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Dovetailing

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DOVETAILING

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Nicole A. Hughes

May 2012

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DOVETAILING

by

Nicole A. Hughes

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

DOVETAILING

by Nicole A. Hughes

Dovetailing is told from a limited third person point of view focused on Samantha. She is the protagonist in a group of four primary characters who include Matt, Adam, and Dylan. They are the four employees of Furniture Town and are present throughout the entire novel. Stan the Sidewinder is a local UFC fighter who is visiting his hometown (the setting of the novel), Las Cruces, New Mexico, for a promotional tour. Las Cruces is a small, shabby, and largely Catholic town near the border of Mexico.

Samantha's struggle to find her way while surrounded by underachieving college-aged men and an increasing awareness of the falseness and staging of reality to which she begrudgingly contributes during her job as salesperson, are the primary narrative arcs. A large part of the novel is spent introducing and exploring the setting of both Las Cruces and Furniture Town, since a major theme of the book is the fetishization of commodity and how this affects relationships and individual perspectives of their lives and the world in which they live.

Dylan, Adam, and Matt, although secondary characters, have their own full narrative arcs. Dylan is attempting to work through new and unexplored homosexual feelings; Adam is recently divorced and struggling to maintain a close relationship with his young son; and Matt is dealing with an injury that has forced him into a different career and caused tension in his romantic relationship with Leslie.

Ultimately, this is a story about the way real human relationships are subordinated and tainted by our relationships to the throwaway items (and jobs) of contemporary life.

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To Jess, Andrew and everyone who read drafts and lent a critical eye

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PREFACE

In *Dovetailing*, I explore the art and theory of the writers that inspire me. I borrow techniques and ideas from my predecessors with very specific purposes in mind. The authors most influential in my own writing include Don DeLillo, Sam Lipsyte, David Foster Wallace, Jennifer Egan, Robert Coover, and Joy Williams. These writers vary stylistically but are still considered preeminent postmodern writers. The postmodern techniques we use in our writing extends to structure, humor, popular culture, reexamination of classic subjects, characterization, fetishization of commodity, and setting.

Structurally, I am influenced by Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, which is set in an otherwise realistic contemporary world that is visited by "the toxic event" (107). The toxic event is never concretely identified but rather serves as an event in which the reader can directly experience the dysfunctions of the media and the community in this type of situation. The narrator has the following conversation: "'What are they calling it?' He looked at me carefully. 'The airborne toxic event.' He spoke these words in a clipped and foreboding manner, syllable by syllable, as if he sensed the threat in state-created terminology" (117). In *Dovetailing*, the setting is contemporary Las Cruces, New Mexico, and the metaphorical "toxic event" is Samantha's furniture stealing rampage. Just as in *White Noise*, one long chapter in *Dovetailing* occupies the middle of the book to give specific focus to the "toxic event."

In service of humor, *Dovetailing* spends some time on the antics of the furniture store employees and the bizarre and unfamiliar inner workings of the industry. This

approach is similar to that of Sam Lipsyte in his novel *The Ask*. *The Ask* is a humorous look into Milo Burke's world of university advancement, specifically his stagnation and inability to secure a benefactor. Lipsyte delves into the novelty and obscurity of Milo's workplace to keep the reader entertained and give a seemingly boring and familiar topic a fresh approach. When discussing the type of people who buy into the ideals of charity, Milo's boss tells him, "you pay a whore to make you feel like a man, you fund a philharmonic to make yourself feel like a refined man" (136). Humor in *The Ask* is also driven by the perception and voice of the narrator: "Vargina was a miracle, and that's maybe the only time I have used the word sincerely. Her mother had named her the word her name resembled. A sympathetic nurse added the 'r'" (6).

Dovetailing also examines the absurd effect popular culture has on our society and uses hyperbole to express it to the reader, much like in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" from David Foster Wallace's collection *The Girl with the Curious Hair*. The story focuses on a McDonald's commercial actors' reunion "arranged by J.D. Steelritter Advertising... a spectacular collective Reunion commercial, the ribbon-cutting revelation of the new Funhouse franchise's flagship discotheque" (235).

Dovetailing's Furniture Town secures UFC fighter, Stan the Sidewinder, as its mascot, and it becomes apparent that he is two people -- his public and private persona. Stan the Sidewinder is more symbol than character, and he spends his time "fucking off," much like DeHaven K. Steelritter who accepts:

Prime wages for doing the bare minimal and spending the rest of his time fucking off (apparent)? He represents the Product. Is Ronald McDonald. Professionally. This son, this sty on the cosmic eyelid, this SHRDLU in the cosmic ad copy *represents* the world's community restaurant. (246)

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan creates a layered reading experience, one of the hallmarks of a successful contemporary novel. The narrative can be read as fun and rock ‘n roll with several funny and scary observations of contemporary society as well as a philosophical consideration of the effects of the passage of time on an individual’s personal narrative. *Dovetailing* deals with many of the same appropriated ideas Egan examines. Egan reexamines classic subjects by sublimating Proustian ideas including the concept of involuntary memory and the tendency of physical objects to bear a unique burden of memory and uses them to reinforce the novel’s “passage of time” motifs. For example, the reader first meets Alex in the beginning of the book as Sasha’s inconsequential date. We return to Alex in the final chapter when he agrees to do parrotting for Bennie. As a result of his new job, the interactions, and the places he goes, he begins to remember small pieces of his date with Sasha:

Alex had first heard Bennie Salazar’s name from a girl he’d dated once, when he was new to New York and Bennie was still famous. The girl had worked for him - Alex remembered this clearly - but it was practically all he could remember; her name, what she’d looked like, what exactly they’d done together - those details had been erased. The only impressions Alex retained of their date ... The answers were maddeningly absent - it was like trying to remember a song that you knew made you feel a certain way, without a title, artist, or even a few bars to bring it back. The girl hovered just beyond reach, having left the wallet in Alex’s brain as a kind of calling card, to tease him. (311)

Many years have passed; both Sasha and Alex are married with children. Alex desperately wants to complete his memory, but he cannot recall his actual sexual encounter with Sasha and is left with a connection that his mind cannot complete (338). It is not until he experiences this same world with the rest of his senses that the memories start coming back to him:

He leaned in to the buzzer, ever electron in his body yearning up those ill-lit angular stairs he now remembered as clearly as if he'd left Sasha's apartment just this morning. He followed them in his mind until he saw himself arriving at a small, cloistered apartment -- purples, greens -- humid with a smell of steam heat and scented candles. A radiator hiss. Little things on the windowsills. A bathtub in the kitchen - yes, she'd had one of those. It was the only one he'd ever seen. (339)

In *Dovetailing*, I continue to explore these classic subjects. Samantha is preoccupied with people's valuation of objects -- specifically furniture -- as an intricate part of identity. Throughout the novel, Samantha and Matt use sales techniques to manipulate consumers. The mattress product sheet they receive on page 62 showcases how fond memories are used to invest the customer emotionally in the product.

Much like Robert Coover in his short story, "The Babysitter," from the collection *Pricksongs & Descants*, *Dovetailing* fetishizes commodity. Individual fantasies take on qualities similar to television, and it can be argued that television becomes an expression of sexual fetishism. Television is produced to satisfy the need and desire for easily obtainable and unrealistic fantasies. The babysitter's (who remains unnamed) action of surfing through television channels is paralleled to Jack's love for, and desire to be intimate with, her and the different fantastical episodes he imagines: "kissing Mark, her eyes closed, her hips nudge toward Jack. He stares at the TV screen, unsure of himself, one hand slipping cautiously under her skirt. Her hand touches his arm as though to resist, then brushes on by to rub his leg. This blanket they're under was a good idea. 'Hi! This is Jack!'" (216).

The central presence of television in "The Babysitter" also demonstrates how popular culture has transformed the American public into people with short attention spans and the desire to have everything all at once. Jack wants the babysitter physically,

emotionally, and intimately without having to put any long-term thought into it. While the babysitter is in control of the television remote, Harry, Jack, and Mark have many brief and varying fantasies about her that mirror what she is watching on television. Through their fantasies, Coover accomplishes more convincing emotional portrayal than characterization through traditional conventions of realism. In addition, Coover brings together raw (or human) behavior and processed (or fiction, film, and television) portrayals of behavior. Coover clearly understands that processed fiction is too clear cut in its representation of action, human emotion, and, most importantly, character. The scenes in “The Babysitter” cannot be neatly categorized as drama, murder mystery, or comedy (as television shows can) because Coover builds intertextuality between his story and television, which creates deception in the narrative.

Joy Williams novel *The Quick and the Dead* is set in the Southwest and describes a landscape similar to that in my novel. *Dovetailing* begins with four or five pages of setting to place the reader in a visual landscape. Williams takes the same approach. Her novel begins:

The winter had not brought rain and there were no flowers, there would be no flowers. Still, the land in the spring of the year when Alice would turn sixteen could not be said to be suffering from drought. The desert knew no drought, really. Anything so habitual and prolonged with simply life -- a life invisible and anticipatory. What was germinative would only remain so that spring. What was possible was neither dead nor alive. Relief had been promised, of course. (5)

The tone is largely set by description of the physical surroundings. In *Dovetailing*, the dreary small town setting is used to show how reality differs from the false front contemporary society is so determined to create.

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When the barrel cactus experiences a freeze in an otherwise warm climate, it becomes damaged and grows multiple heads. Armored spikes keep everything in their place and are the only things standing still when the thirty-mile per hour winds hit. The barrel cactus, even when damaged and from afar, showcases the natural, raw beauty of the southwestern landscape— mesquite bushes, yuccas, purple mountains, but has disappeared behind the newly-erected facade of what developers and retired Californians believe the southwest should be. The raw hand-formed adobe houses that sat in Old Mesilla turned into million dollar renovations with old historical doors, wood chipped and initials of first loves carved in, replaced by a thousand dollar artificially distressed replica from Spain. Red lava rock gardens installed over naturally wild front yards. Cacti planted that aren't native to Las Cruces. Real coyotes run out of town by overdevelopment, so now pottery sculptures of coyotes, quail, and jackrabbits have taken their places.

The city was divided into three sections. The southernmost section, towards the direction of El Paso, housed the University and a large suburb. The University was one of the only places to see lush green grass. They maintained it for the cows. Driving into the suburb, you passed a deserted golf course spread with brown grass— grass dead for decades. Also in this section of the grid, but headed further east in the direction of the Oregon Mountains, was another sprinkling of houses accessed by dirt roads. The larger plots of land made it look less like a suburb and emphasized untamed yards of natural landscape. Deming lay to the West past Old Mesilla and the giant roadrunner trash

sculpture. The relatively deserted mall—only the cheap perfume store, food court, and tacky, poorly made club-clothes pushers left behind—could be considered the center of the city. Not much of a hub really. A few elderly men and women still made the rounds. The women walked with small weights in their hands and jogging headbands around their foreheads. Their arms pumped, pumped, pumped, and their small, jagged hips wobbled back and forth. The men sat on benches watching nothing go by. The city outside the mall was sunny but seasonless, and because of this the mall would never completely close down. The store displays were the only incontrovertible documentation of the seasons: cardboard santas and snowmen signaled the winter; “school’s out” paraphernalia and window displays full of swimsuits, bunnies, and chicks represented springtime; and now, construction paper cutouts of variegated leaves embodied the fall. Being outside would fool you into thinking it was another insufferable summer: no trees for leaves to fall from, eighty degree weather, and no one out on the sidewalks for afternoon strolls.

If visits to the mall left you sick, you could always discern the most recent holiday by the tombstone decorations. Las Cruces took pride in its many cemeteries. The groups Samantha socialized with in high school had visited them at night and told ghost stories. Her favorite housed the lowest-income dead. The most prominent graves were fenced in family plots, but most of the tombstones were strewn with dollar-store decorations in the style of pin wheels and fabric flowers. Many of the tombstones were DIY and crumbling. What had struck Samantha the most though was the color. Bright representations of every color in the spectrum made it look like the happiest place on earth. Crucified Jesus’ looked out of place among the red and yellow wreaths and the

children's birthday party decorations. The most decrepit tombstone was two pieces of weathered 2x4 nailed and tied together in the shape of a cross, the deceased's name etched into the splintering wood. A yellow, silk bouquet jutted out of the dirt mound. Something beautiful in the intimacy of that cross made Samantha reconsider cremation.

Las Cruces was still primitive enough that its citizens could see the stars at night. The city was determined to keep it this way. The tallest buildings were three-stories. The rule was that no building could block another's view of the purple mountain skyline. There were also rules about light pollution. The city was currently engaged in a voter battle about whether to build a planetarium. Unfortunately, the building would be erected on "A" mountain, and the lights from the parking lot would pollute the city's best place for viewing stars. Despite the illimitable scope of the sky, the bad outweighed the good for Samantha.

Worst of all, behind all of it, was the extreme poverty. Retired Californians moved by the droves to buy up what they considered cheap housing. The people who lived here, who had always lived here; the things that grew here, that had always grown here were replaced by newer, cleaner, more polished versions of themselves—these fake replicas of history out of the reach of the people and the things they were replicating. The feeling Samantha had about the city was extending to Furniture Town.

Good furniture lasts forever. Furniture Town actually sold good furniture, a lot of it, often to the same people over and over again. People who wanted, not needed it. Lately at work, the warm, happy feeling Samantha got from the solid construction of a single piece of furniture was dampened by the staging and manipulation of it all. Bright-

eyed families came in to look at new kitchen tables, and the sales associates sold them an image of an average middle-class family. In Las Cruces, world culture and the desire to conform hadn't changed much since WWII.

This new perspicacious Samantha rested in the shadows of the Samantha who loved her job as a sales associate. Her disapproval of staging was momentarily eclipsed by the disapproval she felt watching her fellow employees move dining and bedroom floor models to the side to create a fighting arena during peak customer service hours.

Samantha sat cross-legged on the customer service desk located in the center of the store. From her perch she had a wider view of the showroom—a simulacrum of a house. The bedroom models were warm and inviting with cool, crisp linens and soft yellow lighting. The dressers and nightstands were made of solid wood, except the cheap Relica set showcased just before the college semester started. They all shuddered at the idea of particle board but the parents loved it (only for their kids of course). The store was divided with invisible lines into several scenes: living room areas consisting of couches, coffee tables, sofa tables, TV stands, large entertainment consoles, and loads of cardboard accessories—flat-screen TVs, telephones, etc; bedrooms comprised of bed-sets, dressers, nightstands, benches, chests of drawers, and, of course, loads of accessories; kitchens containing curio cabinets, tables, chairs, china cabinet, etc.; and offices saturated with desks, office chairs, filing cabinets, and speckled with cardboard laptops, printers, monitors, and more. It was a shiny, glossy catalogue come to life. Everything was perfectly clean. Samantha often joked that the only thing missing was the all-american family (actors of course) “living” out their lives in the staged spaces.

In an attempt to palliate her fears of an actual guest walking in on this unprofessional turn in her workplace, she turned the TV behind the customer service desk to the local news station. This same time everyday, the news showed videos submitted by locals. Yet another five-year old covering a John Mayer song on his guitar. After too many child prodigies prodigy just becomes the general state of being for all children. Prodigy becomes average. Jess, her best friend from middle school, was something of a prodigy. She and Samantha had metamorphosed hysterical crying into laughing and back again the day Jess had found out she'd been accepted to the University of Washington School of Medicine. Jess had asked Samantha to come. That was six years ago. Samantha was twenty-four now, and she wasn't much closer to joining Jess in Seattle. Just yesterday Samantha had stared at her completed, but not yet submitted, U of W application. Samantha panicked each time the cursor had hovered over the submit button and wondered what she would do if they didn't accept her. Inevitably, she would avoid possible disappointment and close the window without submitting, except for that one time. That one time she had ignored her feelings and clicked submit; an error message had popped up and she'd decided it was a sign.

“Wait, wait, wait. Let me just move this last end table. Ok, FIGHT,” Matt yelled. He stood on the seat of an office chair with thumbs and forefinger cupping his mouth.

Dylan and Adam moved in a circle opposite one another with their hands up in the air. Neither man had serious talent, but Adam put on a show just like the best UFC fighters. Dylan only had his stare; its intensity suggested he might devour Adam. It was the same look Samantha's fellow sales associate, Matt, wore when trying to close a deal.

Like a predator attempting to kill his prey, Matt was skittish and afraid to move in the customer's presence. Moving in for the close too soon would guarantee the wallet wouldn't materialize.

Matt, the assistant manager and current acting manager (Gilbert was in Europe), hopped around precariously on top of the office chair seat. He looked huge cheering on the fighters. Six feet three inches and the height of the black leather Beta Series desk chair easily made Matt the boss of Furniture Town. He picked a good chair to stand on. His height made him look wiry, but Samantha imagined to see him naked would be to see something finely sculpted. The chair, like the Matt that Samantha envisaged, was of incredible quality. The black leather covered the sturdy solid oak frame. The easily adjustable lever allowed Matt to choose his height at just a push or a pull.

"Come on mother fucker. I'm not scared of you," Adam said. Adam was the opposite of Matt physically. He was much shorter and had a lot more muscle mass, making him look stocky. He proved his staying-quality daily by working in the warehouse moving furniture. Dylan also looked like a stereotypical warehouse guy. He was an ex-football player, and you could tell he was built once, but now he just looked big and fat.

Dylan managed to get his chunky tan arm over Adam's neck, and using his elbow to pull him down, wrestle Adam to the ground. Then Adam bit him.

"You can't bite," Dylan whined. Matt laughed hysterically in the background.

"I'm fighting with the true original spirit of the UFC. Wikipedia it dude," Adam said.

“Kick him in the groin, Dylan. Counterstrike. Find it, find that counterstrike,” Matt said.

Matt hopped off the chair and sat next to Samantha on the customer service desk. Samantha came up to his shoulder. She was appreciative of her petite frame but constantly cursed her long, dirty blonde hair for being stringy, liking it only once, momentarily, when her ex-boyfriend described it as beachy. In retrospect, it may have been the nicest thing he had ever said to her. Even Jess could tell he was a jerk, and she was all the way in Seattle starting her neurosurgery rotation. Samantha wondered if she had some kind of psychological disorder where misery was preferred to the unknown. Whenever she'd thought about leaving, and tried to imagine what else she was qualified to do with her life, she'd fall victim to a panic attack. Her breathing would come too fast for her to inhale any useable oxygen. She didn't have much keeping her here except her parents and her ragtag female role in Adam's son's life.

When Samantha had dropped off her application, Bernice, the token girl who worked there before Samantha, had pulled her aside.

“You really don't want to work here,” Bernice had said.

Samantha had fidgeted under her gaze and the pressure of Bernice's thumb on her shoulder. “Actually, I just want a job. Anywhere pretty much. I mean, I've worked at some pretty crazy places” -

“Whatever, your life.” Bernice had shrugged and walked back to the customer service desk.

Samantha was happy she hadn't listened. She was perfectly capable of functioning in this setting.

"What do you think?" Matt asked.

"Intriguing bout man," Samantha said.

The guys thought Samantha was cute because she played along with their fighting. She alternated between thinking they were immature and sexist, and flirting with Matt.

How had her mom known Samantha's dad was the one? Samantha couldn't imagine her father ever being as immature as Matt or Dylan or any of the other men she'd dated. Her parents had met over thirty-five years ago at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Her father had been going to pharmacy school there, and her mother was working on her master's degree in early childhood education. Her mother had been at the library when her father's friend came up to her to ask her out. Samantha's mother, Sandy, looked straight past the friend and locked eyes with Samantha's father, Randall. From then on, Sandy and Randall were inseparable; their mutual friends even nicknamed them Sandal.

Samantha didn't believe that you should go to college just to find a husband, but she wondered if it would increase her chances. Even more than finding a partner though she desperately wanted to find meaning in her life, and just like her mother and father, she believed this meaning could be found at school. She could clearly picture the ivy growing around the old medieval bell tower at the center of her imaginary school. Students walking from class to class; she'd be surrounded by people who existed in her

space to share ideas, debate issues, better themselves, and contribute something to the world. She knew Harvard, Yale, and Columbia were out of the question, but she could happily picture herself at a state University if it had the same look (old stone gargoyles would help). University of Washington was a perfect fit, and Jess was there.

A couple walked through the door. “What the hell is going on” was written all over their faces.

“Welcome to Furniture Town. How can I help you?” Samantha asked.

“We need kitchen chairs,” the couple said. Samantha noticed the wife’s skin was pale and smooth, and her face so shiny she looked like she lacquered it in the mornings.

“Why choose our chairs you ask” -

“We didn’t ask,” the husband interrupted.

Samantha knew all of their customers believed the superior construction of their furniture apocryphal, so she always started off like a lawyer trying to prove her case even though most customers would never admit they questioned the quality.

“I will show you.” Samantha led the couple back through the carefully staged room: turn right at the bedroom sets, straight back through the kitchen sets, don’t go over to the living room sets, and arrive at the great wall of chairs.

The husband stared up at the great wall. It was literally that. There was a very elaborate pulley system that displayed six of each type of kitchen chair completely saturating the full height and width of the wall.

