finder's fee, Mark wanted to get laid, Martin just wanted to her write a good part. Even if her cell phone did work, who would she call? Her mother. Was Jasmine the only relationship she had in her life? Was she so awful that no one but her mother really cared about her?

"I am!" Vicky wailed. "I am a terrible, useless human being!" She yelled at the night. "I can't even could a decent Chicken Cordon Bleu! I'm a terrible writer! I'm a bad mother! A dysfunctional, cheating wife! I'm an adulterer! A liar! A compulsive mall shopper! Vicky's sobs came harder and she stumbled on the rough ground.

"Oh lord! Forgive me!" Vicky cried looking up at the sky. "A racist!" Vicky gasped at the realization. "I fired Elia! I let her whole family down! Even the baby," Vicky was wailing again and she sunk down onto her knees on the dirt. Sharp rocks poked at her knees. They brought their sweet little babies to my house and I...I...I didn't ever cuddle them. I never even picked one up. "I almost sat on the baby girl!" Vicky wailed, a fresh batch of tears welled up into her eyes. She pictured herself lowering onto the pink blanket, the swaddled new born, on the couch.

"I am a terrible, horrible person and I don't even have any one to blame," she whispered. "But myself." She huddled on the ground sobbing, "I am a pill popper and a prescription junkie," she moaned. "A chain smoker," she muttered, reaching into the front pocket and pulling out the

pack of cigarettes she'd stashed there. She lit the end of one and inhaled deeply. The white cloud was quickly swallowed up by the darkness. "Pretty soon I'm going to be a bald, chemotherapy victim," she said, smoke pouring out with the words. "My children will be embarrassed of me. I will have to hide in the house, but I will be divorced by then," her voice trailed off and a fresh crop of tears ran down her face. "So it will more likely be an apartment."

Vicky inhaled again. "Divorced," she said in a regular voice. The tears had stopped now. she tugged again on the cigarette. "I am getting a divorce." She tossed the cigarette into the night. The burning ember blazed in the blackness. Her body felt exhausted, and she slowly lowered to the ground. Leaning back, she let her head rest for a minute on the dirt, and looked up at the stars. Then she rolled on her side in the fetal position.

"Manny doesn't love me anymore," she whispered, closing her eyes.

When she looked up, her head ached, her eyes stung. The front of the down jacket was soaked with snot and tears. A coyote had begun yipping to her left, and now there was another answering from her right. She sat up quickly. She thought she heard something scamper away right behind her. She flipped her head around and jumped to her feet. "I'm not dead yet you mother fuckers!"

Her feet lifted one after the other, her arms raised up, fists clenched as she moved faster and faster across the hard ground. Her eyes scanned the desert all around as she ran. When the howls and yips came from behind her she ran backwards yelling "Get out of here! Leave me alone!" She turned around, but missed her step and fell to the ground. A sharp rock cut at her knee as she fell. She felt the sharp rocks beneath her fingers as she pushed herself back onto her feet. Her heart was beating fast now. What if she'd twisted her ankle? What if they decide tonight to sample a human for the first time? Or what if they *have* eaten humans and in all the God awful places—like this—and no body ever bothered to tell anyone? What if half of all the missing persons had been eaten by packs of coyotes and other wild things. Things that most people never saw because they were safe inside their homes, or cars, or shopping malls? Vicky forced her feet into a run. Her mind cleared like it did only after the first three miles at the track. Dogged determination pushed her steadily onward across the desert.

When she looked up, she noticed the lights of Sparks were far off to her right now. She had been running too far north! How far was impossible to tell now. Calm down, she told herself firmly. It's going to get light eventually. The worst thing that could happen is you spend the whole night walking. She forced a deep breath into her lungs. No one ever died from exposure in

the middle of the night in the desert in the summer. What about the heat tomorrow? Another jag of panic coursed through her. What if I'm lost all day tomorrow, and I die of dehydration? Ridiculous! She told herself. You are not going to die! You can still see the lights! It can't be much farther! Your cell phone will start to work eventually.

Vicky saw the dark outline of mountains protruding into the stars straight ahead. That must be 395! Those mountains are the start of the Indian Reservation on the way to Pyramid Lake! Her heart raced. She could make it to Jett's cave. He would take her back to town! The good news calmed her heart and she ran faster across the desert. Her feet thudded across the rocky soil and she lifted her eyes back up to the stars to say a prayer of thanks, but just as she clasped her hands in front of her, she felt her right foot strike something. A second later she was rolling and tumbling across the cold ground.

Chapter Break

Vicky pried herself up from the earth. Her mouth was sore and she spit out a clot of blood and dust. She looked over to see what she had tripped on. From the size of it, it must have been a log she, thought. Pain shot through her elbow and she pressed on the bone with her hand. The dark form in front of her moved suddenly, Vicky felt the earth spinning beneath her. The form moved again and this time, it stood up, on two legs. The stars filled her eyes as she felt her head tilting back and a wave of dizziness overwhelmed her. I'm going to faint, she thought. I'm going to die, and then everything went black.

When she opened her eyes again flames rose up 10 feet into the sky in front of her. She inhaled sharply and scooted back away from the heat.

"You back among the living?" She heard a gravely voice come at her from the other side of the. Oh my god! His cheeks were hollow and two dark lines ran up either side of his forehead like horns.

"Oh my God!" Vicky screamed. Her mother had been right all along and the rapture had finally come. She'd been left alone in the desert with the devil!