“We don’t use glue, Krazy or Gorilla.”

“Not crazy?” the husband questioned. He winked at his wife.

Samantha ignored that. “No. We don’t use anything but epoxy.” Samantha watched the husband peer and squint at the joints of the chair.

“Looking for flaws?”

The husband shrugged.

“No flaws...”

“No.”

“Do you see any flaws?” Samantha asked again.

“No,” he said. Grabbing the wife’s arm, Samantha led her hand across the sensually, smooth grain of the finely lacquered, maple wood seat. The wife bit her bottom lip. Her husband coughed. The wife pulled her arm away abruptly. It looked like she had to use a little bit of force.

“Sir, turn it upside down.”

“Upside down?”

Samantha loved this part. When she had first started working at Furniture Town, Matt had taken the liberty of training her in furniture acrobatics. Every time she stood on a kitchen chair, she remembered Matt holding her firmly by the shoulders. It was at once both comforting and exhilarating for Samantha to feel Matt’s hands on her. If she had to pinpoint the exact moment she fell in love with him, her first lesson would be it.

“Upside down, a ‘v.’ The back and the seat touching the floor, a ‘v,’ see?”

“Yes, I see now.”

Samantha could see three pairs of eyes peering at her over the living room sets. Everyone loved to watch the chair test.

“Stand on it,” Samantha demanded of the husband.

“I won’t stand on it.”

“Honey, please don’t stand on it,” the wife said.

“Left foot here, right foot here. I’ll do it too, on this other chair.” Demonstrating for the husband, Samantha stood between the rungs on the same kind of maple lacquered kitchen chair.

“I can’t watch, I’m going to look at the sofas,” the wife said.

“If I break it I’m not buying it. I want it noted that you are forcing me to do this.” The husband said this loudly, turning around looking for witnesses. He climbed aboard his chair, mirroring Samantha.

“Now jump.”

“What?”

“Like this,” Samantha said. Gripping two of the legs for balance, she jumped up and down. She timed her jumps carefully.

The husband jumped once. “Impressive,” he said.

“No,” Samantha said. “Jump harder. Higher.”

The husband jumped again and again. He started to scowl.

“That’s it! Get angry!” Samantha said.

“Get off, Henry,” the wife said, approaching them from behind.

The couple left with six chairs in the Tundra, which Samantha loaded up herself. When she came back inside, Adam was cheering on Matt and Dylan’s exchange of blows.

“Did you make a sale?” Matt asked from his corner of the “ring.”

“Set of chairs to a nice couple, you?”

“Does it look like that’s what I’m doing?”

Jess had told her about a doctor she was doing her residency under who only spoke to them in sarcasm. The first day, Jess had put in an order to give one of the patients a painkiller that they’d happened to be allergic to. Once she’d realized her mistake she’d set it straight; regardless, the doctor put a huge smile on his face, patted her arm, and told her: “that’s great female student number three. Killing the patients is our mission here at Northwest Hospital.”

The breeze was the first harbinger of their next customers. The man wore a flannel red and black checkered shirt and jeans tucked into boots despite the 80 degree weather outside. The man’s bear-like presence dwarfed his wife. Adam and Dylan went to work moving china cabinets after some prompting from Samantha. Matt took the couple. Salespeople always alternated taking the customers that come through the door, regardless of the potential sales, and for good reason too. Before Matt and Samantha (even before Bernice) there had been Sam and Terri. It was rumored Terri had been cursed with a very small bladder and was making no fewer than three trips to the bathroom an hour. She’d never be in the bathroom long, but Sam would jump on the customers that came in while she was away, regardless of who’d had the previous customer. Management saw this as taking advantage of someone with a disability and had written up a thirty page rule book on customer rotation etiquette.

“We’re looking for a bedroom set and I don’t want none of that low quality crap,” the man said. He knocked on the top of the nearest dresser -- an action of arrogance and ignorance.

“Great,” Matt said, “let me show you the Colorado Shaker.” Samantha loved watching Matt sell things. Just like her, he could tell what a customer wanted as soon as they spoke, what style they were and where to start them.

The man knocked his big, hairy knuckles against the top of the russet finished cedar dresser, and Samantha saw Matt cringe. “You know you can’t actually tell the quality from knocking on the wood,” Matt said, his voice firm but not insulting, “let me show you something.”

“I know how to whittle me some nice wood pieces so don’t you go talking no fancy salesperson shit,” the man said. Samantha noticed Matt had lost the burly man’s better half, probably to sofa country.

“Look at this English dovetail,” Matt said, pulling out the dresser drawer. “These drawers are lined in velvet and have ball bearing glides so the drawer opens easily.”

“Very lush,” the man said. He ran his hands along the velvet lining. Being turned on by Matt’s sales technique put Samantha on edge, but she couldn’t help notice his genuine connection to the furniture. Eventually, every time, he was able to put the customer at ease, silencing their wariness of salespeople with his wet and glossy eyes.

Matt and the man ran their hands over opposing corners of the drawer fingering the smooth interlocking boards that made up the dovetail.

“It’s substantial,” the man said.

“Best of all the joint doesn’t require any mechanic fasteners,” Matt said.

“Wrap it up for us,” the man said, “we’ll take it right now.”

Samantha cringed. So perfect up until now. The large warehouse deceived customers into believing rows and rows of furniture sat waiting to be purchased, when in reality, the warehouse only housed recently shipped orders waiting to be picked up by their purchaser.

The man’s face hardened with Matt’s explanation, and his hand balled back into a fist. “I want to buy something from you and you can’t even sell it to me? What kind of place is this?”

“When you want this large of a set we place an order, sir, and it takes three to four weeks to get here. They build it new for you once it’s ordered.” Samantha shook her head. The part about building it new was a lie. Matt seemed unable to keep himself from telling it. He’d said these same lines only a few months before, and the customer had excitedly made some special request about the wood’s finish, which would’ve been simple if Matt’s lie was true. He’d just nodded his head: yes, yes, yes. The furniture was ordered, found in the central warehouse, shipped with the regular finish, and everyone, except Matt, had held their breaths in hope the customer wouldn’t notice the difference. He had of course. Matt had offered no explanation and refused to admit his lie. “Sir, I’m sorry you are having buyer’s regret, but this is absolutely the exact same as what you ordered.” Matt had said. Dylan, Adam, and Samantha had hid between two entertainment centers and listened to Matt’s fervent denial. Matt’s voice had stayed completely calm, he’d spoken slowly, and he’d looked at the man seriously and without

anger. The man had looked back at Matt with contempt. "I requested a special finish and this isn't it." Matt nodded his head in agreement with everything the customer said, so it was clear he was listening intently. "I'm not arguing with you sir, but it's simple fact we do not take any custom orders." It'd been obvious in the customer's facial expressions that he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Those other people were with you. They're witnesses. Where are they?" Samantha, Dylan, and Adam had sucked in their breaths and hunkered closer to the entertainment center they'd been hiding behind. "It's just me here sir. I don't know what to tell you. I wish I could help. We certainly don't want any unhappy customers here at Furniture Town." The man had given up and taken the furniture with him, frustrated he wasn't making any progress. Maybe it was that customer's fault Matt hadn't learned his lesson.

The burly man in front of him now didn't make any special request. He demanded this set or no set. The usual protocol was to point out all of the imperfections the floor models endured from use. Matt turned around while the man looked at the unattainable furniture.

"Do you see any imperfections?" he whispered to Samantha. She shrugged. She couldn't see anything from where she sat.

"Why don't you take a day or so to think about it. We will be happy to help you if you change your mind."

The man nodded, found his wife, and left.

Dylan and Adam took a break from lifting the large china cabinets, empty of china, back to where they belonged to mark up the fight stats book. Dylan had won

again. He was in first, Matt in second, and Adam in last. Samantha reasoned it was because Dylan had the most anger issues. Adam kept his anger, along with all of his other emotions, guarded. Samantha had only seen him honestly happy on the nights he had his son.

Dylan and Adam went back to lifting. Samantha directed them to arrange the scenes in a specific way. Each scene was carefully constructed to represent individual rooms. The customers had to believe they were in a dining room. If they were to see a dresser, next to a desk, in front of a china cabinet, the mind would fragment, and the customers wouldn't be able to picture the pieces in their own home. Mismatched furniture was the worst possible situation, and so the sets were sets, and styles were grouped and displayed together. The separated scenes ranged dramatically in colors and textures from dark cherry wood to light maple and fragrant pine. Some of the glass was modern and straight, and others was traditionally beveled with gold piping around the edges.

"Closing time." Rocking back and forth, Adam and Dylan sang with their arms over one another's shoulders. The sky outside was already turning black. It was that beautiful time of evening where the only hint of the sun was the incomplete blackness of the sky.

"Who's going to follow me to the bank?" Matt asked.

"It's on my way home," Samantha answered, "I'll do it."

"Doesn't anyone else find it strange TWO people have to take the deposit to the bank?" Adam asked.

“Calling for backup, over, man trying to steal large Furniture Town night deposit, over. Save me Supermantha,” Dylan joked. He pretended to be stabbed and fell to the ground. Samantha glared at him and then smiled and stepped on his neck.

“You double crossing bitch,” Dylan laughed, grabbing for her ankles. Samantha helped him off the floor, and Matt locked up the door behind them.

At the bank Matt got out of his car and signaled for Samantha to do the same. “Do me a huge favor,” he said.

“Sure. What is it?”

Matt reached into his trunk and pulled out a large black garbage bag. “I can’t keep this at home, and it’s spreading bad vibes riding around in my trunk. Can you hang on to it for me for awhile?”

“What’s in it?” Samantha asked. She saw it was double knotted at the top; there was no way she could peek without tearing the bag open.

“No trust man?”

No, Samantha thought. “Yes,” she said. “Just curious.”

“It’s my old fireman gear. Leslie doesn’t understand why, but I need to keep it.”

“Of course.” She felt giddy with the thought of Matt sharing something this personal with her. “Let me know when you want it back. I’ll keep it safe.” Samantha smiled. Matt looked at her strangely. Maybe I was a little too enthusiastic, she thought.

Matt thanked her and drove off. Samantha left the bank parking lot and looked out her rearview mirror. The black sedan had been following her since she’d left the bank. She pulled into the parking lot across from the historic church in Old Mesilla, El Patio located just across the gazebo-adorned lawn, and lifted up her blue work polo. She wore a black tank top underneath. While she was removing her hair tie and fluffing out her hair, someone knocked on the passenger side window.

“Why hello,” she said, rolling it down.

“Hey baby, ready for some shots?” Dylan asked. He wore the same sweaty black t-shirt from earlier today.

“You betcha.” Samantha felt distant from herself, and she knew it was happening again. She was dating someone less than perfect for fear of becoming too happy. Nothing was guaranteed because that happiness could be ripped right out from under her, and she wasn’t sure she’d be able to cope. She’d seen how much Adam’s divorce had devastated him. That was not for her, she’d decided.

“Andele jotos,” the doorman yelled at them, “I can’t extend the special just because you’re my buddies.” Arturo used to work at Furniture Town, in the warehouse, but was let go for not being gentle enough with the furniture. They’d went through a lot of touch up markers that month, masking anything that could be perceived as an imperfection.

Samantha waved at Arturo and skipped over a little puddle in the street. Dylan wasn’t smiling.

“Sientete asshole,” Dylan said to Arturo. He slammed Arturo against the adobe brick exterior of the bar. “I’m not a fucking joto.”

“He was just kidding Dylan,” Samantha said. She swept her fingertips across Dylan’s shoulder. She wanted to tell him that he was too uptight but she didn’t bother.

Dylan dropped Arturo and smiled. “I’m just kidding too man. Scared you right?”

“You can’t scare me bro.” Arturo fist-pumped Dylan, and Samantha saw his smile waver for just a moment. Samantha tuned out their conversation and took in her surroundings.

Everything else in Old Mesilla was closed: touristy boutiques selling turquoise jewelry, Billy the Kid paraphernalia, serapes, and tequila bottles with worms in the bottom or lollipops that could be licked to the scorpion in the middle. Stuff nobody who lived in Las Cruces actually owned. El Patio was on an inside corner and looked dusty and old like a saloon out of a cowboy movie. The only thing missing was a tumbleweed and a breeze. The lawn was proudly marked with a sign from the National Council of State Garden Clubs—home of the Butterfield Overland Train stage line.

If Samantha believed in such things, she'd be able to feel the spirits of the dead who lingered, waiting to be celebrated at the Dia de los Muertos festival every year. Tucked into a corner alcove of an alley between shops was a shrine. A crocheted Virgin Mary hung above small clay statues of the same, and unlit candles framed a woman's picture. These memorializing items sat atop a fireplace mantle on two small roman pillars with pots of vibrantly colored flowers flourishing underneath. Wooden beams in the adobe at the top of the alcove gave the shrine a sufficiently old, spiritual feeling. The only history the shrine couldn't share was the identity of the dead woman.

Death permeated the square. The building where Billy the Kid was tried and sentenced to hang proudly announced itself. Inside, they sold postcards and keychains and other tourist tchotchkes. If you were to miss all of these signs of death, there was always the church across the square to remind you. A white sculpture of an angel with a halo of thorns prayed for the names listed on her pedestal—*lest we forget they have made the supreme sacrifice.*

Samantha and Dylan went inside. She bought a bucket of coronitas in ice and lime wedges at the bar. Dylan scoped around for a table. Samantha slouched back in her chair a coronita in one hand and the other tapping the table in tune with Liquid Cheese; her eyes diminished into annoyed slits as Dylan attempted to move closer and closer to her. He'd started by sitting next to her with one arm rested loosely on her shoulder, but then had positioned his chair behind her so both arms could rest around her shoulders, and his legs could straddle her chair.

"I can't see your face," Dylan said.

"That's what happens when you sit behind me."

He moved across the small, round table made for two and stretched his legs underneath, so both his feet came in contact with her bare toes. The lights were down low; it hardly mattered who was sitting next to her.

"Watch the band, Dylan."

"I'd rather look at you."

"It's dark, you can't see me."

"I've memorized your face. The dark doesn't make a difference."

Samantha ignored Dylan and focused on the band. Behind them was an old adobe wall with a painting of an orange sun setting behind purple mountains. El Patio was painted sloppily over the landscape, and a huge sombrero acted as the dot over the "i."

Samantha had moved to Las Cruces when she was too young to even remember. The only memory she did have was one her parents continually denied ever happened, even now. Mom, dad, Fred the hamster, and Samantha had moved in the middle of July.

They'd unloaded the UHAUL and left Fred in the garage, in his cage among the boxes, while they went and got lunch. When they'd returned, Fred was dead. Samantha's mom had told her that Fred must have gone out exploring and he would probably be back soon, but Samantha could see Fred's furry body balled up at the bottom of the cage. He wasn't moving. Later, Samantha understood the 110 degree weather probably killed him. He was used to the snow and freezing temperatures of Montana, so the dry, dry, heat must have been quite a shock.

“What're you think about?” Dylan asked.

“I'm thinking about leaving you. You're too needy,” she snapped. Dylan looked shocked, and Samantha regretted lashing out at him. She considered whether to apologize and tell him about how lonely this town made her and how badly she wanted out. “I'm sorry. I think I'm just tired.”

Dylan took a sip of his beer, “Maybe you should go.”

Samantha was surprised Dylan was being so firm. She'd expected him to forgive her immediately.

“Sorry again, really. Can we talk later?” Samantha wondered what was wrong with her. She was trying to save them from a breakup when that's exactly what she had wanted for a few days now. She wondered if sometimes her mouth wasn't connected to her brain.

Dylan shrugged. “We'll see how I feel.”

On the drive home, Samantha thought about how truly inert her life had been. Things had looked promising in high school. She was fourteen when she got her first job

as a summer camp tennis, golf, and swimming coach and only sixteen when she'd started her job at Blockbuster, but after a five-year stint there she'd kept running from job to job never spending longer than a year at each. Insurance sales, real estate sales, hardware sales, put any word in front of sales and she'd probably worked it. Now, at twenty-six, with some education under her belt, she felt a suicidal need to get out of town. For some reason unknown to her, she kept doing the opposite. Jess called her once a month and continued attempting to shame her into moving to Seattle. Samantha found herself telling Jess about how happy she was; about the new guy in her life; about her new job; about how much her parents needed her; and recently, about how Adam was using her as a surrogate mother figure for Joseph. "Using you," Jess had said, "that's the key word."

Samantha turned into her parents' driveway and lost her train of thought. She pressed the brake, and her chest constricted. Her breaths came short and fast, and even sitting she felt numb, tingly, dizzy, and faint. Inhales stuck in her throat, and a high mewing noise squeaked out with her short, forced exhales. She couldn't feel the rest of her body, yet she felt pins sticking her skin and restricting her muscles. She looked down to make sure her head was still connected to her body, and her vision blurred.

She woke up in bed with her mom and dad standing over her.

"You haven't been meditating," her mom said.

"Don't pick at her," her dad said, "you'll give her another."

"I'm fine. Please. I'm just tired."

They reluctantly left her side. Samantha looked at the clock. She called into work and left a message: "This is Samantha, I'm dying, I won't be into work. More

money for you Matt.” She tried to put a positive spin on it. She remembered Matt and sarcasm’s incompatibility. She picked the phone back up and dialed again. “I’m not actually dying Matt. Just sick. The flu or something.” That should clear it up, she thought to herself.

Dylan texted her. He felt like seeing her after all. She got back in her car and drove to his apartment complex behind the Sonic Drive-In on El Paseo. El Paseo was a hotbed of cop cars and wannabe ghetto kids, cruising back and forth, back and forth, in their tricked out Hondas. The accessories they added cost more than the car itself: a ten-year old Honda Civic with Lamborghini doors, stereo systems, and underbody neon lights that illuminated the road beneath them. She pulled up beside a black Miata with a neon blue light reflecting out the back. The driver’s seat was reclined too low to see anything, but a white elbow resting atop the rolled down window.

Dylan’s apartment complex’s rusted, blue staircase loomed over her. She walked up the first couple of steps, and the smell of stale puked mixed with the hot dog smell of Sonic. Samantha knocked on his door, trying to avoid looking at the rancid pile only inches from her foot.

“What’re you doing here?” he slurred. The door was opened just wide enough to let out a crack of light.

“You texted me,” she said, but he had already gone back to the couch and rolled up in the fetal position. It seemed a little too soon in the failing of their relationship for drunk texting, she thought. She shut the door behind her. A portable TV in one corner sat atop a stack of phonebooks. He used beanbags for seating and a futon for his bed,

both from Wal Mart. Wal Mart littered Las Cruces with white plastic bags; blue lettering and yellow smiley faces spreading over the desert landscape. Sometimes you could catch one floating in the wind. Samantha's mom had declared it the state bird. Samantha had told Dylan this, and Dylan had repeated it at a party. When people had laughed, Samantha knew the brightness of his face meant he had felt clever. He wasn't often clever.

“Do you have any gatorade? You should drink something.”

Dylan groaned, and Samantha opened his fridge. Two taco bell burritos (one half-eaten) and some orange juice were it. They actually took up quite a bit of space in Dylan's mini-fridge. Only a two burner stove, no oven, inhabited his kitchenette. Since Dylan was still unresponsive, Samantha wandered into his bedroom. She saw an unopened box of condoms in his yawning top drawer and decided there probably wasn't anything worthwhile to look at in there. She went back to the living room and sat down next to Dylan on the futon. The only visible sign of life came when Samantha touched his arm, and he slammed his fist back against the wall in resistance.

“Keep it the fuck down,” the neighbor yelled, pounding on the adjoining wall. The walls didn't keep out any noise, which had made Samantha slightly self-conscious but also louder during sex with Dylan. Dr. Cabo had told her it was very healthy to have conflicting feelings and desires. She wanted a good guy, but she was afraid of dating a guy better than herself, so she set her sights low. She knew just as well as Dr. Cabo that this meant she had a very low opinion of herself, but they were working on that in sessions. Dylan wasn't a complete loser, she thought. He'd never graduated from high

school; however, he'd played football for Armadillo until his grades dropped too low, and they kicked him off the team. His mom had supported him for a little while, but it was hard on her; she still had two sons and three daughters, and there just wasn't enough money. Dylan's father had skipped town long ago. After the money stopped coming, Dylan went on a job search and landed the first one he applied for, warehouse guy at Furniture Town. Arturo, a loyal football friend, had hooked him up.

When Samantha and Dylan had first started dating, he would show her his old football pictures. She had to admit he used to look pretty good. His fat had been muscle then, and his big physique had been much more toned. Showing her the pictures was the only time Samantha had seen him completely unself-conscious.

Dylan was snoring, and Samantha figured it was hopeless to try and have a conversation with him, but was satisfied he'd make it through the night okay, so she left.

3

Adam had called Samantha after Matt announced she wouldn't be in. Adam had told her not to worry about their plans with Joseph that night, but Samantha was looking forward to it. She'd lied to Adam, telling him it turned out to be food poisoning and she would be fine by the evening. Samantha slept, ran a few miles, took a bath, and slept some more in an attempt to relax. She woke at 9:00 p.m. and headed over to Adam's at 9:30. She got there right as the babysitter was leaving.

Even though it was way past Adam's four-year old's bedtime, Joseph came thrashing out of the house into Samantha's arms.

"Sam, Sam," he yelled. "Dad, Sam, Sam's here!" Adam came out to pry Joseph off of her.

"Thanks again for coming," he said. "Joseph's become quite smitten with you."

Since they'd started this routine, Samantha had learned that Adam only got to see Joseph for two weeks every month. Anita and Adam had married when they were seventeen. When Anita had turned twenty-three she became pregnant with Joseph. Adam had shared this information freely. He imparted the rest of the story slowly and with more reluctance.

Samantha sat in the living room where she could see Adam's whole house. The room was flanked by the kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. Adam carried Joseph into the home's one bathroom and hoisted him up in his arms. Samantha could see his coffee colored Latino face forcing a smile into the mirror. Joseph giggled and then stopped.

"I want to look like you daddy," he said. Joseph was an exact replica of his mother; his hair the color of snow with an almost transparent face broken up by dark sparse freckles. The freckles didn't come from Anita though. They came from Patrick, Joseph's real father. Based on Joseph's looks, Samantha had maintained suspicions, but it took Adam months before he'd confided in her. Anita had become pregnant after having an affair with her co-worker Patrick. She'd broken down later and told Adam five months into her pregnancy. According to Adam, he'd immediately forgave her.

Samantha doubted this. Anita never got over her guilt, so she initiated the divorce after Joseph was born. “For your own sake,” she’d told Adam. “You deserve better.”

Samantha could see Adam was struggling with what to tell Joseph.

“You don’t want my big ugly face, fantasma.” Adam tickled him, and Joseph screeched. “I like being the ghost, daddy.” Joseph craned his neck around the door frame and yelled “boo” at Samantha. He threw his hands up in front of him and stuck out his tongue. Samantha smiled and waved.

Adam had first proffered Samantha over six months ago. He was worried that Joseph would suffer without a traditional family structure. He didn’t have time to date, so he did the next best thing. He asked Samantha to play mom just one night a week. She loved kids and had immediately said yes. Adam had ritualized the night before Anita came to pick up Joseph by keeping him up all night. This seemed like the best day for Samantha to come visit. Sometimes they would watch Disney movies, and sometimes, like tonight, they would make an ice cream sundae bar and play with crayons. Adam told Samantha that he and Anita had worked out a deal, and that she was fine with Joseph being up all night and pumped full of sugar.

Tonight, Adam brought home some packing material—large, thick pieces of paper. “Can you spread out the paper on the floor, Samantha?” Adam asked. “I’m going to set up the sundae bar.”

Joseph screeched again with glee and opened the hall closet. Samantha gently laid out the crumpled paper until it covered the living room floor. Joseph got out the

jumbo pack of crayons and sat anxiously in the middle of the floor, the red crayon quivering in his hand, trying to wait patiently for his dad to finish.

“Sundae bar is ready guys,” Adam said.

Samantha admired Adam’s handiwork spread out on the kitchen table. Three different kinds of ice cream, chocolate syrup, caramel, strawberry topping, chopped walnuts, whip cream, sliced banana, sprinkles, gummy worms, and, for the adults pleasure, espresso beans.

“Whoa dad, this is the best one ever!” Joseph said. He sped through the door with the red crayon still in his hand, leaving red marks across the door frame. Adam smiled. Samantha guessed he preferred the small messy hurricane that was Joseph over the sterile quiet that replaced him when he was gone. Adam made a sundae for Joseph while Joseph told him what toppings to add (a little of everything). Samantha and Adam both ate a small scoop of vanilla ice cream, his with espresso beans and hers with strawberries. They stayed in the kitchen until Joseph finished eating.

“Time to draw,” he screeched, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. Joseph picked up his red crayon and sat back down in his declared spot. His smile disappeared with concentration, and when he hit an especially tough angle or detail he’d stick out his tongue, biting it with his teeth.

“I’m drawing a fire truck.”

“It looks great buddy.” Adam sat and watched Joseph draw, looking up from time to time at the movie playing on TV. Samantha couldn’t think of a single subject to draw, so she looked around the room for ideas. She went to work drawing Adam’s plaid couch.

“What is that?” Joseph said pointing.

“I’m drawing your dad’s couch.”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why?” Adam added, smiling. “That’s not very imaginative.”

“Well, it’s going to be a magic couch, of course.”

“What kind of magic?”

“You’ll just have to wait and find out.”

Joseph fell asleep before that happened. Adam and Samantha watched him drool on his unfinished fire truck. His white eyelashes flickered with each inhale and exhale.

“Thanks again for doing this. He really likes having you here, and it seems important for him to see me interacting positively with a woman. Anita appreciates it to, you know.”

“Of course. I enjoy it. Joseph is a special kid.” Samantha meant it when she said she enjoyed being with Adam and Joseph, but she didn’t like the awkward moments after Joseph fell asleep. She wasn’t physically attracted to Adam, but watching him be a father and feeling like a part of a family where she was the adult was provocative. She knew what Dr. Cabo would say: you enjoy feeling like you have a family without having any of the actual commitment. Knowing more about Adam than anyone else at work made her feel confided in.

“Tell Joseph I’ll see him next time.” Adam always walked her to the door; she wished he wouldn’t.

“Good night,” he said. She waved awkwardly, and he shut the door behind her. Monotony punctuated the long drive home. Adam lived on the other side of Las Cruces (usually only passed by people driving to Albuquerque). The drive, although long in distance, always went by without incident. She was often the only car on the road. The mountains provided a backdrop for the tall, plastic, yellow “M” that interrupted the scenery like a lone tree. It was hard not to look at when it was the only object at eye level, looming larger and larger as Samantha made her way back into the city. Once closer, the McDonald’s sign was no longer the only noticeable landmark. Two painted water towers, one with cowboys herding cattle, the other with Spaniards and missionaries on horses, tried hard to be less like water towers and more like naturally occurring murals. In the dark the painted people looked real; giant explorers making their journey in the dark, destined to forever make a continuous loop. Samantha wished she got to pass the three metal crosses on her drive home. Lit up with christmas lights at night, the physical manifestations of the city name were condemned to the outskirts, away from any place of interest. The city loved material representations of culture and ideas, so why didn’t they have more love for their crosses? It probably wouldn’t matter if the crosses were more centralized because even in the exact center of the mall’s roof, genuine history wasn’t enough to make her appreciate Las Cruces.

Her fear of rebellion, and she considered leaving the city a form of rebellion, originated from her desire to please everyone around her. Even those people that didn’t care about how polite she was or wasn’t. She appreciated quality and professionalism, but she would never call someone out if they gave her bad service. Dr. Cabo had told her

many times that she holds herself up to a standard no one else does, and since she didn't hold anyone up to her own standards they were a ridiculous framework around which to build her life. She'd always thought Las Cruces would be full of friendly, service industry people. They were in the southwest. People here were laid-back, they lived on Las Cruces time; therefore, it wasn't abnormal for someone to show up twenty minutes late for their commitments. Instead, the people here were rude. The service industry recruited primarily from high schools, and adolescents didn't give a shit if your fork was clean or if you got the side of ranch you asked for. So much so, Samantha's family had a running bet going. Every time they went to a restaurant they'd put a dollar aside and ask the server for a side of ranch. They usually had twenty or so dollars put aside before a waitress would remember to bring it. The waitress who did would get it all as their tip. This intimately sarcastic humor of her family intensified her fear of leaving. The hard, gray concrete of the driveway welcomed her home.

4

Samantha was flossing her teeth in her car with the door open when she heard it.

“Aaaayeeiii.” The coyote lurked out behind the weather worn adobe bricks holding a limp black cat between its teeth. Samantha felt a certain love for the coyote because of its resemblance to a dog. The skinny legs lent it frailty, and seeing it in front of her recalled the classic image of the coyote howling at the moon. Samantha still hadn’t grown used to the thin, flea-ridden cats that lived in the old Catholic Mission. Though that wasn’t all that bothered Samantha about the decrepit lot. Only a few feet behind the last remnants of the old Catholic Mission was the Rio Grande. Sometime in the past the water (she’d never actually seen it full of water) in the river had picked up all of the rocks and other debris and left an empty ditch with sandbars. Even the snapping turtles had disappeared, burrowing far beneath the mud, waiting until water would return. The sins of La Llorona was the most mainstream myth adopted to explain the disappearance of

water from the river. It was said La Llorona drowned her children in the river, so she could be with the man she loved. She believed that without her children this man would love her back, but instead he continued to reject her, and she killed herself when she realized what she'd done. Her passage to heaven is obstructed until she finds the souls of her children, so she wanders up and down the dried river, weeping for them and the things she's done. The cries of the cats and the howls of the coyotes that loitered in the abandoned mission sounded far too much like the cries of La Llorona to Samantha. She was never one for superstition, but fear was known to destroy her good judgment and lead her to believe even the most ridiculous myths.

Two cars flanked the Furniture Town storefront sign with the oversized chair and desk; singularly blocking the unobstructed Organ Mountain landscape several miles away. Los Mariachis was on the other side of Furniture Town. The restaurant boasted a large plastic two-dimensional sombrero as their sign. Matt had worked out a deal with Los Mariachis a long time ago. He would point tourists in their direction, and they would feed the hungry employees of Furniture Town with plates of pinto beans, spanish rice, and flautas. When Los Mariachis felt especially generous, they would send over green and red enchiladas and cinnamon-sugar sopapillas with plastic packets of honey. Samantha was surprised at the number of tourists who passed through the town, but Matt told her it was a cheap place to stay and in between several larger and more desirable destinations.

Beyond the highway was the Mexican border. The only people going across anymore were high schoolers who couldn't wait for their first Corona and gangsters who

were likely smuggling guns, drugs, or people. The news constantly discouraged people from crossing.

“They really need to tear that thing down,” Matt said, coming up behind Samantha. She looked up at him. Her chest was constricted, and she sniffled to keep from crying.

“Bad allergies?” Matt asked.

Samantha shook her head. She put her shoulders back and inhaled deeply through her nose. Her eyes watered.

He put a hand on the side of Samantha’s head touching her hair. “So you’re a cat lover?”

Her laughter interrupted her careful breathing, and she snorted. Embarrassed, she punched Matt harder than she meant to.

“How is someone supposed to live here without being completely depressed? Everything real is falling down and it’s being replaced with bullshit.”

“Not Furniture Town,” Matt responded, putting his arm casually around Samantha’s shoulders as they walked in through the big glass doors.

Samantha treasured small physical gestures from Matt. Trying to reconcile his flirtation with her and his relationship with Leslie was pointless, but that didn’t stop her from trying. On good days she would tell herself not to be ridiculous; it was just friendly flirting. On her more delusional days she would imagine a future with Matt. Fantasies of him doing something dramatic such as denouncing his relationship with Leslie to be with the woman he truly loved, preoccupied her. Leslie never really got hurt in these

scenarios. She would gracefully tell Samantha not to let him go, and then hug Matt one last time with a single tear falling down her cheek.

Samantha longed to never reach the customer service desk so Matt could keep his arm around her. They stepped up to it, and he turned her towards him and held onto both of her arms.

“Are you going to be ok?”

“A-ok,” she said. Why do these things come out of my mouth, she wondered.

Adam and Dylan arrived soon after, and the four got to work readying the showroom. The number of lights needing to be turned on every morning to spotlight the customers’ dreams was extravagant: floor and table lamps in the office and living room scenes. Some had the small chain pulley, and others simply needed a gentle touch to the lamp’s base. Customers, especially young children, loved switching off and on the lights in the curio and china cabinets. Most of these cabinets exhibited lighting that radiated with just a touch of the door hinge. It eliminated unsightly wiring that detracted from the overall character of the piece. Children liked it because it’s unusual, unexpected, and somehow illogical. Samantha had never seen a house with an actual china cabinet. She was pretty sure no one owned anything like that anymore. Curio cabinets were furniture pieces of a dying generation.

But it wasn’t just the curio cabinets that were old news. Nobody in Las Cruces knew it yet, but all of these separate one-purpose pieces were vanishing. Samantha had seen an expose on HGTV about it. Las Cruces wasn’t in the business of producing anything cutting edge, including furniture design. The wave of the future for Las Cruces

and places like it and the present for big cities was all-in-one, multi-purpose furniture. Chairs that functioned as ironing boards, beds, and when turned upside down with the removal of a panel, a sofa table with drawers. Furniture that considered both function and form, and furniture that didn't look like furniture. Why own a table that looks like a table when you could have a table with wooden tentacles like some living object from the sea? Or perhaps rekindle the popularity of indoor benches by having a wooden tree grow out the side, bringing the form of nature into your home. Samantha had never even dreamed of pieces like these before she saw the TV special.

“Why don't you bring Joseph to work, Adam,” Samantha said, “we could put him in charge of turning on all the lights.” She moved effortlessly down the row of desks, releasing light with the speed of an assembly line worker.

“Missing school and playing with toys is a win win situation,” Adam said. He finished switching on the floor lamps and collapsed on a showroom bed.

“What age is it when going around the showroom floor turning on lights becomes work, not play?”

“When your livelihood depends on it,” said Matt. He poked his head around the mirror of a dresser set.

Samantha didn't believe there was anything about this job that Matt didn't like.

“Alright folks,” Matt said, gesturing for Dylan, Adam, and Samantha to join him by the customer service desk. “UFC will not be held today due to the ‘surprise’ visit by corporate.”

Dylan and Adam groaned with disapproval.

“Don’t be sad boys. I have a surprise for you.” Matt grabbed the life-sized cardboard cut-out from behind a bookcase. He turned it towards the group and put his arm around its neck.

“What the hell is THAT?” Dylan asked.

Samantha touched its face. “Is that our new mascot?”

They gawked at the cardboard copy of local resident and UFC champion Stan the Sidewinder.

“Read the back.”

Stan the Sidewinder, long-time resident of Las Cruces, NM and professional UFC fighter and all around muscle man, has recently been picked up for sponsorship by Furniture Town. Furniture Town spokesman, Ray Raymond, comments on the sponsorship of Stan as a way for the corporation to give back to the community. Stan says that he is “stoked” Furniture Town has offered to sponsor him, and adds that he is looking forward to “getting it going.”

“This is awesome!” Dylan said.

“It gets even more awesome. He’s coming here to sign autographs tomorrow and will be here all week long!” Matt said. He punched Dylan playfully on the shoulder. They jumped up and down like kids who had just been handed tickets to Disneyworld.

“Holy shit! This is like the most exciting work day ever.” Dylan smiled. He punched Matt back.

Samantha was worried they’d keep giving each other good news and the day would end with excessive bruising.

“Rein it in guys,” Adam said. “Adults shouldn’t be seen out in public quite so excited.”

“You guys are excited?!” Samantha asked. “They think that sponsoring some sports idiot is giving back to the community. Give me a break right?”

“I need to tell you a story, Samantha,” Matt said.

“Is this the story about how he came to be?” Samantha asked. “I was here when that customer told us about it.”

“Growing up the Sidewinder was told he would never be a fighter because of his skinny arms,” Matt said.

Samantha protested, but Matt continued the story at length. “Stan’s father had hired the best personal trainer in Las Cruces, but Stan’s arms hadn’t grown. They waited until after high school, hoping his upper half would catch up with the rest of his body, but it never did. By this time, Stan’s father was ill and confined to a wheelchair, but since none of the personal trainers in all of New Mexico had succeeded, Stan’s father took it upon himself to try and train Stan. Ten years ago, you could often see Stan running through an obstacle course of boulders. He’d lift them over his head and throw them to his side, so his father could get through in his wheelchair. Stan’s arms hadn’t grown, but

all of this time, he'd been working on refining the use of his legs, by coming up with new leg-heavy moves.”

He'd just told the story word for word. Unbelievable. She rolled her eyes and moved Stan and his muscles to the front of the customer service desk, so customers could see it when they came in.

Dylan and Adam laughed and retreated back to the warehouse. A corporate visit didn't mean much extra work for them. The warehouse stayed neat like a hospital stays neat (blood, sweat, and tears disappearing into some sterile abyss), and the two of them would have plenty of time to get their shit together since the warehouse was usually the last stop on corporate's visit.

Samantha looked at her reflection in the mirror and extended her hand to herself. In her best salesperson voice she said, “Welcome to Furniture Town. Let me tell you about today's great deals. For pre-approved guests we are offering 6 months of no payments as well as no interest until next year on any purchase of \$5,500 or more. Did you know we are the only furniture store that promises to have the lowest prices and will do price matching if we are ever undersold? So, can I get you started on the pre-approval process? While Matt, our assistant manager, enters your information into the system, let me hear about what you are looking for today.” Samantha's voice twisted away from itself and emerged into something commercial and hyperbolic. She felt like the most polished version of herself, and something about the speech made her feel powerful even though most of the customers would try and stop her halfway through.

“Saying that too many times will knock the wind out of me,” Samantha said. She looked around the mirror at Matt.

Matt cleared his throat and motioned forward with his head. Matt and the breeze described the consumer before Samantha; flustered, she turned around and knocked a lamp off the nearby Brushfire sofa table in magnetic red. “Oh, hello. Welcome to Furniture Town,” Samantha said. She extended her hand out to the first shoppers of the day. She attempted to nudge the ridiculously resilient lamp underneath the sofa table with her foot. If it’s corporate she knew she was screwed. The only way she’d know it wasn’t corporate was if the shoppers turned down the approval process. Corporate never went through with something like that. Their narrative imagination stopped at sending someone in to take mental notes about the store’s employees and process. They would never be able to come up with a false name and all of the other information needed for the application.

The man didn’t even let her attempt the introduction again. “No speak English,” he said.

“Oh, uh, como puedo ayudarle?” Samantha said. Her spanish was clumsy, and she could forget about speaking in anything but the present tense. For past events, she found she could usually get her point across if she said a present tense sentence and motioned her thumb behind her shoulder.

“Los Mariachis?” the woman said. It was obvious she was leaving out unnecessary words for Samantha’s sake.

Samantha pointed next door.

“Gracias.” The couple left.

“Your spanish is soooo bad,” Matt snorted.

“You didn’t jump in to help at all.”

“Wouldn’t it be cruel if corporate required us to learn the script in Spanish too?”

Dylan said.

“Why?” Samantha asked, partly because she truly believed she should know it and partly because Dylan had been irritating her lately.

“Because this is America and if you want to be an American learn to speak English.”

Matt frowned.

“We live right next to the border dumbass,” Samantha said.

“Half the population is Mexican,” Matt added.

“Yeah, your parents are from Mexico, and sorry I called you dumbass by the way.”

Dylan scowled. “We are a universal world now. Everyone else needs to catch up.” Samantha wasn’t sure what he meant, but she guessed he misinterpreted the same radio show about globalization she had listened to this morning on her way to work.

“China and other places far away from us have McDonald’s and Starbucks on every corner just like here,” Dylan added. Now Samantha was sure he’d heard the same report.

“Any of you people work here?”

“Yes, hi. Welcome to Furniture Town. How can I help you?” Samantha asked. She was having serious problems staying focused today.

“That’s it?” The man said.

Matt groaned and put his head in his hands. Dylan skipped and jogged enthusiastically back to the warehouse.

“Oh no, I have more. Let me tell you about the special deal we are holding right now.” Samantha stood up straighter and swept her arms in a grand Vanna White gesture.

“I’m not interested,” pinstripe suit said. She was relieved. Saved again. She couldn’t afford to make the introduction mistake repeatedly. The next customer was sure to be corporate.

Pinstripe suit pointed to the bedroom set next to him.

“You’re interested in this bedroom set?”

He ran his fingers over a contemporary silver statue. A man and a woman, but really more like two slender snakes, one with breasts, their arms and feet intertwined with the bodies in the shape of a heart.

“Are your accessories for sale?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“I need this statue so my wife knows how I feel about her. It’s our anniversary.”

“Use your words,” Samantha said.

The man stared at her in shock, as if she were the tyrant and he was her tyrannized. Tears looked ready to roll from his eyes, and Samantha immediately regretted her outburst.

“You could write her a poem,” she suggested, satisfied no tyrant would ever have such an idea.

“Women love poems,” Matt added.

The man nodded, too choked up to say anything, and walked out. Matt looked at Samantha puzzled.

“You’re really feisty today. What’s up?” he asked.

“Sorry, I don’t know,” she said. They often sold off accessories if they could get double the price, and Samantha wasn’t really sure why she didn’t try to sell it to the man. She picked it up. It was very heavy and she had to hold it with two hands. The statue embodied all of the things she imagined about her adult life: the closeness the silver woman had with the silver man; the weight of their relationship; and the simple elegance of the design was how she imagined her house. She pictured the statue on her imaginary fireplace mantle above the hot flames. Several inches of snow coated the large lawn outside. She tried to picture a man on the couch beside her, but she couldn’t, so instead she imagined Matt there. They were snuggling under a soft throw. Maybe she’d knitted it herself.

“Only two more hours to lunch,” Matt said.

“Thank god. I’m getting a headache.”

“Irritable. Something must be bothering you.”

“It’s this guy. You don’t know him.” Matt took her word for it. “We’re having problems.”