Vicky stared at the bloodshot eyes of the man standing over her. The flames reflected in his pupils. At least Jen would be in Hell to keep her company, Vicky thought trying to remember how to breathe.

The face seemed to float toward her from the flames. As he loomed closer, she could see he was smiling, but darkness filled large spaces in his mouth where his teeth were missing. Her eyes drifted down to his body, for she did notice, thankfully that he had a body. He wore dark clothing. Long pants and a lumberman's shirt. No jacket. No hat. The dark lines still looked like horns, but now she could see in the light of the fire that they actually belonged to some kind of headset. What was a man doing lying on the desert floor in the middle of the night wearing a headset?

"I was sleeping when you fell over me," he said.

Vicky hadn't asked the question out loud, had she? Her vision blurred for a second when she moved her head, and then cleared again.

"Why?" Vicky managed, even though the words felt strangled in her throat. Thirst took over her thoughts. She needed water. Water. Water. Water. He mind stuck like a scratched record and refused to receive information until she asked the question:

"Do you have any water?"

He looked at her and rubbed his chin. "I got a bottle of water, but don't know if you want to drink or not."

"Why?"

"Someone told me once I had hepatitis."

This news seemed to confirm her arrival in hell. Vicky tried to swallow, her throat refused. She tried to lick her lips, but her tongue felt fused to the roof of her mouth. Vicky stared at the sunken eye sockets, and was aware of the fact that as closely as she was studying him, he was studying her.

"I guess I could ask you the same question—why you out here in the middle of the night running like you seen the devil?"

"I thought I could," Vicky's eyes followed his hands as they moved toward a coffee can on the ground, "get home by walking." She finished, watching as he pulled the can closer towards his feet.

"I guess that depends on where'd you started and where ya headed."

Vicky nodded. "What's that on your head?" she asked, pointing to the headset. She was hoping the devil was at least connected to a satellite phone system. Maybe he could connect her with her sister.

“Radiation.” The man answered, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small yellow device. “Geiger Counter,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What’s—“ Vicky scooted further away from the flames. The fire was popping and crackling loudly. “Why do you have that?”

“I’m a rock hunter.” He said nodding his head once. “Never know when you might come across a hot spot out here,” his knobby long fingers lifted and waved away from the flames. “Nevada’s known to be the Government’s garbage can—that’s why they own 80 percent of the state. They gotta have somewhere to toss off all their unmentionables.”

“What kind of rocks are you hoping to find?” Vicky heard the sound of her voice, but she felt like she was listening to someone else having a conversation.

“Geodes, mostly. These hills are stuffed full of all kinds of jewels. Opal, Sardonyx, Tigereye, Amethyst, Citrine. You just gotta know where to look.”

Vicky tried again to swallow. Her throat had loosened slightly. She wanted to clear it, but was afraid any sudden movement might trigger a choking fit from which she wouldn’t recover. ‘Water. Water. Water,’ hammered a steady beat in her brain.

“Do you know where a cell phone works around here?”

The fire flared suddenly. A blue green flame shot up from the center followed by a loud pop. “How...how did that fire get here?”

“You sure you’re okay, miss?” The man loomed above her. The lines in his face looked jagged. His eyes filled with flames like a fiend.

Vicky struggled to get to her feet, but the earth moved underneath her and she collapsed. “I need water,” she said finally. “I’ve been walking all night and I think I need...” Dizziness overcame her again.

“I don’t know nothing about cell phones, but I got a pay phone I use that’s not far,” his face changed, the lines seemed to deepen like canyons across the dry flesh of his face. He bent over and picked up the coffee can. He seemed relieved that she would be leaving. He pulled out Dixie cup and handed it over to Vicky.

“Thanks,” Vicky managed as she struggled to her feet. She brought the heavy cup to her lips, but coughed when she saw there was something other than water inside. She poked at the substance with her finger. It was dirt. Soil. He had given her a paper cup full of dirt.

“There’s gold in that dirt.” He nodded, and turned abruptly to lift and hoist his pack onto his back.

"I don't want to take your gold," Vicky said, trying to sound polite.

"It's a gift," the man said with an angry expression. "You don't return gifts."

"Sorry!" Vicky gasped, realizing her existence was perilous and in the hands of a complete lunatic. "You're right. I...thank you so much for this." She cuddled the dirt close to her chest.

The fire no longer flared, and Vicky stared at the singed skeleton of what had been a large bush. He must have ignited it some how, she thought half wanting to ask him, but the other half battling for ignorance. She was still spooked by her initial image of the man as the devil.

"Can you walk?" the man asked.

Vicky struggled to her feet. A warm feeling rushed down her spine. "I think so," she said.

As they walked, she traced the day's events and realized that other than the Cheeze Its, she'd eaten nothing, and had only alcohol to drink. No wonder she didn't feel marathon ready.

They trudged on and on through the darkness. A few times she attempted friendly conversation, but the devil wasn't biting. Vicky had convinced herself that he was a man, and not the devil, since he had agreed to lead her to safety he couldn't be all bad. Still the name stuck.

To kill time, Vicky forced herself to formulate her present moment into one sentence as if she was filming a documentary. 'I am walking along an empty stretch of desert following a man who was until moments ago was sleeping without a blanket on the dirt who is wearing a radon detector and on a quest for geodes.'