“What kind?”

“The regular kind. He’s annoying me.”

“Why do you suddenly find him annoying?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“So you don’t know.”

“Ok, I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong with you women?”

Samantha wasn’t sure whether to laugh or get angry. Moving past irritable into angry was not a strength of hers. She wasn’t sure what people did when they were angry. Yelling was out of the question. She couldn’t hit her boss too often (not hard anyway), so she just laughed.

They jumped up on the customer service desk across from each other. Samantha spun her hair around her finger and wouldn’t make eye contact with Matt. It didn’t matter anyway because he wasn’t trying to look at her. He was looking through the customer book. The customer book was used as customer rotation backup. Many customers showed interest in particular pieces but didn’t purchase right away. Once, Samantha had worked with a large family who needed to furnish their entire house. She’d recorded every piece they picked out on a loose sheet of paper that she kept in her bag. The customers had come in to make the actual purchase on her only sick day so far this year. Sure they hadn’t asked directly for her, but she’d wondered why Matt didn’t investigate the fact the customers knew the names of the pieces they wanted without even looking at them before they made their purchase. The sale had been over \$10,000, and Samantha had been furious. Not only would that sale have meant a major commission; it

also would've won her the sales competition for the month. The prize being a free spa weekend. Matt didn't need a free spa weekend. The month she did win most sales, they'd sent her a basketball. That's apparently what happens when you win in March.

Since Samantha didn't know how to express anger, she'd cried a lot when she found out Matt had made the sale. Matt had looked stunned and avoided her if she had even the slightest gloss to her eyes, but Samantha, and as it turned out Gilbert, hadn't believed he was quite as surprised as he pretended to be. So Gilbert started the customer book. Now if customers came in, before swiping their credit card, the customer book had to be checked. The sale could still be made, but the appropriate employee number had to be used if the customer was already spoken for.

"Hey, HEY," Matt said. Samantha looked up, startled.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been checked out for awhile now. You want to take lunch first?" Matt asked. "You didn't miss anything."

"Ok, me first," Samantha replied. She watched Matt's image reflected in the glass doors as she walked out to her car.

Samantha drove to Dr. Cabo's. She'd been going for awhile now. They'd started with weekly appointments, but recently they'd decided Samantha's improvement meant they could meet once a month instead. Samantha was beginning to wonder if that decision was a mistake.

"What makes you think anything in the world was ever original or has ever been real?" Dr. Cabo asked. Samantha was irritated when Dr. Cabo echoed her exact words

back to her as a question. He always told her what she was feeling, whatever it was, was perfectly normal.

Samantha's feelings were vague, and she had a hard time expressing herself. "I want people to stop pretending."

"Pretending what?"

"I don't know. Pretending to be something they aren't. Why bother hanging on to what the fifties told us a real family was?"

"But you said you are upset that people don't all sit down and have dinner together. That they value objects and information that have no real connection to them over the things and people that are right in front of them."

"Maybe it's not so much that that bothers me. It's that people don't recognize it. They don't realize they are faking it."

"And you?"

"I stage and sell furniture to people who think it will change their family dynamics. I recognize that."

"Are you doing anything to try and change it?"

Samantha sat with her hands in her lap.

She got back from her appointment, and then Matt from his lunch break, and they sat silently at the customer service desk. Samantha scratched her arm. Matt picked at the dry skin around his nails. Samantha kept sneaking glances at him. Each time she admired a different part of his face. His lips looked dry and chapped, and she had to hold

back a strong desire to lick them. She studied his eyes. The blue of them was shocking against his lightly tanned face. A crisp, light aqua—the color she always imagined the ocean to be. She thought he looked sad and a little pained. Her gaze moved down to where he fiddled with his knee. Matt saw her watching.

“I hurt myself a while ago,” Matt said.

“How?”

Matt hesitated. “Accident off the job. That’s why I work here now. I can’t do the only thing I was really good at.”

“You’re good at this,” Samantha said.

“No corporate today, I guess,” Matt said.

“I guess not,” Samantha said, her face hot, and her cheeks fire-engine red. She couldn’t rid the flush from her face. That short conversation with Matt made her feel closer to him until he’d changed the subject. Maybe she was projecting too much meaning on this moment.

Matt turned on the TV at the customer service desk. He was searching for news coverage on Stan the Sidewinder’s arrival. It didn’t take very long. The first channel that came on was playing a soap opera, but a message about the UFC fighter’s arrival scrolled across the bottom. A small animated snake methodically curled up, unwound, and revealed its fangs on the left side of the scrolling bar. When it revealed its fangs a message scrolled out of its mouth: Sidewinder is coming... hit paydirt, autographs for the men and kisses for the ladies given as freely as meat at a steakhouse tomorrow at Furniture Town. Don’t miss the beef!!!

Matt switched to a new station where a panel of fight analysts (i.e. random guys off the street and one token woman with a low-cut blouse) were talking about the Sidewinder's moves. They drew circles, squares, and x's over different parts of his body on the video they were watching. The three men were all talking over each other, and the woman just nodded in agreement with them. Samantha could only make out small clips of what the group said: he's not moving aggressively enough here; last year his numbers weren't impressive; he's learned to use his legs to his advantage; opponents will attempt to force him into upper body moves in the upcoming season. Samantha thought he looked puny and weak in the video, but according to what she could understand from the analysts, this year was going to be different. Their expectations seemed ridiculously high, but Matt obviously didn't think so. He nodded like the woman on TV and, at some point, had jumped down off the desk and was attempting some of the Sidewinder's moves.

Samantha wished closing time would come faster. She was bored with watching the Sidewinder on TV.

"Samantha. Get down here. I want to try this one move."

Samantha looked at the TV. On his back, the Sidewinder had his legs around his opponent's neck, and with one quick snap his opponent felled the man onto his side.

"You are not going to try that on me."

"I won't hurt you. I'll be really gentle. Dylan would do this with me."

She wanted to tell him to get Dylan then, but Matt looked so hopeful.

"If you hurt me you owe me all of your commission from this month."

Matt nodded in agreement. Samantha kneeled on the ground at Matt's feet. He was lying down, which made it slightly less awkward, but even still Samantha tried to avoid looking at his body. He put his ankles up on her neck. Without him jerking his legs to the side, she started falling over like she had seen the guy on TV do.

"You're supposed to let me push you over," Matt said. "There's no point if you're going to do all of the work for me." Samantha righted herself.

"What're you guys doing?" Dylan asked. He said "you guys" but he looked at Samantha.

She jumped up, a reflex response, and before she could offer an explanation Matt demanded Dylan get down on the floor since Samantha wasn't cooperating. Dylan looked from Matt to Samantha and then at the TV. He immediately smiled.

"Hell yeah, why didn't you tell me this is what you guys were doing?"

"I'm telling you now. Get down here."

Samantha watched Matt and Dylan grunting and wrestling around on the floor. Five minutes before closing time, she interrupted them. It was the only time she hadn't seen them excited the work day was over. They started closing duties.

Samantha thought about what Dr. Cabo had said and asked Matt, "do you mind if I stay behind for a little while longer? I want to practice my pitch for a couple of these new sets, and I have a hard time doing it if the furniture isn't right in front of me."

"Sure. Don't forget to lock up, and call me when you leave. We'll go get a beer. Dylan, Adam, let's go. Closing time."

His promise of beer made her reconsider staying behind. His offer was far more appealing, but now he wasn't expecting her until later anyway. She decided to do a quick, half-assed job. Disreputability in a rebel didn't seem like a bad thing.

No way could Samantha move the beds, dressers, and some of the larger kitchen pieces by herself; she'd have to work around them. Careful not to break anything—Gilbert would have her ass for that once he got back—she filled her arms with accessories and laid them on the customer service desk: fake plates; copies of statues; copies of things people should have on their dressers, like elegant perfume bottles, old-fashioned combs, and small hand-held mirrors. Then the office room stage: cardboard laptops; pencil jars; and old newspapers arranged neatly on the top of desks. Alphabetically filed folders with labels, empty of contents, were also rearranged.

Stan the Sidewinder stared at her, and Samantha felt surprisingly disconcerted. His two-dimensional head rested almost neckless atop his disproportionate body. Wrapping his large muscular legs around his opponents to bring them down was his signature move, and Samantha could see why. His cardboard cutout had legs like a clydesdale. Samantha thought his upper body, although small compared to his gorilla legs, was probably bigger and stronger than any of her co-workers'. She was ambivalent about Stan signing autographs in the store, but supposed he had to be a nice guy if he was using his fame to give back to the community. She put a pillowcase over his head and went back to work.

The core of the store, the staged sets, would stay the same so it wouldn't be immediately obvious she'd rearranged. She'd have to move the accessories and use their

placement to her advantage. She didn't know where to start, so she picked up the nearest accessory, a bag of fake makeup. No one ever looked in the makeup bag, but just to be thorough Furniture Town had sent it to them with fake makeup. Just in case. Samantha wished she had a car to put this in since that's where women seemed to apply most of it. She decided that wasn't a good accessory to start with and grabbed a handful of cardboard TVs. This would be easy. She put one with each of the most popular bedroom sets on top of dressers and at the end of beds. She took laptops, which had been with the office sets, and added them to the bedrooms as well. Most of the cardboard laptops and the TVs went on the beds. The rest of the TVs she put in the dining rooms. Some went on the kitchen tables or on top of islands; she even placed a few inside the most popular hutches. She was pretty sure no one kept TVs in their hutches, but she didn't have a lot of options. File folders were scattered throughout the bedrooms and the kitchens because there's nothing like bringing your work home with you.

She was already feeling discouraged. This wasn't going to work, she thought to herself. She continued anyway, putting bedroom pillows with the office sets and laundry baskets with the TVs. No one could do chores without entertainment. Why talk to the person you're lying next to when there were so many other forms of entertainment available, like Ipod's at the kitchen table and in the bedrooms. Why have someone next to you at all? She was wishing she could saw the beds in half when she recognized she might be getting a little too worked up.

She quickly placed the rest of the accessories. She needed to take the pillowcase off of Stan's head now that she was finished but had become irrationally agitated by his

presence. What if his expression had changed? The thought was menacing. The only plausible solution to her predicament was the one she decided on. She turned off the lights, closed her eyes, yanked the pillowcase, and ran. She could still see him on the other side of the glass and was surprised how much her hand shook in an attempt to lock the doors.

Sitting in the car with the radio on, she attempted to compose herself. Before she could call Matt, she had to push the ridiculous idea of a cardboard cutout coming to life out of her mind. Her phone rang, and she jumped. Matt told her to meet him at El Sombrero in ten minutes. He didn't ask if she was done.

5

Beers after work with Matt cheered Samantha until he started talking about Leslie. While he talked, she worked on putting a positive spin on their conversation. He was confiding in her. That was something.

“I hurt my knee in a skiing accident. I'd never been before but Leslie insisted I go with her for her family's annual trip to Aspen.” Matt's voice quivered slightly when he

described how his left ski had twisted around, dislocating his knee and permanently damaging the surrounding muscle.

Samantha's positive spin was fading. She sighed, expecting him to go on about Leslie coming to his rescue, but he went back to talking about how his knee injury had drastically changed his life, and Samantha wondered if he blamed Leslie for the accident that took firefighting away from him.

Samantha was a good listener. She maintained consistent eye contact and didn't touch her beer. She nodded at the appropriate places. Not knowing what to say, she wished instead to comfort him physically. If they could just tangle their limbs together and she could brush his ear with her lips then she might be able to save him.

"Samantha? I'm sorry, I've been droning on and you've totally spaced out."

"No, I'm here," she said.

"What about you? How did you end up where you are now?"

"Where *we* are now. You read my resume. You know my history." She hoped she sounded coy. Matt drank his beer and didn't say anything. One of them was going to have to break.

"Can you rephrase the question?" she asked.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Sales was both what she was good at and what she was qualified for. "After high school I went to college for a year and a few months during the summer."

"What did you study?"

"Science."

“All of science?”

“I was an undergrad.”

“I never would have guessed, about the science I mean.”

Samantha wrapped her hands around her beer in a defensive posture but didn't say anything.

“It's not a bad thing. I just kind of figured you would have studied English or communications or something. You're so good at sales. Science seems unrelated.”

“Maybe I'll change my major when I go back,” she said, releasing her beer.

“Go back?” Matt asked.

She wasn't sure this was a subject she should share with her manager since going back to school also meant leaving Furniture Town.

She shrugged, “You know, if I ever go back.” She could've told him about Jess and U of W, but she didn't want to ruin something that was just beginning. If something was beginning.

Matt gave her a suspicious look, but he didn't press the subject.

The TV in the background was set to some local news channel that everyone had been ignoring until now. The waitress turned up the volume at the request of a patron, and the newscaster's voice reverberated through the restaurant. Matt and Samantha looked up to see what the commotion was. A stock picture of a rattlesnake with its fangs showing was pictured in the background of a neon green flashing headline: Las Cruces Welcomes Back Stan the Sidewinder. See him tomorrow at Furniture Town. The pretty news anchor smiled and said, “you know I'll be there.” Newscasters walked a fine line.

Samantha thought her voice was a little too come hither and fuck me all night long and not enough professional journalist.

“Badass!” Matt said. “We get the Sidewinder and the hot news anchor.”

Samantha stared at the newscaster. She didn’t look anything like her. The reporter looked more like Leslie. Samantha frowned at this development. Matt touched her hand, but the physical contact was short lived. His phone vibrated, and he reached into his pocket.

“I should go,” he said. “Leslie’s probably home now.”

“I had fun,” Samantha said.

“You’re too nice. See you at work tomorrow.”

They walked out together. This was the first time Samantha saw him looking unsure of how to say goodbye.

She waved.

Samantha felt small. He saw her like everyone else did. Lost and fragile and always hurting herself at work. She got more bruises walking around the sharp-edged show room furniture than she had during her karate days. Someone honked, and Samantha looked over at them. They were honking at Matt. His reverse lights were on, but he wasn’t moving. They wanted his parking spot.

6

The phone rang. Matt's voice boomed, "Thank you for calling Furniture Town where the highest of quality is guaranteed and service is always delivered with a smile this is assistant manager Matt how may I help you today?"

Samantha smirked at the obscenely long greeting script. Matt's side of the phone conversation echoed through the showroom floor.

"Yes sir, I was in charge that day."

"No sir."

"I didn't realize it sir."

"That's what I thought. Corporate didn't approach us."

"I understand it's not their job to come get us..."

"He sent his wife? I never saw this woman. Are we sure..."

"I didn't mean to question them, I'm just surprised."

"I will hold the meeting. Right now sir."

"Thank you sir."

He hung up the phone and sighed. Samantha knew the news was bad, had to do with the scheduled corporate visit, and that the person on the line was probably Gilbert angry his vacation—traveling through Europe for the last month, doing "market research" in Provence, Barcelona, and Vienna—was interrupted because of his employees' incompetence.

Samantha had already summoned Dylan and Adam to the front. “Emergency meeting?” she asked.

“Passive-aggressive assholes. Let’s not waste our time,” Matt said.

Adam raised his eyebrows in surprise. Samantha saw Dylan avert his eyes from her when she looked over at him.

“Do you feel that?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, I think the store is trembling,” Samantha said.

“It’s an earthquake,” Dylan said.

“We don’t get earthquakes in this part of the country, moron,” Adam said. “Don’t you hear the music?”

They looked outside. A shiny black Maserati had pulled into the parking lot.

“Holy crap, it’s the Sidewinder,” Matt said. He high-fived Dylan in anticipation, but a woman in a navy suit with a feminine cut was the only one to get out of the car. Her hair was up in a tight bun, and she wore oversized shades that she didn’t remove when she got inside. She approached them, said nothing, and motioned their attention out the door. Half of them watched in awe, the other half in confusion, as the UFC fighter got out of the car with two women in mini-skirts, one in a tube top, the other wearing a bra or bikini, on either side of him.

Samantha rubbed her eyes. “Are they moving in slow motion?”

“It’s much more dramatic in slow motion. We’ve been practicing this arrival for weeks now.”

Samantha expected her to gush more, but just as quickly as she had offered an explanation, she went silent and her face went flat. Along with the carefully coordinated slow motion, the driver remained in the Maserati and continued to bump some horribly generic hip-hop music. The car and the doors of the store continued shaking.

A family entered the store from another set of doors and came to stand by the employees. The parents, as if choreographed themselves, each put a hand over their children's eyes. The dad stammered, "we're looking for a kids room set."

"Uh, we don't carry kids furniture," Matt said, not taking his eyes off of the Sidewinder's entrance. He wiped his palms on his khakis. "I recommend going to Oak-To-Go. They have affordable metal and plastic sets." Matt didn't distinguish between wood and particle board like he usually did.

Soon after they left, Samantha broke away to the other side of the store to work with another family. Luckily the business with corporate and Stan kept everyone from noticing the rearranging Samantha had done last night after closing. Samantha asked the little boy to please go sit at the kitchen table. Last night, she'd taped the cardboard TV to the chair he now sat across from.

"This is you eating dinner," Samantha said. The boy's eyes looked wet like he might start to cry.

"We really just wanted to look at bedroom furniture," the father said.

"Shouldn't we sit down with him?" the mother said.

“No!” Samantha snapped. She corrected herself: “No,” she said more calmly. “You and your husband are going to be over there. At the bedroom sets.” She gently led the reluctant mother over to a bedroom scene. “Please sit on the bed.”

The wife sat gingerly on the edge. “Both of you... please,” Samantha said. The husband seemed amused. He jumped on and laid back against the pillows, arranging his arms over his head. The wife moved a little closer to him. She craned her neck. Samantha wished she would stop looking over at her son. She really needed them to concentrate.

Samantha handed the husband a piece of cardboard in the shape of a laptop, “hold this,” she said.

“I thought we were eating dinner,” he said.

“You are. Just pretend.”

“We don’t eat in the bedroom,” the wife said. Samantha wished the wife wouldn’t be so timid. It embarrassed Samantha because she was just like her. If the women’s roles were reversed, this scenario would probably stay the same.

“Why am I on this cardboard laptop then?” the husband said.

“I don’t know. Pretend you’re checking your stocks or something.”

“I checked my stocks yesterday.”

“Okay, then you’re looking at porn.”

The wife jumped out of bed. “I’m done with this.”

Apparently Matt had heard the word “porn” because he ran over to mend whatever damage Samantha had done. He wore a big smile on his face and shook hands with the wife and her husband.

“She’s fooling with you. Wouldn’t you know it’s bring your humor to work day. Just fantastic isn’t it? Your son really seems to love it,” Matt continued as the kid ran over into his mother’s arms. “Can I interest you in our superb new payment plan? The first three months are absolutely free.” It wasn’t apparent if he had smoothed over the damage, but he had distracted them enough to move them away from Samantha who sat perched on a dresser with her arms crossed angrily over her chest. Her “date” with Matt had momentarily eased some of her tensions, but seeing the Sidewinder and the woman who wouldn’t remove her sunglasses and the other two women that might as well have been blow-up dolls brought it all rushing back to her. Now she was madder than ever. She wondered how people could be so stupid. How could Matt and Dylan idolize someone like this? A man who spent his time practicing slow motion arrivals, though it made her even more upset that someone in charge of him had thought the whole thing was a good idea.

Samantha managed her foul mood responsibly, distancing herself from anything remotely irritating. She avoided the Sidewinder and his groupies by assembling furniture. She worked by the entryway putting together a mirror/coat stand/entryway bench and ended up with three “extra” pieces. The bench was a little crooked, but it was the floor model and they’d end up selling it for half-off anyway. When employees built the floor models at the store, they were required to do so with the tools that came in the

pre-packed boxes. When Samantha assembled furniture pieces at home, she used real tools: power drills and circular saws. Not kiddie tools, as Matt called them, like allen wrenches and screwdrivers that came in little plastic ziploc bags. She hated how sore she was after a day of assembling furniture at work, and it made her grouchy she couldn't bust out power tools around the customers.

While Matt and Dylan arranged Stan's cardboard cutout twin next to the meet and greet table, the Sidewinder wandered around the store, kicking a dresser or two for good measure.

"It's how you tell whether this wood is real or shit."

Adam glared at him, and this lifted Samantha's mood. Stan walked over to where she stood assembling furniture. A hard hat of gel held his light blonde faux hawk together, creating an illusion of baldness from a distance. His face, Samantha thought, looked rearranged. Broken and bruised then regrown and healed. There was something unnerving about the absence of body fat. Without it, the angle of every muscle and the threading of every vein stole Samantha's attention. He looked like he stepped directly out of a muscular system anatomy poster.

She got up to shake his hand, "I think it's really great that you are using your fame to help the community. What is it that you are doing exactly?"

"I'm a fighter. You've never seen me on TV before?" Stan's voice rose in panic. He expected everyone would know who he was and what he did.

"That's not what I mean."

Silence.

“Are you raising awareness of something? Or donating some of the proceeds you raise to a charity?”

“I don’t really know. Frieda takes care of all of that.” He pointed to the woman in the navy suit.

“Is it nice to be home?” She bent back down to continue working.

“You’re really good at using those tools,” he said. He got close behind her to look over her shoulder and patted her ass. “Keep up the good work.”

Now she really wanted power tools, so she could drill a whole in the Sidewinder’s head and drain all of the stupid out.

Matt called him over. The table was ready, and there was already a line out the door. Dylan stood next to the cardboard cutout. Samantha had heard him begging Frieda to let him do her job (make sure each person in line didn’t take up too much of the Sidewinder’s time) while Matt transitioned the Sidewinder’s fans into Furniture Town customers. Samantha knew Matt was doing Dylan a favor by letting him assist management of Stan’s autograph signing and meet and greet.

Adam was at the other entryway assembling a limited edition vanity. The stool Adam was assembling was an easy, padded-top model with a wood frame that only needed four short legs screwed into it. The vanity was a limited edition piece (code for slightly cheap and tacky), but, like all of the limited edition pieces, they sold quickly. The actual vanity was a much more complicated project, and Adam looked unfocused. Samantha knew from experience what he was thinking about. None of the screws fit

where they were supposed to, and there were always several pieces missing. Most of it was purely cam lock assembly. All he was supposed to need was a screwdriver.

Samantha propped up her combination coat stand against the wall for extra support. She went to the customer service desk to print out a hanging price tag for the piece. On her way back to hang it, she stopped and watched Adam screw in the cam locks.

“When I first came here,” she said, “the cam screws used to intimidate me. I was only familiar with having to nail or drill something straight into a hole, but these locks that line up, and snap, and I thought I’d never be able to build something like this.”

Adam looked up at her and then at the coat rack combination she’d just built. “It looks alright.” He winked, “I wouldn’t let Joseph sit on it probably.” Samantha turned to see Matt watching them. “I’m not sure you’ve actually improved.”

Samantha scoured his comment for teasing and came up empty. He ran his fingers over his hair and turned his back to Samantha. She faltered, searching for something to say to him or some explanation to give a confused looking Adam, but she had nothing. Samantha walked over to where Dylan was trying to converse with the Sidewinder. Stan punched air for a news camera.

“Dylan,” she whispered. “Meet me on the loading dock.”

“I can’t. I’m supposed to make sure Stan has everything he needs.”

“Stan is fine,” Samantha said, but Dylan didn’t budge. “Can we go talk behind this dresser then?” she asked.

“Is it going to take long?”

She sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “Behind the dresser.”

The Sidewinder was doing a move on the hot news reporter for the cameras. She was between his legs, and he was fake squeezing. Dylan had been trying to hurry people along, but Stan kept pushing him playfully to the side. He didn’t want to rush the people, he’d said. This was their dream come true after all.

Samantha felt silly hunching behind a dresser to talk to Dylan, but it was the only way he would leave the Sidewinder’s side.

“Ok, go” Dylan said, still watching the Sidewinder who was now lining up kitchen chairs, with running space in between, to leap over like hurdles.

“What?”

“Talk, talk. You called this meeting.”

“We should go out for coffee tonight. I need to talk to you.”

The Sidewinder only made it over two chairs before he clipped the third with his heel and knocked it over. Samantha noticed it didn’t break. “Impressive,” she said.

“Isn’t he great?”

“I meant... never mind. So we need to talk.”

“We’re talking now,” Dylan said, still watching the Sidewinder.

“We need to talk somewhere where you’ll make actual eye contact with me.”

Dylan looked at her, but not before the Sidewinder grabbed two small kids by the back of their t-shirts in an attempt to lift them off the ground. He had weak arms for a UFC fighter, but average to strong arms for a man, and he managed to lift them both a

couple of inches off the ground until his left arm gave way, and one of the kids went crashing into the corner of the autograph table.

Tears welled up in the kid's eyes. Samantha could see the kid's father frowning at his son. That's going to be trouble later, she thought to herself.

"Sorry about that kiddo," she heard Stan say. "Comes with the territory, you know?"

The kid obviously had no idea what Stan was talking about, but he just nodded and looked at his brother still hanging in the air.

"What if I have plans?" Dylan said.

"You are making this really difficult." She could try forceful manifestation of anger, but it wouldn't matter. Her voice and demeanor wouldn't change. Her breathing sped up, and she felt like her breath was skipping.

"No, it's fine. I don't have plans, I thought today was Thursday, but it's Wednesday right?"

Samantha was frustrated with Dylan's pathetic attempt to seem busy. "Meet me at Milagros after work."

As soon as the last word was out of Samantha's mouth, Dylan returned to Stan's side. With all of the madness in the store Samantha wasn't sure what to do with herself. Matt solved her problem when he called a meeting.

Dylan pulled Matt in close. "What're you thinking man? With the Sidewinder still in the store?"

"Unfortunately, business must go on."

Samantha was happy for the distraction. She hoped the meeting would be a long one.

They sat in a circle on top of the customer service desk. Matt didn't seem concerned with their informal behavior even though customers were still in the store. Samantha assumed he'd resigned himself to the fact that most of Stan's fans were not buying anything. Most weren't even bothering with pretend browsing. The appearance of propriety must have been buried with the china cabinet.

A female fan had asked Stan to sign her chest. Frieda was trying to rectify the situation, but Stan already had the sharpie in between his teeth, and the woman was already stripped down to her bra. Stan had quite a lot of surface to work with.

"We're about to be shipped a new line of mattresses" -

Dylan was irritated and impatient, "Isn't this something Mattress City should worry about?"

"If you'd let me finish my god damn sentence maybe you wouldn't ask such stupid questions."

A sign Matt and Leslie were having serious problems at home? Samantha hadn't seen him so irritated before. She felt strangely elated at the thought.

"Every minute you people waste is a minute we are over here instead of over there." Matt gestured towards the Sidewinder. "The mattress is made specifically for the high-end Tuscan Cabernet bedroom set."

Samantha opened her mouth to point out that they never sell any of these (they live in the wrong income area) but changed her mind.

“It’s a combination air and comfort therapy bed.” Matt picked up the product sheets next to him and passed them around. “I want you to review these sheets, and tomorrow morning you will each give me a sample customer presentation. This means I want everyone here an hour earlier than usual.”

Adam took his product sheet back to the warehouse to read. Dylan stuffed his in his pocket and ran to the Sidewinder’s side. Samantha picked hers up and started to scan it:

Get ready for the nighttime experience of a lifetime thanks to the Quatra-Zone Heartbeat Bed. We have combined the therapeutic effects of the human heartbeat, along with NASA grade air chambers, to give you the sensation of floating in the womb. You will literally sleep like an unborn baby.

- NASA’s air chambers allow you to make adjustments anywhere you please. Your head, neck, breast, waist, hip, buttock, and foot support can all be at different inflatable levels.
- Our new, easy-to-use remote has over 300 different inflatability settings, giving you three times as many options as other beds, so you can exactly replicate the experience of your own mother’s womb.
- You get to choose your material. Possibilities include latex, differing densities of foam, and more (see your local retailer for possibilities).
- The heartbeat simulation can not only be heard, but also felt throughout your entire body in our patented “sound-wave massage.”

Do you remember how well-rested you felt when you were first born? Let us help you get back that feeling with a deeply regenerative night’s sleep. The Quatra-Zone Heartbeat Bed uses special resonators to transmit the sound waves. Just like the equipment used in your microwave, perfectly safe, with a thick cover of latex to protect you from any traces of radiation.

WARNING: Because magnets are used in the resonator, those with pace-makers or other medical implants will be unable to relive their pre-birth experience. If you fit this category, please refrain from lying down on the Quatro-Zone Heartbeat Bed.

Samantha was bewildered. She wondered if she was being punked. She ducked as if avoiding hidden cameras. Adam was laughing in the warehouse. The Sidewinder was still energetically posing with his fans. He had his arms around two women, and all three of them were howling up at the ceiling lights like wolves. Samantha wasn't sure anymore what the UFC actually entailed. Stan was doing a lot of posturing and not much fighting. Hadn't she just read he wasn't very good last season? Why was he a favorite this season? Before she could answer these questions, Adam came running from the warehouse. He gasped for breath.

“Samantha, Samantha”... he paused, “I'm going to ask Joseph tonight if he remembers what it was like in his mother's womb.”

Adam and Samantha laughed until Matt told them to start their mid-day cleaning duties. He apparently found nothing in the product sheet bizarre or funny. Dylan hadn't read it yet, but he would probably have the same serious, unobservant reaction as Matt. Samantha grudgingly went up front to vacuum the floor and dust the room exhibits. Stan ran up behind her and swooped the vacuum out of her hands. She was shocked but happy he hadn't swooped her off the ground instead. He dirty danced the vacuum all over the store while his fans laughed, clapped, and danced with him. Samantha let them be and started dusting the room exhibits.

Because of their daily cleaning routine, the showroom shined brighter than any room in Samantha's parent's house, or for that matter, any house she'd ever been in. Her family was neater than the average family, but they certainly didn't vacuum and dust every day. Is this what attracted people to buy new furniture over and over again? Most

furniture doesn't break or wear out, yet people consistently throw away their old furniture and replace it with something shiny and new. Imitation of the showroom: perfectly arranged, neat, clean, new, and expensive— grouped and defined for your convenience. Everything with its own place, and each room with its own story and theme. Samantha's stomach ached. She had to take action. Her guerilla staging didn't seem to be working, and besides, Matt was on to her. He'd been keeping a close eye on her customer interactions following the porn incident. She knew what she had to do. She went to the filing cabinet in the warehouse and looked around to make sure no one was watching. Opening the cabinet slowly, so it wouldn't squeak, she grabbed a year's worth of pink sheets. On the top right hand corners were customer addresses. She stuffed the sheets into a duffel bag that was next to the cabinet and covered them with her sweater.

The line for Stan's autograph had died down slightly mostly due to his scantily clad lady friends who were currently grappling one another on top of a moving-tarp in the parking lot. Matt and Adam ditched the Sidewinder to go outside and watch the sexy spectacle. Dylan stayed. Samantha wouldn't have been surprised if somebody brought out a hose, some mud, or a bucket of oil. Maybe they could use tubs of lard from Los Mariachis, next door. Frieda asked Dylan to announce the store closing. Dylan looked at his watch.

“We're open for another four hours.”

Frieda put her hand on his back, but Dylan didn't seem to notice. “Stan is getting tired, and he needs to reserve some stamina for later.” The Sidewinder was holding a petite woman in his arms, curling her up towards him and away again. His arms were

trembling, but he held onto the woman with much more determination than he'd held onto the two boys earlier. You could see it in his facial expression. These interactive feats of strength had been happening all day.

“I see nothing tired about that man.”

Frieda tapped Dylan's watch, and he went outside to ask Matt's permission. Matt followed Dylan inside.

“We're open for another four hours,” Matt said, “but we can close early if the Sidewinder would like to join us for drinks this afternoon.” Matt had his lets-make-a-deal face on.

“We really need to get back to the hotel. Stan requires a full-body oil massage nightly” -

“Lay off it Frieda,” the Sidewinder interrupted. “I would love some drinks.” He winked at Dylan and punched his biceps. Samantha hoped that wasn't the hardest he could punch. Dylan didn't even waver.

Dylan stood on top of the chair and made his announcement. “The Sidewinder will be back tomorrow to sign more autographs,” he added.

7

The caravan headed off to El Patio. Frieda declined drinks and took the fighting hos back to the hotel so they could clean up and call their families, but not before she gave the Sidewinder a stack of cash to treat the employees with. Matt, Adam, and Dylan rode with the Sidewinder. Samantha drove herself. She needed to leave early to hire some day laborers from the curbs in front of Home Depot before they went home for the day.

Word had already gotten out that the Sidewinder was making an appearance at El Patio. Samantha couldn't believe it when she heard the DJ on 104.9 making the announcement. El Patio was going to be packed. Samantha pulled up and decided to

watch the spectacle from a distance before she went inside. At least one hundred people swarmed outside the bar. The bouncers, Arturo and two others, weren't letting anyone else in and were trying to keep the crowd calm. Dylan walked in front of the Sidewinder with his arm up and palm out in an attempt to make a clearing in the crowd.

“Let us through, let us through,” he shouted. Stan hindered the process by kissing all of the women in the crowd and fist pumping the men, and when Dylan looked back no one was following him. Matt and Adam were already inside. Dylan had lost the Sidewinder, but Samantha saw Stan sneaking in a side door with the rest of the crew. The people around Dylan whispered and chuckled. Samantha felt pity, so she ran up to join him.

Once inside, they saw the Sidewinder and the others sitting at a long table. Samantha sat across from the Sidewinder with her chair pulled out far from the table. Matt sat next to Stan with his chair pulled in close and at an angle, so that he was almost face-to-face with the UFC fighter. Adam was up at the bar ordering drinks.

“It’s on the house,” Samantha heard someone yell. She watched Dylan trying to decide where to sit. He shuffled between Samantha and the Sidewinder. He finally sat down on the other side of the UFC fighter.

“Thanks guys,” Samantha said sarcastically. “I feel so loved.”

“If I sit next to you I can’t look at you,” the Sidewinder said.

“Do people actually find you charming?” she asked.

“I think you’re cool,” Dylan said, “that’s the male equivalent of charming.”

“Thanks man.” The Sidewinder patted Dylan’s knee.

“He thinks I’m cool,” the Sidewinder said to Samantha.

“Trust me, that’s not a positive endorsement.”

Adam walked up holding four beers with snake venom shots floating inside. He passed them around and went back to the bar to get the fifth. The shots were created specially by the adoring bartender, Stacy, in hopes the Sidewinder would be impressed.

“Snake venom,” Dylan said, pointing at the shots.

Stan didn’t seem to understand.

Chatter about the Sidewinder’s return crowded the bar. Samantha felt sick with the thickness of the conversations; people recited snippets of the Sidewinder’s role in their childhoods. Suspiciously made-up and significantly exaggerated memories. Some people even went so far as to refer to the Sidewinder by his real name.

Stan asked Dylan where the restroom was, and he pointed him in the right direction. The Sidewinder came back laughing and holding his gut. “There was a poem on the wall,” he managed to get out between chuckles. He held a piece of toilet paper with writing on it:

Roses are red
my homies are brown
this is my barrio
so don’t fuck around

“That’s not a poem,” Samantha said.

“Well, you’re a snob, aren’t you?”

The guys laughed at his poem or at his insult. Samantha wasn’t sure.

“Let’s toast to the Sidewinder,” Matt said. He held up his beer.

Stan ignored him. He'd already slammed back his shot and was halfway through chugging his beer.

Matt toasted anyway. Stan let out a thunderous belch.

"Oh man, what was that?" Stan interrupted. "It tasted raunchy and it burns."

"It's a special shot Stacy named after you," Dylan said, "snake venom."

"Is she hot?"

"Who?"

Samantha shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous." She wasn't sure who she was talking to, but being surrounded by all of these men fawning over a fighter, a symbol of virility she supposed, gave Samantha a headache.

"You know Stan," Samantha said pulling her chair closer to the table and speaking from under her eyelashes, "you're nothing like what I expected." She let her gaze rest only on him.

"Really?" And what did you expect?" Stan asked.

"Someone with a much bigger upper body."

They all laughed. The Sidewinder smiled at her.

"I've gotta go guys," Samantha said. "It's been a pleasure." She had stuff to do. She looked at her watch. She was too late already but didn't really feel like hanging around. Stan got up when she did but went towards the stage in the opposite direction of the exit. He was posing for photos. Every time he moved his body he growled and the crowd whooped. Samantha couldn't help but smile a little. He was certainly enthusiastic, she thought to herself.

Milagros wasn't too busy this time of night. There were a few lingering couples. Most started out as study dates that became caffeinated, extraneous, and chatty gatherings. Samantha and Dylan, still a little buzzed, sat in two leather chairs towards the front of the coffee shop. Out of the large windows, they could see the parking lot and the dumpster behind McDonald's. Milagro's was part of a run-down strip mall; Samantha wasn't even sure what other stores they shared the mall with. Maybe they had all been abandoned. She didn't care enough to go look. She sipped a skinny vanilla latte, and Dylan drank a coke and ate a cream cheese croissant.

"I don't know how you can drink coffee. It tastes like cigarettes," Dylan said.

"First of all, that's not true. Second, you smoke. If that were true, you would like it."

"Why are you looking at me like I'm a terminally-ill puppy?"

"I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Dylan wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I sort of saw this coming."

"You did? That's a relief." She looked down at her hands and picked the skin around her nails. They were sweating, and she imagined her body had its own weather system with big black rain clouds forming under her palms and rain water releasing itself from her pores.

"I wouldn't be upset except I think you're ending it for the wrong reasons. This is about Matt isn't it?"

Samantha, speechless, opened and closed her mouth several times as if trying to eat Dylan's word. "This is not about Matt. That's ridiculous. Matt is with Leslie. They live together for Christ's sake. What the hell would give you that idea anyway?"

"You went for drinks with him... I don't know where I would've got that idea from. You two act like you're married" -

"Just shut up," Samantha interrupted too loudly. She monitored the volume of her voice, "You're being ridiculous. Don't speculate. It's not about Matt."

"Then what is it about?"

Samantha thought Dylan was too calm about this. He wasn't cursing like he usually did when he was angry, and his breathing was deep and steady. His voice wasn't even strained. Samantha's anger was genuine. Why couldn't Dylan have left the conversation while it was still easy? She was angry at Dylan for thinking this had something to do with Matt. She was angry at herself for not really knowing what this was all about. Dylan just seemed like too much work right now.

She could see now that her excuses were confusing Dylan, and her unwillingness or inability to explain herself was making him angry.

"Being together is too much work right now. I'm tired," Samantha said.

"You use that too much. There's this thing called a nap" -

"I'm just trying to be honest. I just don't want to do this anymore. You'll meet someone else. Someone better than me." Samantha said.

"Yeah, no shit," Dylan said. "It's you I'm worried about." He slammed his Coke down onto the table.

“Why are you angry? You weren’t angry when we started this conversation.”

“I don’t know. I’m not angry. See, I’m smiling.” He reached up and touched his lips.

They both laughed, nervously at first. Dylan stood up, and when Samantha looked at him he was forcing a frown back on his face.

“Don’t misunderstand me, I’m upset. I’m very upset. You should probably avoid me at work.” Samantha hesitated for a moment determined to mirror Dylan’s behavior and avoid making a fool of herself.

“I’m leaving. Upset. I’m leaving you very upset,” Dylan said.

Samantha yelled after him, “you know we have to see each other at work. I was hoping this would go a little better.”

“Yeah, well I was hoping to get laid tonight.” Dylan yelled this from outside the front door and the one employee and few customers turned their heads. Samantha felt self-conscious like they were looking at her trying to discern what she had done to make Dylan so mad. She was just as confused as they were. They were probably already assigning blame to her. She wiped her hands on her khakis and tried to smile naturally. Eventually the customers turned and went back to what they were doing. Samantha finished her latte and took deep, calming breaths. Samantha coveted these breaths. Oftentimes, Samantha would find herself not really breathing at all. She stood up to leave. Outside, she heard a couple at the table say something about “that angry guy who stormed off.” One of the men looked pretty worked up while the other tried to calm him down. She wondered if they were talking about Dylan. She wanted to eavesdrop, but

they'd seen her come outside, and she didn't really have an excuse to hover. She walked to her car thinking about Matt, and how she might've just made her life at work extremely awkward. The thought made her a little light-headed. Out the driver's side window she could see a dark alley. A lightbulb flickered by the dumpster. Samantha saw a homeless man and his backpack huddled against the wall. "Shit," she said, looking in her back seat. She'd left the duffel bag necessary for her guerilla campaign at the store.

She drove to the store and went in through the warehouse where she remembered leaving it. There was a faint light and she saw the outline of a figure.

"Dylan?"

She could tell it was him. It was the same height and body shape. She saw his silver watch glinting in the dark. She could also hear him moaning.

She pressed her back against the opposite wall and made her way slowly down the cold cement floor. She wanted to see who was making him moan. That's when she noticed the other figure down on his knees. The man kneeling looked huge, even compared to Dylan, and muscular. She tried to inch her way back towards the door, but she kicked a metal chair and it scratched loudly against the cement.

"Who's there?" Dylan asked. She could see the Sidewinder standing up.

"It me," Samantha said meekly.

"Hey girl," Stan said.

Dylan didn't say anything, and Samantha didn't give him time to think about it. She picked up her bag and ran back out to the car. She pulled out to the front lot and

stopped. If Dylan was brave enough to go after what he wanted then she would too. She texted Matt and asked him if he wanted to meet. He texted back almost immediately and said to meet him at the park across the street from his apartment.

When she got there he was sitting on a swing. Across the street, in his two story building, dark silhouettes were framed in some of the windows.

“Are you ok?” Samantha asked when he didn’t say hello.

“Leslie and I had a fight.” He hung his head down towards the ground and avoided eye contact.

“I’m sure everything will work out.”

In one of the windows a silhouette, perhaps of an elderly man, sat on a large sofa chair. An outline of what looked like a book was also visible. The man rose to his feet. Samantha and Matt followed his path one window over to a small child who was reaching out the narrow space where the window was open. Matt stood up off the swing still holding the chains. A similarly obfuscated woman ran over and pulled the child away from the open window.