Not bad, she admitted. Further up the road, Vicky contemplated the reality of her situation even farther. 'What chain of events led up to your present misfortune?' the voice of an interviewer rattled through her mind. After several tries the script of her response went like this: "Despite several vodka martinis, I had protected sex—the condom was a small but profound battle that I am now quite proud to have won—with a man who less than six months ago could have had me arrested for such an act, and I am now following a man, who is looking for geodes and radiation, although he prefers the former over the latter, in search of a payphone, to call my fucking sister who is fucking the mayor of Nevada so that she can marry a man named Rich, who also happens to be quite wealthy.

What a dud. She got off on a tangent. This rambling would never survive the cutting room floor. How about: Condoms protected the legal sex I had after my sister abandoned me for her pre-marital sex with the governor so she can get married, and now I am following a crazy

person to a payphone praying there is not God because if there was He would be very angry with my behavior.”

“The buildings right up there at the highway.” The man said suddenly pointing at a tiny gold light in the distance. “There’s a pay phone—see“

A white sign rose up above the flat black desert. “The Indian Reservation store,” Vicky said, thankful that she finally had some idea of where they were.

Jett’s cave wasn’t far. Her eyes scanned the craggy tips of the mountain in front of them. His cave must be right up there, she thought with relief.

After an awkward good-bye that involved Vicky in a complicated transaction where she insisted the man accept a \$10 bill in exchange for sixteen quarters that he dug out of the bottom of the coffee can—turns out he also collected change at Pyramid Lake in the fall when the waters dropped low—she said good-bye, and the man disappeared into the darkness.

Vicky prayed someone would answer the phone, and that she would never see the man who had ignited the bush and given her a Dixie cup of dirt again. No Jen. No Jasmine. No Jett. She couldn’t call Manny. What would she say? But how did she know the man wouldn’t come back with a knife? Someone should at least be given a clue as to where they might find her remains. Who besides a sociopath sleeps in a desert with out a sleeping bag? Of course, he was going to come after her. Her heart raced as she used the last of the quarters to call her cell phone. There were eight messages.

At 7:20 her mother called, Vicky skipped the message. 7:25 another call came in from her mother. Skip. 7:30 Manny called. Vicky played the message twice. “I’m with Iris at the clinic. She has an ear infection. They need to know if she is allergic to any antibiotics. Call me.”

What the hell was he calling to ask her that, and leaving a message? He surely remembered that she is allergic to ampicillin right? She told him very clearly about the ear infection when she was two and they gave her ampicillin. He did remember that, didn’t he?” Vicky could feel her pulse crecendoing as she tried to remain calm and wait for the next message. He called again at 7:45 p.m. “I’m not sure where you are, but I don’t understand why you never answer your phone. I need you to call me.”

“Ampicillin! You moron!” Vicky heard herself yelling into the phone. “She’s allergic to Ampicillin.”

The next message was at 7:56 p.m. Jen. “I’m in jail. Call 530-744-9933. Vicky pushed replay. “I’m in jail...”

Manny called again at 8:30 p.m. “I think I remember that Iris is allergic to something. Where are you? I don’t know the name. I don’t know why you have a cell phone if you don’t have it on.” Manny sounded panicked. Welcome to my world, Vicky thought. Her pulse zipped up and down her body. She waited for the next message, hoping Manny’s voice had switched back to his nothing-can-bring-me-down tone. There was nothing else—the last message.

How could he not have called to tell her everything was okay? Vicky slammed the phone back on the receiver, and stared at the empty highway. Surely, he had figured out to call Iris’ pediatrician. How was she going to help Jen? Why hadn’t she used her phone call to call Rich? Did this mean the wedding was off? Vicky’s heart sank. She realized how much she had hoped that her sister was really in love, that she was really going to be able to pull off a wedding—and how much she was afraid that something just like this might happen to screw it all up. How could Jen have risked so much? Vicky shook her head and hung up the phone. They were all hopeless. At least Jasmine had Jesus to love.

Vicky looked across the street at the stacked up rocks. Jett’s cave was somewhere inside that mountain. She trotted across the asphalt, and climbed underneath the barbed wire fence that ran along the highway. Jett would help her. He would race her back to town on the back of his motorcycle. He would make sure she got to the bondsman. He would take care of her. He always had. Vicky felt a strange sense of calm as she reflected on how even though he had been gone for so long Jett had always been a foundation in their family. Jett loved them. He had loved her. He really had, of that she was sure of. These thoughts streamed through Vicky’s mind as she scrambled in the dark up the pile of boulders.

She remembered when the Colonel gave him his first shot gun and he’d spend every day after school shooting targets that he set up out in the desert. The colonel taught him a few moves, rolls and duck and cover and secret maneuvers that Jen and Vicky tried to mimic, but they never had the direct information on what the moves were for, so they lost interest pretty quickly.

Jett was family, Vicky thought, as she rounded the corner and saw the glitter of glass from the window. He’d always been there for them. More than the Colonel ever had been. Every time there had been a crisis growing up—especially when Jen started trading ballet for stripping—he’d been right there in the mix trying to keep them all together. Why hadn’t she ever realized that before?

With the pressure of relief rising in her chest, Vicky pushed open the door of the cabin. On the floor a candle burned inside a tin can. Vicky heard movement, quick and sudden, “Jett it’s

me, Vicky,” she said into the dim room. A second later she felt a burst of energy against her chest, she was flipped around, an arm wrapped around her neck and pressed over her mouth. Her body was shoved back out through the door.

“Jett,” she screamed, when the hand slipped off. “It’s me!”