“Actually, can I tell you a different story?” Matt asked.

“Of course.”

He told the story of the first fire he was called out on. He’d only been eighteen at the time—strong, eager, very sharp, but still naive. The fire had happened the night of July fourth in a single family home on Telshor Avenue. When the fire department had arrived at the scene, the entire house was up in flames. Matt hadn’t been able to move. He’d stood in awe of the orange and yellow flames licking up, up, above the top of the

roof towards the sky. Manny, another fireman, had slapped him on the shoulder to bring him back to reality. "It happens to everyone," Manny had said. That's when Matt heard the screaming. The owners of the house, a married couple, a middle-aged mother and father, stood in the grass yelling at one another. Matt could smell the alcohol on their breath from where he stood several feet away. "There's a child in there," Manny had said. Matt's job had been to keep the parents calm and keep the gathering crowd at a distance until the police arrived. He'd watched Manny run inside with two other firemen. He'd watched the firemen on the outside working the hose. He'd watched Manny and the other firemen run out with the small boy.

Matt told Samantha he'd found out, sometime after the fire, that the parents had been fighting and drinking in the kitchen. The dad had tried to get rid of the little boy by giving him a rocket to shoot off. The little boy, only four, took the rocket in the living room and lit it. That's how the fire started. The father had grabbed the mother and carried her outside without even thinking about where his son might be. They just stood on the grass watching the flames when a neighbor ran over and called the police. The neighbor was the one who told the police there was probably a child inside.

The story had upset Matt down to his very core. Fires were supposed to happen because of malicious arson or electrical problems. Not parental neglect. Not because of a little boy trying to celebrate a holiday all by himself when his parents were too busy for him. Matt still wondered what'd happened to the little boy. He'd gone back to the scene of the fire, to confront the parents or to see the boy, but they had relocated and the neighbors didn't know where to. He wondered if the fire indirectly saved the little boy

by snapping his parents out of it or by forcing his parents to become responsible, loving people. That's what Matt hoped, but he wasn't sure if he could believe it. He couldn't bear not to be saving people.

Samantha knew this. "I think that's a wonderful thing to believe."

"Leslie is leaving me."

Stars descended, and Samantha worried they'd break completely with the sky.

"I mean, just for awhile. She's staying with her parents in Arizona for an undetermined amount of time."

"I don't know what to say."

"Have I told you how we met?" Leslie first fell in love with him after she'd taken her niece to get fingerprinted for kids safety day at the local fire station. Leslie thought Matt had instantly taken to the feisty seven-year-old, offering to give the two of them a tour of the fire station, but in fact, he'd offered the tour because he was sure something about firefighters instantly impressed women and he was going to ask Leslie for her number.

"Is there nothing about fires you find beautiful?" Samantha asked. She regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. Why was she already sabotaging their connection? He was probably going to think she was a freak.

"I guess just like anything dangerous they are exciting and awe-striking, but I don't know if that is the same as beautiful."

Samantha couldn't help herself, "What do you find beautiful then?"

Matt smiled. “The connection two people could grow to have can be beautiful. The unobstructed sky is beautiful. Your tiny feet are beautiful.”

Samantha blushed. She took the attraction she felt towards Matt in an absolutely unromantic setting as a positive sign. He’d made her feel good about her size six feet in less than a second. This is how someone who cares about you should make you feel, she thought. Dr. Cabo would tell her that thought was a dangerous and reductive justification. Just feet from the playground, the Kiwanis Club had adopted a corner of the park in which they’d built metal palm trees. The fan shaped metal leaves on each tree were a different color of pastel.

Other people might’ve found Matt’s stories overly dramatic, sappy, or part of a more nefarious plan, but Samantha liked his intensity and his passion. She had a thing for men with tough pasts. Dylan’s childhood story was even sadder than Matt’s adult disappointments. She’d felt the possibility of saving Dylan, but with Matt she believed they could save each other.

Samantha pointed at the palm trees, “Easter Island,” she said.

Matt didn’t laugh. “Is that what those ugly things are called?”

Maybe his inability to recognize her sarcasm made her feel like a nicer, more proper and feminine person. Matt got up from his swing and stood behind her.

“Hold on.” He pushed her gently on the back. They stayed like this for awhile. “When you were little, did you ever try to see how far you could jump from the swing?”

“Of course,” Samantha said. “Didn’t everybody?”

“I guess so.”

“I also would try to build up enough momentum to swing all the way around. I really thought I’d be able to go upside down someday.”

“I never thought of that as a kid,” Matt said. “You were feisty even then.” He tickled her on the backswing, and she squirmed out of his grasp. He did it again. Samantha loved playful relationships, but her stomach was in knots from nervousness, and her brain was broken from over-thinking, so his tickling was sure to release something toxic. She jumped on the upswing and landed on her feet in the soft sand.

“Beautiful,” Matt said. She tried hard to believe he was referring to her face lit up by the moonlight, and not her perfectly executed jump off of the swing.

9

Samantha and Matt smiled at each other from across the store. She wasn’t sure how to act around him. She assumed it would be disrespectful or embarrassing if she acted with him like she had last night, and she felt self-conscious anyway around Dylan and Adam,

especially since Dylan accused her of having feelings for Matt. Adam also became a topic to agonize over; he might not find her fit to hang around with his son anymore. Irrational, Dr. Cabo would tell her.

Matt was checking inventory online. Dylan was avoiding her. Adam wasn't speaking to anyone. He seemed faraway. Later, Samantha would ask him what was bothering him. First, they had to do their mattress demonstrations. When they all gathered around the mattress, the mood turned tense and still. Nobody made any sudden movements. Nobody said hello. They all sat around waiting for orders. Matt tried to pair Samantha and Dylan up as the shopping couple, but Dylan refused.

“You're being immature, but fine. You and Adam can be our couple.”

Matt swept his hands across the mattress, highlighting the bulleted product points from the sheet they'd received yesterday. Adam and Dylan stood and watched. Role assignment seemed stupid and superfluous to Samantha. It's not like Adam and Dylan, as the shopping couple, actually did anything. Matt took what looked like a tire pump for a bicycle and flipped the mattress over. A little electrical panel peeked out at them from the other side. On the electrical panel you were supposed to choose which of the twenty different air chambers you wanted to adjust, and then choose from the three hundred different inflatability settings listed in the mattress's manual.

“It seems a little complicated,” Samantha said. “How am I supposed to convince a couple that what they really want is to experiment with three hundred different settings until they find the right one?”

“The secret is to find the perfect setting with them before they leave the store. Have them choose from three broad categories first: firm, medium, and soft, and then attempt to gather a personal history from them. It’s the same technique we use to sell anything, now you just have an opportunity to narrow down the narrative.”

Dylan and Adam had lost interest. Dylan was studying his cellphone screen, laughing from time to time. Adam was lost in space.

Matt continued his explanation, focusing on the employees’ opportunities to construct more specific scenarios for the couples and families that came in because they had a larger variety of details to choose from. Maybe the couple wanted to relive the experience of their honeymoon where they’d drank Pina Coladas on a beach in Mexico. Samantha and Matt would use this information in their mattress sales approach.

Dylan looked up from his phone. “That’s bullshit.”

“You’re one to talk about bullshit,” Samantha said. “Stan? Really, Dylan?” Dylan turned red. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I’m just tired,” she added. Saying “tired” was giving her déjà vu. So many other options, she thought to herself—lethargic, weary, exhausted, fatigue, etc. Even her vocabulary had become dull.

“The Sidewinder is a very genuine and nice person,” Matt said. “I know he’s not the most polite to you, but it’s probably just a part of his image. You should let some of it slide, maybe.”

Samantha groaned. She’d pissed off both Dylan and Matt with one outburst. Perhaps she was starting to get this angry thing down.

“Just be happy we’re not salespeople,” Adam said to Dylan, his first words of the day.

“I guess this means the demonstration is over. Why are you just standing there? Get to work. We open in ten.”

Adam ignored Matt’s obvious bad mood and pulled him aside while Dylan and Samantha began opening duties at opposite sides of the store. Samantha strained to hear their conversation, but their voices were too low. She moved closer.

“You ran into them at Hastings?”

“In the board game aisle.”

Samantha felt sad for Adam and for herself. Why was Adam confiding in Matt and not her? Matt didn’t even spend time with Joseph like she did. Samantha stopped pretending to work and concentrated fully on their conversation.

“I just wanted to rent a movie and go home alone, you know? Then there they are, Patrick and Anita, waving me over.”

“How was it seeing Patrick?”

“You wouldn’t believe what he asked me,” Adam said. “Anita told him I could introduce him to the Sidewinder. Can you believe her?”

“Did they seem like a couple?”

“They weren’t affectionate, but even if they were together Anita wouldn’t put it on display.”

Samantha smiled at Adam’s predilection for gentlemanliness even when outraged. She leaned harder against the combination coat rack she’d just built yesterday.

“Anita was trying to tell me the news first,” Adam’s voice choked up, “but Patrick just blurted it out. He’s asking for shared custody of Joseph.”

“Shit, man” Matt said, “what did you say?”

Samantha gasped in her hiding place.

“I wanted to get angry, but I couldn’t. I basically begged. I told Patrick I’m the only father Joseph has ever known, and he told me he was ready to remedy that situation.”

“Asshole,” Samantha whispered to no one. She adjusted so her ear was flat against the backside of the mirror.

“I don’t know the whole story man, but I’m sure things will work out in your favor.”

“Not likely,” Samantha said in a low voice.

Adam closed his eyes and shook his head no. It was a wonder his head stayed attached to his neck. He pulled a broken Hasting’s DVD and some plastic pieces out of his pocket.

“That situation would make anyone angry.”

Adam started to sob freely. A hard determination followed his crying, and Samantha noticed, for the first time today, how ragged he looked. His face was unshaven, and his hair greasy. He wore a wrinkled shirt, and his jeans were stained. Samantha pushed against the coat rack to get back to opening duties, and it teetered forwards. She tried to grab it, but the backside was smooth with nowhere for her to grip. It went crashing forward. Matt and Adam jumped out of the way. Nothing broke.

“That was like the third thing to fall and not break this week!” This furniture is of seriously good quality. She looked up to see Matt and Adam staring at her.

“Oops, overzealous dusting,” she said. She cleared her throat. Adam had stopped crying, but the area around his eyes was red with irritation. Samantha wanted to ask him if he was okay, but was afraid they’d call her out on eavesdropping, so she turned away and went about her business. After she’d made it across the room, she could see they’d picked up their conversation. She couldn’t hear them anymore, but she could see Adam trying to hold back tears and Matt attempting to console him. After a lot of talking and gesturing, Adam smiled sadly at Matt, and Matt patted him on the arm. They looked over at Samantha and she averted her eyes.

Stan and his crew pulled up outside. Trying to think of an acceptable work-related reason to avoid Stan before Matt gave her a job to do, Samantha intercepted.

“I want to do secret shopping today.”

“That sounds like a demand, not a request. Does it have anything to do with who just pulled up?” He sounded genuinely concerned and didn’t wait for her to answer.

“I’m happy to grant your request, but only for something in return.”

“And what might that be?”

“Can you drop off the fireman gear you’ve been holding onto for me?”

“Sure. I’ve always wanted to see your place.”

He smiled and ran a hand through his hair. “Meet me tonight at 9:30? You know how to get there, right?”

She made a pistol motion with her hands and pointed in the direction of Matt's house. She realized what she was doing and put her hands down awkwardly by her sides.

“Okay cowgirl, why don't you shop Oak-To-Go today. A customer told me they have something just like our Sedona bed set for two-thousand less. I, of course, don't believe him, but it wouldn't hurt to go check it out.”

“See you tonight,” Samantha said.

She took off her Furniture Town polo in her car and pulled a white t-shirt on over the tank top she wore with her khakis. Secret shopping wasn't actually a secret, but it was best to show some respect by not wearing the rival retailer's polo in their store. Samantha was on a first name basis with all of the Oak-To-Go employees. That made it easier. She took out a small notebook and pen from under her front seat. She would inspect any sets or individual pieces resembling their stock at Furniture Town. She would do it fast. She had other plans.

It was time to start making her trying-to-convince-customers-to-give-back-their-furniture rounds. Repossession. She'd have to be convincing. She'd have to have flair. She was already pretty sure people would believe her. When she was little, the whole neighborhood, even the diabetics, had bought girl scout cookies from her. For her, selling thin mints had been like peddling crack to addicts.

If there were any similar looking furniture pieces, she'd record the type of wood, the quality, the assembly directions, the price, their financing deals, etc. and bring the information back to Matt. He made the ultimate decision about whether the pieces were comparable. If they were, and they were cheaper, Matt would send a notice out to all the

surrounding Furniture Towns explaining that their stores were in the corporate approved radius, and they should meet the competitor's price. This had never happened. Their quality went unmatched.

Samantha pulled up to Oak-To-Go and scanned the cars in the parking lot. Kenny and Sheila were working today. She'd been out for beers with them before. Both were laid back and didn't take their jobs very seriously (this Samantha did not approve of even though it made her job easier).

Oak-To-Go was much smaller than Furniture Town and only a mile down the street, in front of Target and Albertson's. While Furniture Town had large glass windows that showcased the furniture inside the building, Oak-To-Go had much smaller windows, and the view was hindered by teal banners that advertised different deals and bargains. Maybe they were trying to go for a more local, down-home appeal. Samantha didn't approve. She waved at Kenny when she came in the front door; she didn't see Sheila.

"Sheila went to Starbucks." He talked to Samantha over the magazine he was reading. Samantha made her way to the front left corner. She would make her rounds first and talk to Kenny afterwards. The bedroom set that was supposed to look like the Sedona caught her eye immediately. She could see from where she stood, several feet away, that the Oak-To-Go version was made of plywood with an oak laminate, nothing like their Sedona. She'd ask Kenny for the product sheet in a bit. Nothing else was similar in style. Much cheaper, everything was machine-processed and made of fake materials. Samantha appreciated that some people didn't care about quality or simply

couldn't afford it, but when her customers claimed that the two companies were carrying the same product it made her indignant.

“Hey Kenny, how's business?”

“Alright, you know. Somebody claiming we are carrying the same pieces again?”

“Yep, speaking of which, can I get the product sheet on your Sunlight set?”

“Sure.” Kenny reached into a drawer still reading his magazine. He handed the sheet to Samantha.

Usually Samantha would have waited around awkwardly until Kenny finished whatever he was reading, finally ready for conversation, but she was in a hurry today.

Samantha went out without a completed repossession plan. She'd thought a little about what approach to take, but she hadn't really done anything to prepare. She drove to the poorer part of town made obvious by the fences constructed out of chain link or found material. Dogs were tied up in the front yard barking viciously, or maybe hopelessly, at the air around them. She passed a house with a hole in the roof covered by a blue tarp. The men and women loitering in the neighborhood, mostly teenagers, had a very distinct style. The men wore black athletic shorts that stopped right at their knees and tall white tube socks. On their feet they wore slip-on rubber Adidas sandals; Samantha thought they looked like shower shoes. The women gelled their hair until it crunched and drew on their eyebrows. In high school, Samantha had been tempted to go down to Juarez with a group of her friends and have permanent makeup (eyeliner, lipliner, and eyebrows) tattooed. She couldn't remember what'd stopped her, but she couldn't thank it enough.

Her makeup preference back then wouldn't have gone over well now—thickly traced raccoon eyes and maroon lipliner.

The first address on her list was on the corner. Something that looked like a dirty bike ramp was in the backyard, and they had a couch on the roof. She could hear shouting from inside. Samantha looked in the rearview mirror; she'd anticipated the need to appear professional but not the need to look tough.

She had trouble keeping control of her nerves as she made her way up to their door. At the front of their yard was a tree with a bright green piece of construction paper. It said "R.I.P. Francisco 'Chuy' Moreno" in black permanent marker. Small colorful star stickers, like the kind you got in elementary school, surrounded the letters. Samantha knocked and waited. A woman with rollers in her hair answered. "Yeah?" Samantha stuttered to get out her explanation.

"I'm from Furniture Town and" --

"Are you selling something? We don't want nothing."

"No, I'm not selling" --

"Listen little girl. We don't want whatever it is you're selling so why don't you back your little white ass out of my yard."

"I really think you'll want to hear what I have" --

The woman stared at her with a blank, unhappy expression. It was a lot like the expression Samantha's mother had perfected to keep her third graders in control. It'd made Samantha nervous and uncomfortable then, and it still worked now. "Ok, well thank you then," she said nervously, followed under her breath by "and your fat white

ass.” She walked quickly down the driveway, glancing over her shoulder only once. The woman didn’t slam the door shut until Samantha was in the car with the key turned.

That didn’t go well. She went back to work to regroup and come up with a better approach. When she got back, Matt was talking on the phone, and Stan was showing Dylan and a large group of customers how many nightstands he could leg press. He lay on the ground with his feet in the air, keeping still while Dylan carefully stacked nightstand after nightstand on his feet. People held their breath in anticipation. There were gasps followed by more silence. This happened several times before a loud crash broke the tension.

“Well I guess six is the limit then,” Stan said. “Beat that record.”

Only a few non-Sidewinder related customers came in, and most of them just needed additional pieces to complement what they already had. The easiest kind of sale. The Sidewinder customers hadn’t turned out to be big spenders; most of them just stood around all day watching Stan perform and left without buying anything. The only thing they sold to the Sidewinder’s audience today were the six nightstands Stan had leg pressed. All of them were busted and completely unusable, but the customers didn’t care because the Sidewinder had agreed to sign the inside of the drawers.

10

Round two. The duffle bag full of customer receipts sat morosely in the passenger seat while Samantha made her way to house number one (she’d wiped the slate clean, it was bad for morale to remember her first attempt). It looked as worn-down as Samantha felt. She’d needed a full night of no sleep to arrange the receipts in bundles based on the

location of the home. This would save her time in the end. She'd decided to start in a poorer part of town again. Later she'd think she hadn't learned her lesson. She couldn't get over the idea that poorer families would be more likely to believe her. This thought made her feel incredibly guilty, but not enough to change her plan.

She approached a small home with a tidy little yard and a happy looking Chihuahua playing with two small children. Based on her surroundings, she thought this would surely end well. She'd never known things to go from good to bad so fast. Samantha stumbled over her lie again (she still blames the happy, innocent looking children for this) and the woman who answered the door ignored her and went inside. Samantha thought that was it, she'd failed again, but before she could even turn around the woman in her nightgown ran at Samantha. The woman waved a frying pan over her head, and the egg inside tipped precariously from one end of the skillet to another. The children laughed hysterically, and the Chihuahua nipped at Samantha's heels.

After this incident Samantha decided to start in the middle class parts of town (the majority of the town anyway). She would tell the inhabitants the furniture was dangerous. A choking hazard? Would they believe that? Maybe the hardware. It could be a choking hazard. Not very well attached. Defective. Poisoned wood. Toxic if licked. What if these families didn't have children or pets? Would they care? Could wood somehow be wrongly treated and made explosive? It didn't really matter if it could be, could she convince people it had been? Maybe she could just string dangerous sounding words together. Most people are bad listeners anyway, which is exactly what Samantha needed for her plan to work. She hadn't really been ready. She needed people

who could move the furniture. The possibility she had any evil mastermind skills inside her looked dismal. This whole scheme was doomed to be a failure. It didn't matter. She didn't have any more time to waste.

Round three. Before heading off to the suburbs, she stopped at Home Depot to hire some day laborers. When she stopped her truck next to them, they put down their playing cards and walked over. She figured three workers would be enough, and she'd pay them one hundred each for every day it took to complete her mission. There were five men and they wanted her to choose. She had no idea how to make her decision, so she just picked the three strongest looking men.

Her movers were poised to hop in the back of the truck, but Samantha called them up front.

"I think riding in the back is illegal," she said.

The men misunderstood her and started insisting they weren't illegal.

"No, I didn't mean you. I meant having people in the back of the truck... I think we all have to be buckled inside."

After she convinced them to ride in the truck, introductions were made.

Samantha, Jorge, Pete, and Ricardo drove to their first victim. Samantha told the men what she thought they needed to know. They were to wait in the truck while she approached the home and spoke with the family. If the family allowed for their furniture to be taken, Samantha would lift her arm over her head, and the movers would come out and move select pieces into the back. Pete asked about blankets, cardboard, dollies, and other items used to protect the furniture during transport. Samantha tried to explain that

it didn't matter. They were going to hide the furniture in the old, crumbling Mission until she could decide what to do with it, but the men were too concerned with their own culpability, so Samantha stopped for supplies. It wouldn't hurt to put on a facade for the families. Throwing furniture into the back of the truck with reckless abandon might concern some of them.

Though the idea of the suburbs in Las Cruces was the same as suburbs anywhere, the look and feel was much different. The houses all sat on at least one acre lots. None of them looked the same. Very few of them were two stories. The lawns reflected the personalities, ages, and interests of the owners. It was completely normal for a perfectly manicured lawn to sit next to a naturally wild front yard, which could sit next to a dirt lot scattered with kid toys. Jess had told Samantha that's the one thing she missed about Las Cruces—space.

There were no lines painted on the roads and no sidewalks. The pavement was often interrupted by a dirt road or two. Many of the houses, like the cemeteries Samantha admired, were colorful. Lots of shades of pinks, and one two story house that gave off an angular appearance created with deep purple, light blue, turquoise, and red. The more Samantha had stared at it, the more it grew on her. Samantha lived with her family at the very far edge of this suburb. She hadn't considered whether or not she would repossess her parents furniture.

The neighborhood she was in now reminded Samantha of all the failed jobs she'd had. There was cooking at the country club (knives and heat were serious hazards to her well being); waitressing at a breakfast place in Old Mesilla (there were only so many

people willing to forgive her for spilled drinks in their laps); and babysitting. Apparently, letting a six-year-old ride his tricycle in the road is not appropriate, no matter what he says. Desert adventures are also not the greatest idea when you have a fear of snakes and your charge is determined to find one he can poke with a stick. Being a success at her current job didn't seem to matter anymore. If she couldn't succeed at this repossession scheme, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to believe in herself again. Samantha gripped the steering wheel harder as her determination grew. She checked the invoice on her lap one last time and pulled to the side of the road.

“This is it guys. Wish me luck.”

“We'll be watching for your hand signal,” Pete said.

Samantha got out of the truck. She practiced the story in her head. It's exactly the same as making a sale, she thought to herself. The house she chose first had the naturally wild front yard. The mesquite bushes were so tall she couldn't see the front door from where she stood by the truck. “Decaying wood, decaying wood” -- these words became her mantra as she made her way to their door. So far everything looked friendly enough. She was eased by the chirping birds in the background; the birds happy chittering made her feel like part of a Disney movie. She wrestled with whether to use the doorbell, the knocker, or her fist. She started with a light fist tap. No one answered, and she didn't hear any movement behind the door. Then she banged the knocker. Still nothing. She waited what felt like a lifetime before ringing the doorbell. A woman in jeans, a white cotton v-neck, and a yellow headscarf answered. It took Samantha a moment to notice the woman was also wearing rubber, yellow kitchen gloves.

“Can I help you?” Her irritation was obvious to Samantha. Another woman came up behind her. She was wearing tennis whites, and her blond hair was curly and cut very short against her head. “I can take care of this, Martha,” she said to the woman with the yellow gloves. Martha, the housekeeper Samantha guessed, retreated back into the house, but Samantha could see she was still watching them.

The woman of the house looked at Samantha expectantly, but not unfriendly.

“Mrs. Ambrose?”

“Yes, that’s me. Who did you say you were with?”

“Furniture Town. I’ve come to repossess these kitchen and living room pieces,” Samantha flashed the invoice quickly, but pulled it away before Mrs. Ambrose could get a very good look. This motion added urgency and authority, and Mrs. Ambrose was beginning to look worried.

“But why? Are we in danger?” She gripped the pearls at her neck and bit her lip. Martha had moved closer and was eyeing Samantha suspiciously.

“I don’t want to worry you with all the details, but basically the wood is decaying and corporate has asked us to move the furniture out until it can be replaced.”

“Of course, but are you going to move all of this yourself? Maybe Martha could help you.” Mrs. Ambrose yelled out Martha’s name. Samantha tried to stop her. Martha wasn’t buying any of this, and Samantha was pretty sure what Mrs. Ambrose was suggesting wasn’t in Martha’s job description.

“I brought movers to help me. If you could just move your belongings from the drawers and cabinets we should be out of your hair in an hour.” Martha was in the front now. She’d removed her yellow dishwashing gloves.

“May I see the invoice?” -

“Well, I just have this receipt from the original purchase” -

“You cannot take these items without an invoice.”

Mrs. Ambrose seemed both in awe of and embarrassed with Martha’s insistence.

“Doesn’t your daughter have her softball game today?” Mrs. Ambrose asked her.

Martha waved Mrs. Ambrose aside, while Samantha defended herself against Martha’s aggressive disbelief. Martha asked why they hadn’t received a call from corporate, and why weren’t there any press releases in the news. Samantha hadn’t anticipated any of these questions, and she stumbled over vague answers, utilizing the empty corporate speak she’d learned working insurance. After what felt to Samantha like another hour, Martha’s resistance was growing weak, probably due to Mrs. Ambrose’s complete apathy towards having her belongings taken. Martha left with one small victory, she insisted Samantha write out an invoice explaining what Furniture Town was taking and why. Martha asked Mrs. Ambrose to bring something Samantha could write on. She came back with a napkin. Because Mrs. Ambrose had just been idly standing by, it took another hour to empty the furniture of the family’s belongings and to finally move the pieces out. Jorge, Pete, and Ricardo were even jumpier and distrusting after the move. Samantha wondered if Martha had turned them against her.

Samantha's pyrrhic victory assured her of her plan's fallibility. This wasn't going to work. She'd have to think of another way to do this. Possibly avoiding the families altogether.

11

Samantha needed to talk to Dylan. She'd never liked letting bad-feelings brew, and she hated the heavy feeling of someone's disappointment and anger towards her. She dropped the guys off at Home Depot, and said she'd pick them up again tomorrow night.

"I promise to be better prepared tomorrow," she said. She drove off without giving them an opportunity to refuse.

Samantha knocked on Dylan's door, three hard, evenly spaced bangs. She could see him through the window; he was certainly taking his time answering the door. When he still didn't move she said, "open the door Dylan"...

He swung open the door as she finished her sentence.

“Oh hi.”

“Hoping I wouldn’t answer?”

“Illogical,” she said. Samantha looked around the apartment. Dylan bit at his thumbnail.

“Why do you have these two big coats out? It’s like ninety-nine degrees outside.” Samantha was prone to hyperbole, but it was too warm for the ski jacket and wool coat that were strewn across his coffee table.

“Let’s not start with the questions please. I don’t want to be quizzed or interrogated, I just want YOU to leave ME alone. Besides, if I remember correctly that’s what you wanted too.” “What’re you talking about?” Samantha wasn’t sure what to expect of their first conversation alone since Milagro’s, but she’d expected Dylan to be more dismissive and less aggressive, brushing aside any attempts she made at trying to discuss the warehouse.

“You’re asking me questions again. Why are you so invasive? Following me to the warehouse. Spying on me. Is this because you don’t have your own life?” Dylan’s tirade was followed by hard heavy breathing and shuffling from the hall closet.

“Did you hear that?” Samantha asked.

“It’s probably the neighbors,” Dylan said.

“Spying on you, by the way? Believe me, it was a complete accident when I walked in on a brainless, empty-headed asshole -- with repulsive proportions by the way - - going down on you.”

A muffled “hey, I’m not brainless” reverberated off of the walls.

Samantha motioned towards the coat closet, “are you sure no one is in there?”

This time she was certain she heard knocking and talking from the coat closet.

“Has she left? Can I come out now? I’m kinda claustrophobic you know.”

Dylan sighed.

Samantha walked over to the closet door and opened it. The Sidewinder stood smiling sheepishly. He wore a bright yellow rain jacket under a navy blue peacoat.

“I played dress up to try and distract myself. It didn’t work.”

“Dylan, nobody will love you any less because you are gay. Isn’t that true Stan?”

“I don’t know. I’m not gay. I’m just a very sexual person. Are you telling me this guy is a fag?” If the Sidewinder was attempting a joke it was a bad one.

“Ok, ok, ok, this obviously isn’t about me. I should be asking you what’s wrong,”

Dylan said to Samantha.

“Do you want to join us? On the sofa?” the Sidewinder suggested.

Samantha looked at her watch.

“Goodbye Stan,” Dylan said.

“Guess not.”

Stan left, and Samantha joined Dylan on the sofa.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. This isn’t about you. I don’t know why I’m turning this into a telenovela when you are obviously happy and it’s none of my business.”

“So, what’s bothering you?”

Samantha knew she would have to tell him about Matt or about the furniture, but she wasn't sure which one to share. If she tried to make up another excuse, Dylan wouldn't buy it (she was a terrible liar), and he'd just become more frustrated with her. She laid her head against his shoulder. She'd tell him nothing. That wouldn't really be lying.

"Can I just sit here with you for awhile?" Samantha asked. "I know I haven't been a very good friend, but maybe we could just start over."

Dylan smiled. "I could do that." He put his hand on her head, and she was grateful for the touch of someone who expected nothing from her, who she could just sit with without adopting a persona—pretending to be happier than she was. She wondered if Dylan was thinking about how this was the most emotionally intimate they'd been their entire relationship, and they weren't even talking.

There was a knock at the window. They could see the Sidewinder standing there, something muffled coming from his lips.

"I think he's asking if he can come back inside," Dylan said.

"I thought he left."

"Me too."

Samantha got up off the couch. "I should go. Thanks for sitting with me."

"Thanks for being unintrusive. I know how hard it is for you to reign in your curiosity,"

Samantha was elated. He was joking with her. She couldn't imagine her life being more perfect right now. Maybe all of her relationships were meant to be defined and solidified tonight.

Samantha arrived thirty minutes late to Matt's place. She hauled the black bag out of her trunk and up his stairs. Elevators were sparse, but Matt's building had one. Samantha didn't trust it though. Las Cruces didn't get their first escalator until 2011, when Barnes & Noble bought out the University's bookstore and built a new multi-level building. Samantha had been as excited as a little kid to ride up and down it. It hadn't been as thrilling as she expected it to be.

"Hey Sam. Let me take that from you." Samantha handed Matt the trash bag and followed him inside. "Come in."

She sat down on Matt's couch. A picture of Matt and Leslie was posed on a side table immediately adjacent. Samantha couldn't help but to visualize Leslie in furniture related terms: Colonial (classic lines and a fairly conservative style) with her brown hair cut all one length and straightened evenly around her proportionate face. Samantha knew Colonial was not Matt's favorite style. She wasn't sure he liked it at all. There was something gaudy about the way waved edges were cut, and the wood oftentimes looked like wooden wall paneling that people tried hard to rid from their homes today. Even the beauty of proportion seemed to be in decline. All the reality TV model search shows chose women with interesting "flaws."

Matt joined her after taking the trash bag somewhere to the back of the apartment. He sat with his legs spread and back straight. He looked perched and anxious, and Samantha wished she knew him well enough to know whether he always sat at home like

this, or if her presence made him nervous. They sat in silence for a bit; Samantha couldn't think of anything to talk about and in a terribly dreadful moment she began to talk about furniture.

“What do you think of the new office desk and filing set we got in today?” she asked.

Matt didn't flinch. In fact, he seemed excited to discuss the new modular office wall.

“You mean the Calais?” He didn't wait for her to answer. “Well, it's cherry wood and awfully traditional” -

“Yeah, I'm not a huge fan of traditional” -

“I love traditional for the office,” Matt said.

“Oh yeah, me too. Traditional for the office is great.” She was glad he was sitting next to her and not across, so he couldn't see the blush rising on her face.

“It really has the hallmarks of a great piece, don't you think?” Matt asked. “It certainly has the highest quality ball bearing, and the drawers extend out all of the way so you can get the greatest use out of them.”

The eight pieces included a bookcase that attached to a desk, two chairs, two filing cabinets, and two hutches that went above each filing cabinet.

“It'd look great with one of those little green and gold lamps,” Samantha said. “Plus, it would nice to sit across the desk from you while I'm working.”

Matt smiled.

“Whoever, I mean,” she said, changing the subject. “It looks like you own a lot from work.”

His living room held the couch, TV, and office area. It was obvious the house was lived in, but the generic design suggested no person in particular. Leslie didn't have a collection of ceramic pigs, and Matt didn't hang art from festivals or novice artists' studios on the walls. If you were in their living room, you would probably feel unease. You may not be able to identify it, but one might say it's temporariness or even fear. The computer desk was messy with papers. Samantha thought she recognized them as articles on relationship and sex from magazines she read at the doctor's and in line at the grocery store.

"Absolutely," Matt said. "I like bringing work home with me. You?"

She was wary of accidentally revealing to Matt what she was up to. "No. Not yet, I mean. I'd like to."

"I bet you would. Firefighting is a lot like selling furniture,. You either succeed or you fail, and when you succeed and you save that person's life or you sell that family a new dining set, they come back to thank you for saving their life or furnishing their house. You know what I mean?"

It took Samantha every inch of self-control she could muster not to break up into angry laughter. She considered the idea but just couldn't shake the fact that most of the customers she'd ever worked with would much prefer her to jump out a window than follow them around the store trying to force explanations on them. Not only that, the furniture they sold didn't change people's lives for the better. It satiated the appetites of the three most offensive human flaws (Dr. Cabo had helped Samantha narrow down her original list of ten): dishonesty, artificiality, and compulsory competitiveness. The use of

objects you own to represent whatever fictional version of yourself you desired was dishonest and artificial and kept people competing for the next best thing. After hearing Matt's version of furniture sales, maybe she should add delusional to the list.

“You know it takes all kinds to make the world go round.”

“What does that mean?” Matt asked. His voice was tense, and his words echoed slow and forced.

She couldn't reconcile her beliefs with how she felt about Matt, and she didn't want to lose either of those, so she just decided to keep them secret and separate from one another. She swallowed, “you'll always be a hero, Matt. I don't think anyone can argue with that, but now you also have another skill, a salesperson of fine furniture. Your job doesn't have to define you. Just like the furniture we own doesn't have to define the type of people we are.”

Matt stood up from the couch. “While I appreciate your insights, you'll see, I'll probably save your life someday.”

Samantha had forgotten she needed information from him. “So, what kinds of people light fires anyway?”

Matt couldn't resist talking about his favorite subject, so he sat back down. “I don't know if I could give you a psychological profile, but usually people with strange obsessions or those with a flair for the dramatic.”

“And how do they usually go about it? I mean is the fire investigator's solve rate very high?”

“If I didn't know any better I'd think you were going to start a fire.”

“I’m just interested in what interests you.” The gullible leading the gullible.

“That’s really sweet.”

Samantha tried to pick out only the useful information from his story, and she left with the scoop on a retired airplane mechanic who was apparently famous, in arsonists circles, for hoarding jet fuel. Fire investigators hadn’t been able to pin anything on him since he never directly committed the crime, so he was “still out there,” as Matt had put it. Matt even shared his rumored location.

Samantha stood up when he was finished. “I look forward to you saving my life,” she said. They departed with a hug that made Samantha’s fine arm hair stand straight up.

Back at home, Samantha called Adam. He picked it up before it even completed a full ring on Samantha’s end.

“Hi,” -

“Samantha? I can’t talk. I’m waiting for a phone call from a lawyer.”

“Oh, ok” -

“I’ll call you later. Sorry.” He hung up. Samantha looked at her phone. She guessed he was getting a custody lawyer of some kind, although she was pretty sure he didn’t have any rights. She doubted he would call her back tonight, but she could talk to him tomorrow at work.

13

Samantha had spent the night alternating between thoughts of Matt and thoughts about her furniture stealing scheme. She couldn't lie or make up elaborate narratives. She'd have to avoid the families altogether. She saw a news report on tonight's county fair and it gave her an idea. Just like the news report said, absolutely everyone would be attending. Not a lot happens in Las Cruces, so when something does, nobody misses it. She would go out tonight and steal. It was hardly even fair to call it stealing; Samantha had convinced herself she still held some form of ownership over the furniture. Plus, she was willing to bet Furniture Town would end up offering to replace people's pieces for free, and stealing didn't seem like more of a sin than lying, but she was sure to be more skilled at the former than she was at the latter.

Dylan and Matt stood at the customer service desk with her. Adam must've been running late, because he still wasn't there. "Are you guys going to the fair tonight?" she asked.

"It's going to be great. Stan is on a livestock judging panel. Supposedly they're going to dress him up like a cowboy. Should be entertaining," Dylan said.

"I thought maybe you'd want to ride out there together," Matt said to Samantha. He was asking her in front of someone else... a minor miracle. Her pencil fell out of her hands and when she went to pick it up she tripped a little.

Dylan filled the awkward silence, "The Sidewinder's here. Still a line around the building, even on the third day. He's amazing." Dylan walked out to meet Stan and Frieda.

"I would love to, but I have plans," Samantha said. "With my family," she added. "Could we do something tomorrow night instead?"

Before Matt could answer, Adam came through the doors looking even more disheveled than he had the day before. The smell of his unbrushed teeth mingled unpleasantly with some other unwashed part of his body. She could see why he hadn't called her back last night. He was barely holding himself together. He threw his jacket on the customer service desk and a crumpled paper fell out. Samantha picked it up and saw it was a worn picture of Joseph faded and oily from being in Adam's hands. She slipped it in her pocket, upset again that Adam hadn't confided in her; she cared about Joseph greatly. She decided to confront him today. Maybe he was one of those people who refused to ask for help, especially from a woman. Samantha had known many men

like this in her lifetime. Her father for one, but of course she supposed fathers didn't come to their daughters for help, and if he'd gone to her mother Samantha wouldn't have known about it.

Dylan, Stan, and Frieda came inside. Stan and Frieda stood at his autograph table. She was giving him some kind of pep talk, probably getting him ready to be swarmed by fans yet again. Dylan sprinted to the back to bring down an order.

Samantha followed him. "What's up with Adam? Have you heard anything?" She really just wanted to see if Adam had confided in anyone besides Matt.

"What're you talking about?" Dylan looked in Adam's direction. "He looks fine to me."

Stan was standing just beyond Adam, and Samantha guessed Dylan wasn't looking at Adam at all. "You're not very observant of other peoples' problems are you?"

"That's not fair," Dylan said. He looked genuinely offended. "I noticed something was wrong with you. Are you forgetting about our moment yesterday?"

"No," Samantha said, "but it was only a moment." She left a confused looking Dylan. She'd already made a list of things to address with Dr. Cabo in her next session: her impatience with people, leading to snapping and unfair criticism, and her self-obsession. It worried her that she was more concerned about why Adam hadn't confided in her than Adam himself. It also worried her that she was aware this was wrong and couldn't change it.

Matt and Adam were standing in a far corner. Adam was gesturing wildly, and Matt looked scared. Samantha was taken aback by his expression; she'd assumed Matt

wasn't afraid of anything. She could hear Adam screaming something about having no rights and selfish lawyers. Matt tried to calm him down, but Adam grabbed his coat off of the customer service desk and stormed out of the store. Samantha felt Joseph's picture in her pocket, and she regretted taking it. She'd taken Adam's comfort; she'd might as well have stolen his rosary.

“Are you going to go after him?” Samantha asked.

“He needs to cool off.”

Samantha was sure Matt could smell her eagerness—to know the details of Adam's drama—leaking from her pores. They stood uncomfortably until Matt broke the silence. “What's up with Dylan and the Sidewinder?” he said, jutting his chin in their direction.

Samantha smiled her we-both-know-something-the-other-doesn't smile.

“Okay,” Matt said. “I see how it is.”

“So both Dylan and Adam are out as conversation topics,” Samantha said, “what else have you got?”

The Sidewinder was running out of feats of strengths and started to repeat ones he'd already done. Most of the women in line wanted Stan to do his famous leg trapper move. It was possible Stan would spend all day on the ground. The next woman in line handed the Sidewinder an original poem about their possible future together. He scanned the paper and then read it aloud, or rather rapped it:

You spend your day with limbs entangled
all work and no play.
Come tangle with me and your day will be brighter,
if you like a good lay.

Stan rapped it over and over again, Dylan even provided beat-boxing backup, until Frieda told them it might not be an appropriate song for the children in line to hear. Samantha wished Frieda would let them continue. Watching Dylan hop around, shoulders slumped, pants sagged, and his hands cupped over his mouth was surely the most entertaining thing she'd see all day. Dylan's rap persona would be quite convincing if it hadn't been for Stan's Vanilla-Ice-like performance quality. His star power did not translate well into the musical realm. Matt was watching the performance with either overwhelming joy or terror, and Samantha took this opportunity to swipe the moving truck keys from the managerial drawer in the customer service desk. She slid them into her purse next to the picture of Joseph. Might as well compartmentalize all of her ill-gotten swag.

A whole fraternity was next in line to meet the Sidewinder. They were joking about Dylan being Matt's sidekick and were trying to decide what to name him. The oldest looking one, he looked like he should've graduated thirty years ago, christened Dylan the Vinegaroon. Samantha shuddered at the name. She felt bad Dylan was being picked on, and she felt bad she now had the image of a vinegaroon in her head. Not as poisonous as the tiny, translucent scorpions, but much more horrific looking. They could grow to be four inches long and they were a deep black color with claws like a lobster. Samantha thought they looked prehistoric and wished they'd had gone extinct with the dinosaurs. Dylan hadn't heard, or was pretending he hadn't heard, and Stan looked unsure whether to defend his friend or bond with the fraternity over mutual teasing. He chose mutual teasing. Samantha wasn't surprised: image came before relationships and if his relationships threatened his image he would take aggressive action to compensate.

“How about it Dylan,” Stan said. “Snake vs. scorpion?”

“Let’s do it.”