He still held her close against his chest. She could feel his heart beating. His breath came in short bursts on her neck.

“What are you doing?” Vicky said, when his grip remained tight around her.

His arms dropped suddenly and she turned around to look at him. He turned away from her gaze. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. He stared up at the sky silently.

“I need your help, Jett.” Vicky said breathlessly.

He turned her around and looked at her. His eyes shifted registered her face, the blood, the dirt, his eyes softened. “What happened?” He gripped her shoulders. “Are you alright? Where are you hurt?” He moved the hair on her forehead and started pressing along the top of her skull.

A new panic rose in Vicky’s chest. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re bleeding. You’ve got dried blood all over your face,” Jett answered. “What happened?”

Vicky shook her head and brought her hands up to her face. A second later she was laughing into her palms.

“What!” Jett demanded. “Is everyone okay?”

Vicky’s eyes snapped back open. Her throat tickled as soon as she began to form the words they caught in throat and she choked a spasming cough. “Water,” she finally croaked.

Jett turned and went back inside the cabin. He returned an instant later carrying a jacket and a water bottle.

Vicky gulped down the liquid. “Jen is in jail,” she said after draining the bottle. “I need to get home. I need you to take me back to my car.”

“Where’s your car?”

“At the Men’s Club.”

“In Reno?”

Vicky nodded.

“How did you get here?”

“It’s a long story,” Vicky said.

Jett nodded, but he stared at her for a minute as if considering what to say next. He looked up at the stars as he pulled his arms through the jacket.

“What?” Vicky said finally.

“Nothing,” Jett said solemnly. “Let me get dressed.” He reached up and touched the cut on her forehead. “You have any other injuries?”

“My elbow,” Vicky answered automatically becoming aware of the throbbing in her arm for the first time.

“Which one?”

She held up her right elbow, and Jett reached for her left. “Sit down,” he said guiding her over to flat rock. “Wait here. I’m going to get dressed.”

Vicky collapsed against the rock. Resting her head on the cool, hard surface she gazed at the Reno skyline in the distance. The desert looked like a black ocean filling the space between. She had been lost out there, she thought. The distance had been so deceiving. Waking up to that blazing fire a portion of Vicky’s mind had accepted the fact that she wasn’t going to make it, but she had refused to listen to that part of her. It was the other part of her, the one that was able to see a way out that she had paid attention to and now, here she was—alive.

The door to Jett’s cabin opened, and Jett stood inside. He was dressed, but he motioned for her. Vicky studied his face, but couldn’t read his expression. What was wrong with him? Was he completely deranged? “Jett, I told you I need to go. Iris is sick. She is in the hospital with Manny. I need—“

“This can’t wait any longer Vicky,” His voice strained with emotion. “We need to tell you.”

Vicky heard a strangled cry coming from inside the cabin. A woman’s cry...he had a woman inside his cabin.

Vicky stayed on the rock. Her feet wouldn’t move. Jett walked over and pulled her to his feet. Vicky looked up into his eyes expectantly, she leaned forward slightly and whispered, “I’m not mad at you anymore.” Vicky’s eyes dropped to his mouth. She licked her lips, her skin felt dry against her tongue. She reached her hand up to his chest.

He caught her fingers roughly and led her towards the cabin. “This can’t wait any longer,” his voice sounded gruff.

He pushed open the door, and Jasmine rushed at Vicky pulling her into her arms. She was sobbing. Vicky felt her head spinning recklessly “What’s wrong, Mom?” She stuttered. “Why are you crying? What’s happened?”

Jasmine held her as Jett walked back outside. Jett standing in his boxer shorts flashed in Vicky’s mind. Her eyes flipped open and she took a step back away from her mother. The tiny room had hardly enough floor space to stand. There was only one cot in the room. Air whooshed out of Vicky’s body. Her eyes traveled back up to her mother’s.

Tears streamed down Jasmine’s face, “I’m sorry, Vicky.”

“What are you saying?” Vicky heard her voice in the room.

“Jett and I are in love, Vicky,” Jasmine placed both hands on Vicky’s shoulders, and grasped them firmly. “I have prayed to God that it wouldn’t be so. I have prayed and prayed and we have both tried everything possible to stop this—but—“

Vicky took a couple of steps back from the door. A fury opened up in her chest like a hydrant and she felt the words surging down the lines unstoppable. “You are going to hell mother!” She screamed. “You are going straight to hell for this.”

Jett’s boots thumped across the wood floor, and his arms were suddenly around her. “We love each Vicky,” He said holding her. “We’ve loved each other for a long time now.” Jasmine was crying and clutching at Vicky’s arms trying to embrace her, but Vicky flailed at her until Jett pulled her into a full restraint. Images of Jett and Jasmine together flashed through her mind. Nausea made her lower her head.

“I’m going to throw up.”

Jett lowered his arms.

Jasmine moved quickly to the cupboard and produced a bowl just as Vicky vomited.

Jasmine handed her a hand towel and Vicky wiped her mouth. “How could you have lied to me?” Vicky said finally, her whole body was shaking.

“We didn’t lie,” Jett said.

“I should have told you.” Jasmine sobbed. “Nothing has happened between us Vicky.” Jasmine reached and tried again to touch her daughter’s face. “You have to believe that.”

“Like I’m going to believe anything you say!” Vicky stormed. “You are sleeping together!” She spit out the words like they left a bad taste in her mouth. She turned her eyes back on her mother. “How could you do this?”

“We didn’t want you to find out like this—“ Jett started.

“Vicky, we wanted to talk with you, but when you never came home tonight—we couldn’t.”

“Vicky, your mother came out here because she was upset about what happened in church today.” Jett nodded at Jasmine. “Tell her.”

Vicky tried to shake loose of Jett’s grip. “I don’t want to hear anymore!” Jett held her tight. “Tell her,” he insisted.

“Pastor Rick called me out in front of the congregation today,” Jasmine said. Tears flooded her eyes and she sat down on the edge of the cot.

“They publicly asked me to leave the church.”

Vicky stared at her mother. Her mind went blank.

“When you didn’t come home, your mother came out here to talk to me,” Jett said. “They called her a false prophet and said she had chosen to side with the devil. They humiliated her in front of the whole congregation.”

“I waited until almost midnight for you Vicky,” Jasmine pleaded. “I was worried, and,” she held her face up to her hands. “I just didn’t want to be alone.”

Jasmine sobbed into her hands. Vicky’s whole body relaxed.

“She’s been through enough condemnation, Vicky.” Jett said. “Even though I love your mother, she has refused to be with me. This is the first time she has ever, that we have ever—“

Vicky turned suddenly, yanking her body loose from his grip. “I don’t want to hear about it!” She said, her voice low like a growl. “How could you have taken me out here—why didn’t you tell me!”

“I tried—I couldn’t. I didn’t know what you wanted.” He said.

“I can’t listen to anymore of this!” Vicky yelled. Something inside of her snapped in two. “How long has this been going on?”

“Forever.” Jett said taking a step back towards the door.

Vicky’s stomach turned. “You mean, even when... before the Colonel?”

Jasmine covered her face with her hands.

“I’ve always loved your mother, Vicky.” Jett said.

“But you were my boyfriend,” Vicky wailed.

“I tried to tell myself that what I was feeling toward her wasn’t real,” Jett said, his voice was no longer calm. He sounded angry. “That I could just ignore it and it would go away.”

Jasmine dropped her hands and tried to reach for Vicky's hand. Vicky yanked her hand out of reach. She looked from Jett to her mother. "Now I know why you were always so preoccupied, how you could look the other way when it came to Jen. Now I know how you could let something like that happen, Mother!" Vicky's eyes were wide, she felt a wildness in her voice, like an animal sprung free from a cage.

"You ignored what was happening to your own daughter!" Vicky's words poured out of her without any decision or thought. She was as startled by them as they were. "Or was it just too inconvenient to admit the truth? Was it just too unChristian to deal with the fact that your husband's best friend was molesting your daughter!" Vicky's whole body shook with rage. "You were so afraid of him, weren't you? You sacrificed her!"

She turned wildly waving her arms at Jett, "And you let it all happen—even though you had the strength to stop him!"

"Vicky Stop!" Jasmine screamed. "What are you talking about?" She rose up from the bed, her whole body seemed to be shaking and she threw herself on Vicky. "What did you see?" She demanded

Vicky broke loose from Jett's grip and leapt out the door. "Where is your car!" she demanded of Jasmine.

"Enough to know now that Jen was too young," Vicky's voice shook as she said the sentence that had never formed in a complete way before. The foggy memories, and skewed perceptions of her childhood had blocked her view for so long, but now that this piece had been put in place for her, the others fell in to form the complete picture. "Clay was in our room," Vicky said the blacked out memory, lit up before her eyes. "Many times, taking her away somewhere in the middle of the night. She told me not to tell anyone." Vicky shook her head. Why had she listened? Even then she knew something wasn't right. She had been so naïve, willing to blindly follow everyone's directions, to believe what they all told her, to think that the world was a place where people did the right thing, and told the truth. A place full of good people.

Jasmine's hand clasped in front of her. She dropped to the ground beside the bed. Her voice reciting a rapid prayer, she prayed so reverently that Vicky had to look away. "Don't you see that your prayers aren't enough?" Vicky demanded. "Don't you see that they didn't do any good?"

She turned back to Jett who stood in front of the door with his arms crossed.

“What good did you do?” He asked her. “Do you remember we talked about all of this? When I was still in boot camp—I asked you what was going on—and you said nothing.”

Vicky looked at him, her limbs numb. “I was afraid for Jen. I didn’t want her to get in trouble.”

“She was 12 years old Vicky!” He shouted. “You were the only one who knew what was going on.”

“Stop Jett!” Jasmine cried out. “She was just a child.”

“I didn’t understand.” Vicky whispered. “I didn’t know.”

Jasmine rose up and tried to hug Vicky, but Vicky raised her hand to prevent her.

“You were such an innocent girl, Vicky.” Jasmine said. “I know you didn’t understand what was happening. You idolized your sister. It’s not your fault.” Jasmine’s hand rose up again and caught Vicky’s arm.

“I need to go,” Vicky shook Jasmine off. “Jen is in jail.” She met her mother’s eyes. “All of this is said and done Mother. Years ago. There’s nothing new here,” Vicky said, her tone level. “It’s too late to change history now.”

Silence filled the tiny cabin. The candle flicked in the draft of wind coming in from the door. Their shadows moved like monsters on the walls. Jasmine nodded and stepped out of Vicky’s way.

Chapter Break

“You need to call her and work it out.” Jen said. “They are in love, Vicky. What the fuck? Who are you to judge that?”

“I’m the daughter and the ex-girlfriend that’s who—“ Vicky snapped.

“That’s ridiculous! You haven’t given a hoot about Jett since you were about 16, and even then all you did was fight with him and complain to me about what a nuisance he was.”

“In some countries she would be old enough to be his mother!”

“So what?” Jen replied. “I happen to know Rich’s son isn’t infatuated with you just because of your charming personality. Have you done that subtraction?”

Vicky stared out the window. She knew she needed to forgive Jasmine. She knew it was more a matter of stubborn pride than anything else, but there was something else that had weighed on her mind even more than that conversation.

Vicky tapped her fingers on the counter nervously. "You know I... I should probably talk to you about what I remembered that night that I saw them together."

"If you are talking about the thing with Clay, then I don't want to hear it. Thanks to you Jasmine has taken me on as her new project."

The line was silent.

"I don't feel good about my part in all of that."

"Let's not get all Hollywood family drama here, okay?" Jen said. "It's all said and done and to be honest I'm not open to any fucking discussion about that pervert. He's rotten down to the bone by now and let me tell you thinking about the worms taking up residence in his skull makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"But I let it happen."

"I told you not to tell anyone!" Jen snapped. "Besides your head was so far up in the clouds Vicky, you had no real idea of what he was even doing."

"It feels awful to think about what you have gone through."

"I'm not interested in a pity party, Vic," Jen said impatiently.

"I let it go on...for so long."

"I threatened you!" Jen burst into the phone. "Have you forgotten that?"

"It still wasn't right. I should have stopped it."

Another silence.

"And I should have stopped it too," Jen said finally. "The fact that I was worried about getting in trouble with the Colonel just goes to show how crazy we all were. I thought God would be mad at me if I didn't do what he said. How's that for brainwashed? They both deserved to die, and they did."

"I don't remember anything clearly," Vicky said.

"You're lucky."

Vicky felt emotion trill through her body. "I didn't do the right thing then, and even later, when you started. When you started making money, like that. You were so young, Jen."

“Stop blathering like this is something that happened yesterday. You think I’m still carrying on about this. Fuck you! Just because you are ready to heal doesn’t mean I’m supposed to get all down and spiritual with you.”

Vicky shook her head. “I know, I’m just saying that I didn’t do the right thing.”

“Listen, I just thought that Clay was the Colonel’s best friend, and that he was normal and that he knew what was supposed to happen to little girls.”

“Me too,” Vicky said.

“By the time I figured out he was sicko it was too late.”

“But why didn’t it happen to me?”

“I made him promise not to touch you.”

Vicky’s stomach dropped. “Oh my god, Jen.” She had hid Jen’s secret so deep inside her that after awhile, even she had forgotten where to look for it and now that she remembered, the idea seemed impossible. How could she have been so certain that what she was doing was so right, and why had it taken so long to realize how horribly wrong she had been? Tears ran down her cheeks. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Whatever!” Jen yelled into the phone. “Like I told Jasmine, I’m not interested in all of this past life crap. Shit happens! Life sucks! Both of you act like bad things don’t happen. Wake up Vicky! Life is full of ugly, horrible, wrong, unfair, bullshit! If this is the first time you are figuring it out then consider yourself lucky.” Vicky heard a horn blaring. Jen’s voice came back on the line. “Fifteen years ago I might have been interested, but right now I’m thinking about Rich, and this my book deal and this is the last time I want to have any blabbering about all of this shit, okay?”

Vicky took in a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Vicky breathed in deeply and wiped her eyes with her finger.

“How did your meeting with the governor go?”

“Oh, he wasn’t too pleased about the book deal, but there is really nothing he can do about it.” Jen laughed. “I told him I’d exaggerate his penis size and he felt much better.”

“Did they decide on a title?”

“Secrets of Success: A Call Girl’s Diary.”

“I’m so happy for you.” Vicky said. “Any word from Rich?”

“No,” Jen’s voice drifted off, then came back on the line.

“I’m sorry.”

"I thought I could pull one over on him and I got caught," Jen's tone was matter-of-fact, but Vicky could tell that Jen was hurt. "I deserve to be jilted,"

"You don't deserve—well," Vicky grimaced. "Maybe you do, but still, if he really loves you, then maybe he'll come around."

"Doubtful."

"Stranger things have happened."

"Mom got a letter from Jett."

"Where is he?"

"Special Operations in Kabul."

Vicky sighed. "I know you think it's my fault he went back."

"Jett will always be a Marine. He's not fit for civilization anymore. If it wasn't you, then it would have been something else."

"You think so?"

"I gotta go," Jen said. "I've got client waiting for me."

"Wait—I thought you quit the —"

"Real estate!" Jen smacked her gum. "All these foreclosures are really pumping up the market. I closed three deals last week."

"Bye!"

"Bye."

Chapter Break

Vicky walked down the driveway to the mailbox. Mr. Dooley was in the cul-de-sac waiting for Dukey to sniff around the gate post. Vicky noticed a package on top of the box.

"Hi Mr. Dooley," she waved, then pulled the mail from inside.

"Manny tell you I saw that mountain lion?"

"He did." Vicky nodded.

"I tracked him my binoculars again the other morning—early—just at the sun came up. He seems to be sticking to the same path underneath the big Oak tree just passed our property line."

"Manny said you have a rifle."

Mr. Dooley nodded. "He won't come near my property as long as I have Dukey."

Vicky's face brightened. "Manny and I decided we are going to get a dog."

“Hope it’s not a yapper. Small dog is a good meal for a big cat like that.”

“German Shepard,” Vicky smiled. “I went up to that police dog facility Topanga Canyon last week.”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“They train guide dogs and police dogs,” Vicky hesitated, but decided against telling him about the documentary she was filming on the dogs. If it wasn’t Great Dane related, Mr. Dooley wasn’t interested. “We signed up to get one of their puppies.”

“Those dogs need training”

“I joined the training program,” Vicky smiled widely. “They said I was a natural. They are going to let me work with up to three dogs at a time,” Vicky couldn’t repress her enthusiasm. “Did you know there is a special certificate and the dogs can fly on a plane, visit rest homes—”

“You know anyone who is blind?” He squinted up his eyes even though they were standing in the shade of the Ginko Tree.

“No.”

“I’d go for the police dog training then.”

Vicky smiled and nodded, then waved. “Have a good afternoon Mr. Dooley.”

She turned and looked at the postmark on the package. Northern Pakistan.

At the kitchen table she cut open the box. Inside was a stack of letters addressed to Jett Grayson. Vicky sat down at the table and lifted the stack of mail. The letters dated back to the year she graduated from high school. She turned the bundle over in her hands. Did he really think she’d want to read her own mother’s love letters? Was he crazy?

Four hours later, Vicky set the last letter on the couch, leaned back against the cushions, and burst into tears. “They were so in love,” she moaned out loud in the room. “How could they have waited so long?” Her voice echoed through the empty house. She sniffled loudly. Her outburst in the Jett’s cabin seemed so horribly wrong now. Her mother had written the last letter the day after Vicky had gone home. It read:

“My love,

The way Vicky found out was worse than I could have ever imagined. My heart breaks for her. How could I be so selfish? I’m afraid Gladys is right. I’ve been praying for salvation, but I’m feeling more hopeless than ever before. When I think of you there surrounded by so much danger, I nearly lose my mind. You can’t possibly do another tour, Jett. Not when there are so many other opportunities for you. The fire station called looking for you this morning. I let them know that

you went back-but told them it would only be for a short time. Please come home Jett. I'm ready to leave this place. I have signed on to deliver the first aid kits in person to Africa. The church was looking for volunteers, and while they won't let me attend as a member of the congregation yet, Pastor Rick, is allowing me to go on this mission, and I am very grateful to him for letting me go. I leave in December. Please let me know before then how long you will be gone, and when you will be coming home. I can't last without news from you. I'm so sorry that I ruined everything for us. I want nothing more than for us to be together. When I told you I needed to wait for Vicky's forgiveness, I never imagined that you would think that meant we had no chance together. How could you go back when we were standing on the edge of hope? Now I am alone on the edge of an abyss. I have never felt this way, Jett. This distance between us unbearable now—not again, please. I thought you said never again. Please forgive me, and please come home."

"One hour," Doris chimed. "Pick up the kids in one hour." Vicky stood up from couch, and wiped her fingers across her cheeks, smoothing away the tears. She felt like a bubble had just burst inside her. Before today the idea that her mother could fall in love with her ex-boyfriend seemed ludicrous, disgusting—someone's idea of a sick joke, but after everything she had just read their love was reassuring some how. He had come back from war to be with her. They had loved each other for nearly two decades. She had never been in love with Jett—not like that—maybe not ever.

Vicky remembered the light of Jett's flashlight as he guided her down the trail the night she flew home. After he opened the car door for her, she pulled it shut and turned on the ignition.

"You really messed with my head, Jett," Vicky said after rolling down the window. She stared through the dirty windshield and the dim grey line of asphalt.

"I'm sorry, Vicky. I fucked up." Jett's voice was heavy with emotion. "They don't go over this kind of thing in basic training."

Vicky nodded and placed her hands on the steering wheel. "Yeah, well. It would have been nice if instead of giving me a concussion, you would have told me what was going on."

He turned his face towards the brightening sky. "She drinks tea, Vicky, and I drink coffee. We sit together and talk about landscaping and the war and the church and groceries." He shrugged. "If any of the guys knew this is what I came back for they'd have me dishonorably discharged."

Vicky watched his face.

Jett shook his head. "I came back here because I thought she was finally ready, but after what happened today—I can see it's never going to happen." His eyes shined in the dim light, and he turned his face away from Vicky.

"Her world is inside that church," Vicky said, feeling a strange calm descend upon her. "She's going to try to get it back."

Jett exhaled a burst of air, followed by a quiet laugh. "Yeah." He nodded. "I think you're right."

Vicky bent her head down and rested it on the stack of letters. Would she have waited that long for Manny? Was that what he had been asking her to do? To wait for him to come home? To believe in him? To know that some day they would be together again?

Vicky went back into the kitchen and lifted up the receiver. "Call my Mom," she said to Doris. A minute later Jasmine picked up the line.

"Mom, it's Vicky."

"Vicky," Jasmine breathed. "I'm so glad to hear your voice. How are you? The kids? Is everyone okay—"

"Mom. I want to tell you I'm sorry about freaking out. I'm glad you love Jett. I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy."

Jasmine's voice cracked. She tried to speak again, but only a squeak came out. "And as for the thing with Jen. I am the one who held the secret." Vicky said firmly. "I am the one who made sure you never suspected anything. I thought I was protecting her—" her voice cut off. The memory was blinding and painful. "You can't blame yourself for what I didn't do."

Jasmine inhaled sharply into the phone. "You listen to me now Vicky. You were a child. Children should have to make decisions like that. You didn't understand. I know that you loved your sister more than anyone, and she knows that too."

"Thanks, Mom." Tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "I told myself that I was going to be strong and not start blubbering about all of this again."

Jasmine laughed. "You could always—"

"Talk it over with the Lord?" Vicky smiled.

"I guess you've heard me say that before."

"Yeah, a few times," Vicky laughed through the tears.

"I think it's so amazing how you keep your faith...in him..I mean...so much time has passed and you are still sure...that you love him."

"I will always love my Lord Jesus Christ—"

"I mean Jett."

"Oh, well, it's not something I really choose to do Vicky. When your heart guides you, then, well, things are really clear and...I don't know, honey. I just feel blessed to have experienced what love I have in my life. That's really all we can do, Vicky is to try to be thankful and to let love guide us."

"Yeah," Vicky felt the tears dripping down her face, but she didn't try to stop them this time. "I'm going to write Jett a letter telling him that I'm sorry and that I'm not upset anymore and that I want him to come home."

"I," Jasmine's voice cracked and she took in a deep breath. "That would mean a lot Vicky. Thank you."

"Bye mom."

"I love you Vicky."

"I love you too Mom."

After picking up the kids. Vicky sat down to write the letter to Jett. She pictured him somewhere in Afghanistan and remembered the story he told her about the field of poppies. Images of women, and children flowed into her mind. Dirt streets and open markets, she wondered what life felt like there, so close to war, a place where violence could erupt around every corner. How did it feel to live with that kind of fear? Vicky closed her eyes and pictured him there, standing on a corner with a few other Marines. Take care of him, she whispered. He is there to help. Her mind filled with the faraway faces of the people living half way around the world. Take good care of them, she thought fiercely this time.

Dear Jett,

I am sorry for overreacting at your cabin. I am glad you and my mother have found love. I am no longer angry except with myself for driving you away. I want my mother to be loved. I want you to be loved. Please come home in time for the wedding. The only way to end a war is to stop fighting. She is waiting for you, and I think she is finally ready.

Much Love,

Vicky

She placed the stamp on the envelope, and left the envelope on the kitchen table. Why hadn't she ever thought to write Manny a letter? Vicky carried a pen and paper out to the backyard, and sat down on the chaise. She pictured Manny wearing his flip flops and surf trunks working with the camera crew in Indonesia. Instead of this vision of him imagined time and time again, Vicky forced herself to picture boarding the airplane, Iris and Ira in tow.

"I'm going to Africa," she whispered. A shimmering excitement accompanied the vision of empty beaches, grass sprouting from a water logged field. Giraffes and elephants walking across the tundra.

"Dearest Manny," she began, although she was tempted to write,

"To the absentee father of my children,"

But she refrained. What was the point? She had given up being angry at the same time she had given up trying to change him. The air was warm and a faint whiff of grass hung in the air. Vicky sneezed. The noise triggered a movement in the grass just beyond the fence. Air caught in Vicky's throat as she squinted trying to see what was in the grass. The grass moved again in the shadow of the oak tree. For a full minute Vicky stared at the dark shape in the grass. The head and ears were the most unmistakable shapes. The black body was harder to see. Even staring right at the cat, Vicky argued with herself that the body was actually a charred log—until it moved. There! The black tale curved upward towards the sky. The mountain lion's body jerked twice, then it hunched back down over a rock, panting. Vicky stood up slowly and moved over toward the pool house. Inside on the shelf she took out the pistol.

She held the gun up in front of her, and moved towards the fence. Looking through the scope, Vicky struggled to center the red line of the tracer on the cat's head. She could see now that the cat wasn't lying near a rock—it was the carcass of a deer—a large deer. She moved the scope back to the cat's head. Two black rimmed eyes focused on her through the lens. Vicky moved her finger to the trigger, her heart pumped hard, and she had to remind herself to breath as she watched the cat struggle with its fresh kill. It's teeth clamped on the neck of the deer. The cat yanked its head and body backward, its ears flattened against its head as it pulled the heavy carcass through the grass.

The gun shook in her hands, still she didn't pull the trigger. That night in the desert, there had been an instant when Vicky had felt the cold press of death. She had seen a satellite image of herself taken from space, then zoomed in so close that there was nothing but the black desert, the

tribe of coyotes and the red desert dirt smudged on her cheeks. Something about that perspective had stuck with her, helped her forgive Manny and Jett and Jasmine. That night she had let go of the idea of how her life, her marriage, her children, her home, her whole world should be. Shards of her old life lay scattered all around, and she wasn't going to pick up the pieces.

Vicky lowered the gun. She watched the cat slowly disappear into the shadows of the wooded canyon. When all the light had drained from the sky, Vicky turned and walked toward the yellow glow of glass. Elia opened the sliding door, "Buenos Nochas!" she called waving her hand. Vicky waved back and smiled. "Gracias Elia!" Through the windows, Vicky watched Elia's mother shuffling through the house carrying a bucket, she heard the noise of her children. A new baby had been brought in tonight and Vicky had set up a bassinette in the sewing room. The babies shrill cry made her smile. Her mind shifted back to the mountain lion struggling to drag the heavy carcass through the grass. The rustling grass had quieted beyond the fence. Darkness hid all the creatures that lived in the canyon. She looked up hoping to see the sparkle of stars like she had that night in the Nevada desert, but the drawn curtain of night blocked all the light, and made even the brightest stars invisible.

The End