They moved furniture to the sides so they had a large circle to fight in. With Matt’s help it only took minutes. Samantha knew why Stan wanted to fight, but what was Dylan thinking? Maybe he was trying to prove himself, or assert his dominance in their relationship. But surely he didn’t think he could win, and even if he could win, wouldn’t he let the Sidewinder beat him? Dylan wouldn’t risk hurting their relationship by humiliating Stan in public.

The fighting ho’s made signs with messy black marker lettering that said Vinegaroon on one (they spelled it Vinageroom) and Sidewinder on the other. The fraternity stood in Stan’s corner and cheered him on with riotous yelling. Samantha stood on Dylan’s side. Matt stood in the middle.

And then it began. They hopped around like boxers with fists out in front and feet moving adeptly. They threatened each other with their eyes. The Sidewinder was licking his lips. Dylan was trying to imitate Stan’s posture, but he looked frightened like he wanted to take it all back. A loud cracking sound reverberated through the store. Stan was on the ground. Dylan had punched him hard in the nose. Dylan covered his mouth with his hands and leaned down to see if Stan was okay.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Stan lay with his eyes closed, but Samantha could see his mouth twitching into a smile. Then Stan had Dylan on the ground. He’d put his legs around Dylan’s neck and thrown him sideways (the same move Matt had wanted to try on Samantha earlier in the

week). Dylan didn't get up, and after five loud pounds on the customer service desk, one of the fighting ho's grabbed the Sidewinder's hand, lifting it in the air, declaring him the winner.

"The snake wins!" one of the frat boys shouted.

"Of course he did," Samantha said, "he's a professional." No one listened to her. They all surrounded Stan fascinated by his busted nose, probably waiting to scoop his bloody tissues out of the trash can.

Samantha went to check on Dylan. His eyes were open. He said nothing hurt he just didn't feel like getting up. Samantha laid on the ground next to him. "Not such a good idea, huh?"

"I guess you do weird things when you like someone."

Samantha thought Dylan was getting wiser and wiser. Maybe Samantha's judgment was getting worse. She couldn't be sure. She added "waffling" to her mental Dr. Cabo list.

"You're probably right," she said. Surely she'd been behaving curiously since her ramped up flirtation with Matt. She hoped she wasn't doing the wrong thing by waiting until tomorrow night to hang out with him. What if he changed his mind about her while he was at the fair? What if he fell in love with the rodeo queen? Where was Matt anyway?

He was pumping fists with the frat boys. He flashed Samantha a thumbs up sign. His code for "I just made a major sale." Samantha had forgotten she was at work; work

had seemed more like a TV show stage set lately. This would all make a lot more sense on TV, Samantha thought.

The fraternity left, and Stan asked Frieda for a break. Samantha saw him go back to the warehouse with Dylan. She hoped he was apologizing to him, or at least checking on his injuries. Frieda also watched him go.

“What’s up with your friend?” Frieda asked.

“What do you mean?” Samantha said.

“I mean I’ve never seen Stan so attached to anyone. He talks about him a lot back at the hotel you know. I make him get it all out in the room, so he doesn’t let it slip while we’re out and about. You never know what the media is going to pick up on.”

Samantha was surprised by Frieda’s admission.

“What does he deal anyway?” Frieda asked.

“Deal?”

“Yeah, I’m Stan’s publicist. I need to know what drugs he’s taking so I can be prepared.”

“Dylan isn’t a dealer.”

“Why else would they be spending so much time together?”

“I thought you said Stan talks about Dylan all of the time?”

“He does. I don’t want the media knowing he’s using. That’s bad for his image. Is it coke? I can’t imagine Stan getting so attached to someone for steroids.”

What kind of publicist was Frieda if she couldn’t tell what was actually going on between the two of them? Even Matt had picked up on something. Maybe Samantha’s

own relationships were more authentic than she'd originally thought. Either way, Matt extricated Samantha with his own good news.

"I just made a huge sale!" he said. "Sigma chi just moved to a newly constructed house, and they need to furnish the whole place."

"Congrats," Samantha said.

"I'm set for the month," Matt said. "I wonder what the prize for February high-sales is."

He hugged Samantha and jumped up and down with her a little.

"Excited as a little bunny?" she said into his chest.

"I'm going to buy some top shelf wine for tomorrow night. We are going to celebrate our asses off," Matt said to her.

Being in Matt's apartment at night, drunk with wine, guaranteed something sexual would happen. Samantha was nervous and happy it wasn't happening tonight. She needed time to prepare herself. Thoughts of Leslie were trying to creep into her mind, but she pushed them out and focused solely on Matt.

"Party!" she said.

Frieda's expression went from uninterested to amused. Samantha didn't care that she sounded like a complete nerd right now. She was too happy to be critical of herself. Dr. Cabo would probably call this a breakthrough.

Dylan and Stan were back at the autograph table whispering to each other. Samantha was pleased with how happy everyone was. Except Adam, but he wasn't at work, and she'd forgotten about him. She wouldn't let anything ruin this moment.

“Hell,” Matt said, “I’m thinking we should close early again today.”

Frieda looked grateful. Samantha wondered what she would do until the cover of nightfall allowed her to pick up the Furniture Town truck and start her expedition.

“But I won’t of course,” Matt said. “Look at all of the Sidewinder’s fans out there. We don’t want to disappoint them. This is the happiest moment of their lives,” he said without irony. His elation and lack of irony made him sound like a child. He was as excited about the money he’d just earned as Joseph had been about his special night with his father.

Samantha tried to call Adam. No answer. She’d try again later. She had a gnawing feeling at the bottom of her stomach that something was going to go very wrong.

14

Seven o’clock and the sun was already starting to set. The Sidewinder was to judge the pigs at the county fair tonight. Everybody would be there. Everybody but Samantha and the three day laborers who were bitching and moaning about missing the event from the back of the company moving truck as Samantha drove down Telshor Avenue, past the dried up golf course and block of concrete where a clubhouse used to be, to the largest grouping of suburban houses in Las Cruces. She’d considered spray painting the side of the moving van black so the Furniture Town name couldn’t be identified, but figured keeping it there would give them cover and help deter any possible suspicions.

“Everybody’s going to be there, miss. Can’t we do this another day?”

“I told you call me Samantha. Miss is weird. The whole point of doing it today is that no one is home.”

From her receipts, Samantha saw that almost every house in this grand grid of city planning had purchased from Furniture Town. The workers would be able to carry out most pieces on their own or use the dollies that Samantha brought. The only pieces needing multiple hands were kitchen tables, oversized armoires, and headboards. Samantha was to go in ahead of them and empty the drawers and cabinets. She didn't want to also steal the families' personal possessions. Just the furniture. She would put a red dot sticker on anything the workers were to bring out to the truck. Then she would move to the home next door while they finished and so on and so on. The first house took them forty minutes to move a kitchen's worth of furniture, but they got faster with practice, and productivity increased once the workers stopped moping, and Samantha stopped worrying about neatly rearranging the homeowners' belongings. She started removing clothes from the dresser and strewing them across the bed and the floor instead of folding nice stacks of t-shirts and placing them on chairs or atop tables. Tedium turned into delirium and delirium turned into fun. The workers were laughing and teasing Samantha, coaxing her to add five bucks to their bet that they could finish the whole neighborhood by tonight. Samantha loved the enthusiasm but didn't picture that happening.

“Families with small children certainly wouldn't stay out until midnight just because of the county fair, would they?” she asked.

“Don't you live in this town?” Pete asked.

“The fair is like the biggest event of the year,” Ricardo added.

“There ain’t nothing else to do,” Jorge concluded.

“Plus Stan is going to be there,” Samantha said.

“Who?”

“Oh, the Sidewinder,” she said.

“Ah yes. He is a big draw,” Pete said.

And he was proving to be. They were even holding a snake race as the final event in his honor, but first he had to judge the pigs. The county fair was good for funnel cakes and all types of fried delights: fried twinkies; fried cheesecake; fried ice cream; fried scorpions; and this year, in honor of the Sidewinder, fried rattlesnake on a stick with a pepperoni replicating the forked snake tongue for extra effect. Not everything was fried though. They also ran wild with green chile: green chile ice cream; green chile iced tea; and whole green chiles wrapped in bacon and served on a stick. The smell of roasted green chile permeated the air. This was the only part Samantha was really disappointed to miss. All of these food booths were set up with portable tables under tents in the dirt. There was no grass. Just dirt. The best years were without wind when the dirt stayed on the ground. Next to all the food booths were the rides: the Gravitron that spins fast and pushes you up against the wall and spins even faster and then the floor drops out from beneath you; the ferris wheel; some vomit-inducing spinning rides; some rides that slingshot you up high; a kiddie roller coaster; and loads of booths with impossible games nobody could win manned by high school kids with no interest in your participation, or

old-man carnies chewing toothpicks out of one corner of their mouths and smiling at you out of the other.

If that was it for the fair maybe it would be okay, but it's not. There's a rodeo where they ride bulls and show horses and then, away from the rides, there are the showcase booths. When Samantha was in middle school, her school had a booth that showcased and sold, mostly to parents, their art projects. Samantha had made a giant papier mache Felix the Cat. Her mom bought it and put it in the garage. Samantha never asked her why it was in the garage or if they could bring it into the house. She hated that cat. Along with art projects, those booths sold and put on display giant crops (the world's largest cotton plant is from Las Cruces) and livestock. It was the livestock that finally kept Samantha away. The livestock fascinated her as a little girl, but one year she overheard the farmer telling his loser pig that the good for nothing porker was going to the slaughter house. Samantha remembered every suicide-inducing kids book and movie she had consumed: *Charlotte's Web*; *Shiloh*; *Old Yeller*; *Bambi*; *The Fox and the Hound*; it went on and on. After one of them, she couldn't remember which, she'd cried all night until her parents took her to the hospital so they could rehydrate her with an I.V.

If Samantha was there, she would see Stan sitting in faded brown leather cowboy boots, cutoff denim shorts just above his knees, a deep v serape with no shirt underneath and a straw cowboy hat. Waist up he looked like a skinny douche-bag hick. A closer look at his cowboy boots revealed a slice up the side of each one. They had to be cut to fit over his giant calves.

Meanwhile, Samantha and her crew had run into their first problem. She was walking through the front doors without knocking -- speed and ease had made them reckless -- and this time walked straight into a little girl. Samantha was terrible at guessing age but she thought eight years old probably. A short little thing with dark hair gelled into little ringlets and knees so knobby they didn't seem to belong on her legs. The girl frightened Samantha. She jumped back and tried to think of an explanation to give her. The little girl looked at Samantha from under her eyelids and sucked on the straw of her apple juice box. They stared at each other.

“Are you from Blue’s Clues?” the little girl asked. “Mommy said cartoons couldn’t come to life but I knew she was wrong and I wished real real real real hard and now you’re here. Are you Steve’s girlfriend? He’s not a cartoon he’s real and Blue who mommy says is a cartoon is his dog but you totally know that already cause your Steve’s girlfriend. My mommy tries to get me to watch other shows that are more growed up I guess but I don’t like Dora and her stupid backpack and who wants to watch shows about tractors and some short guy named Bob who wears a yellow hat. I’m only seven but even I know that this is the stupidest thing ever and my teacher says I’m really smart and that’s why mommy and daddy always have to go talk to her about me because I’m too smart compared to everyone else and I guess it makes everyone sad. That’s what mommy said and she was crying when she said it and mommy never cries except when daddy has martini tuesdays. I don’t know what that is. Do you know what martinis are they sound really really really tiny. How come you’re not on the TV with Blue and Steve? Are you

new? I knew Steve's girlfriend would be pretty." The little girl turned her head and blushed.

Samantha had no idea what the little girl was talking about and wondered if her parents had just left her there, alone. No one else was coming to the door to see what was going on. Samantha felt something warm and small grab her hand. It was the little girl.

"You wanna see my room we can go look for clues it will be awesome. What is our adventure? Wait don't tell me come see my room first."

Samantha regained her composure. "Actually sweetie, I just got a voicemail from Blue, and he said that I should come back later. I messed up, and I'm too early."

The little girl crossed her arms. "Who are you, lady?"

"What do you mean?"

"Blue can't talk you big liar." Then the screaming started. The little girl's face turned a fiery red under her mahogany skin. "Mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy, mommy." Samantha didn't know what else to do, so she ran. Her crew was just finishing next door.

Samantha screamed too, "get in the truck, get in the truck, go, go, go."

The men looked at each other and hopped in the back with the furniture. Samantha pushed down on the gas sending dirt and gravel flying up behind her. She felt they should probably stop to be safe, but it was still fairly early and she couldn't give up yet, so they drove to the other side of town. Another newer suburban area with homes that were exact copies of one another, built for young or lower income families. Samantha didn't have as many receipts for this part of town. Probably most of their

furniture came from Target and Wal Mart. Young families in tract homes didn't spend their already stretched paychecks on luxuries like solid wood furniture. These families couldn't afford to project a desirable image of their lives, so their narratives had been written for them: "The image you will project is that of a low to mid-level family. You will all own the same furniture, even the outside of your homes will look alike. We don't care how different you really are, we don't care what you do because everything we need to know about you is written here in the things you own." Wealthy families built their images in the same way, expect that they could afford to buy individuality. They could afford to import items no one else owned, or at least house their Furniture Town sets in a home with its own unique facade.

On Samantha's third trip to drop the furniture off at the mission, she dialed Adam. Still no answer. Was he ignoring his phone, or was something really wrong? The gnawing suspicion had grown to an impending dread. What if he did something drastic? Was he capable of kidnapping Joseph? Taking him away from his mother? Samantha turned on the radio, preparing herself for word of an amber alert. It wasn't unusual to hear a new amber alert every month. The average age of missing children had gone up significantly since young women started disappearing in Mexico. Samantha was hearing more reports of 15-17 year old girls being abducted. Mexico had barely started their own amber alert system in 2011. She thought of the little Blue's Clues girl and how easy it would've been for Samantha to snatch her. The thought made her shudder.

Samantha had convinced the laborers to unload with speed instead of care. They placed the furniture against the remaining walls of the Mission, so it was safely hidden in

the shadows. The men complained about the coyote, cat, and rat feces, but they hadn't yet run into an actual animal. Samantha wondered if she should pay the men more than what she'd already set aside.

15

"Any of you guys seen Adam?" Dylan asked.

Matt, Samantha, and Dylan started opening duties. Dylan went back to rearrange inventory in the warehouse. Samantha knew his concern over Adam was purely selfish. It would take a lot longer to move boxes by himself. Samantha remade the bedroom sets in an Aztec Chic theme. Most of the comforters were burnt amber, ivory, and turquoise and had soft, blurry prints of ladders and pottery. Matt checked the fax machine and e-mail for any word from corporate. Nothing except for the fax informing them of the new decorative theme. Dylan unloaded the new comforters, lamps, pictures, and other accessories from a shipment dropped off the night before.

"Do you know where Adam is?" she asked, turning towards Matt.

"I don't," he said. The radio was on in the background but the song playing was interrupted for a special news alert. Samantha picked up the remote and turned up the volume.

“What is it?” Dylan asked. He made his way from the warehouse to the front desk where Matt and Samantha were surrounding the radio.

Samantha covered her mouth with her hand and Matt rubbed his forehead.

“What’s going on?” Dylan asked again.

“Shhh,” Samantha said, “it’s an Amber Alert but they haven’t given the name or a description yet.”

The radio spoke: “a young boy, Teddy Monroe, has been taken from his home by a man claiming to be his father. The boy is African American”....

Dylan walked back to the warehouse to move his last box. Matt and Samantha watched him attempt to lift the heavy, boxed dresser by himself.

“Let me help you with that,” Matt said.

Dylan grunted and nodded begrudgingly. Matt put on a lift belt and lifted the opposite side of the box. Both of them bent at the knees and tried to heave up the box by holding onto the side. The cardboard slipped beneath their fingertips.

“Huuuuulllllooooo” a loud voice boomed from the front door. “Where are my homies at?” The Sidewinder had arrived. Behind him, a past customer of Samantha’s approached.

“Shit. Copa de Oro five-piece.” Samantha wanted to ask Dylan and Matt for help, but they were still lifting and dropping and giving frustrated grunts.

“I’ve come to pick up my order. It should be here by now.”

Samantha placed her hand on the woman’s shoulder. The woman tensed. “Think carefully,” Samantha said, “do you really need this dining room set?”

She tapped her foot and studied Samantha's expression, "Is it not here or something?"

"Do you actually eat dinner at a table with your family?"

"That's really none of your business. And, no, not yet, because our table is somewhere on these shelves."

"But would you? Would you sit down at the table and eat together, or does the table just make you think you would?"

The woman looked at Matt and Dylan. They looked close to fighting each other. "I don't know what you're talking about. Do you actually work here?"

Samantha was too tired from doing furniture repo last night. She gave in. She dreaded the warehouse. Seven stories of raw metal shelves with row and rows of boxes of unassembled furniture. Terrible fluorescent lights ran the length of the warehouse and the cement walls, floors, and ceiling let off a terrible chill. When Samantha had originally applied for the job they asked her how many pounds she could lift. Standing in the warehouse, she wasn't sure why they even asked because she's had to lift things of all shapes and sizes, often boxes bigger than her. She could lift these as long as they were light. She could also lift heavy boxes as long as they were small. She'd dragged, pushed, strained, pulled, wrestled, kicked, and groaned. Every Sunday the group arrived at work, six in the morning, to unload the truck. Unloading the truck. Just from the name of the task Samantha assumed it would not include her. She was wrong (as usual).

Samantha boarded the lift and pulled the lever so it would take her to the top shelf. The lift moved up and up and up, but Samantha wasn't looking. She was watching

Stan jump on the new half water, half air mattress. Popping a hole in that particular mattress would be problematic. She watched and tensed her hand on the lever. The lift moved up, up, up, up, up...

“Stopping now would be good,” Samantha yelled out to Stan. She wondered if Matt jumped on his bed. She wanted to jump on Matt’s bed with him. She wanted him to toss her on his bed, look into her eyes -

“What’re you doing?!” Matt yelled.

The fluorescent light shattered against her head. It rained glass shards. Several thoughts overwhelmed her at once: dying a day before her romantic rendezvous with Matt had to be a sign; Leslie must know what was going on even all the way from Arizona; why was she still in Las Cruces; why wasn’t Jess here, she would tell Samantha what to do; Dr. Cabo saying her subconscious was trying to tell Samantha something, since she was still hurting herself at work...

“Bring it down,” Matt said.

“Oh god, your head is bleeding,” Stan said. He trembled and fanned himself like he was dizzy.

“Why are you laughing?” asked Dylan.

The metal platform of the lift banged the ground.

“Did anyone ever teach you to stop this thing?” Matt asked.

That must have been a rhetorical question.

Dylan was there sweeping and Stan was back on the lift before anyone could argue. Frieda appeared sometime during the panic and made her way to the back, yelling at Stan to get down.

Samantha shrugged. “It’s the Copa de Oro with six chairs,” she called after him. The customer stood where the warehouse met the showroom. She looked irritated. Samantha thought, not for long, about how she was bleeding and how there was glass in her hair. Then she felt Matt’s arm around her shoulders and under her knees, carrying her to the service desk. She didn’t want him to put her down. He was saving her life right now, it was all too weird to figure out here, in his arms, with her head bleeding and all attention on her. Outside, the loud whirring of a siren raced past. Dylan finished sweeping and lit up a cigarette near the back door to the warehouse. The smoke wafted in, and Samantha could smell the ash. Matt picked the pieces of glass from Samantha’s hair and put a wet cloth on it to help stop the bleeding. He winked. She smiled. Minor concussion behavior and rapid thoughts made her swoon with the romance of it all.

“Matt,” Dylan called out, “get back here.” Samantha thought he sounded panicked.

Samantha saw a large brown mass moving on the carpet, like when ants are in large packs carrying food back to the anthill, except ten times bigger, something out of a bug-themed horror movie. Stan was screaming and hopping spastically from foot to foot. The noise that came from his mouth was piercing, and Samantha worried her ears would bleed.

“What is that?” she asked of the brown mass. She spoke too quietly, and no one could hear her. She moved away from it and crouched under the customer service desk, holding the rag on her head. “It’s so clean down here,” she said. “This blue and black carpet was a really smart choice.” She couldn’t get up again. She tried to catch pieces of what Matt, Dylan, Stan, and Frieda were saying, and then the brown mass scurried past her. It was thousands of cockroaches. Although prone to hyperbole, she couldn’t imagine exaggerating at a time like this. They resembled a large brass battle shield. She could’ve sworn one stopped to look at her; its long unibrow antenna whispered from side to side as intimately as first dates sizing each other up. She bit her lip and held her rag out to be used as a shield. How could the cockroach judge her? She wasn’t the one who invaded peoples’ homes and made them shriek with terror when they saw her. It wouldn’t stop looking at her. “Oh my god,” Samantha yelled, “I’m one of them.” In this moment, she desperately wanted to undo everything she’d done; she wanted to return the furniture to its rightful owners, but it was too late. Dr. Cabo would lecture her on commitment and following through. The cockroach got so close to her she could see the fine hairs on its legs, and she pushed herself harder against the inside of the desk to try to move away from it.

Stan stopped screaming. Samantha heard heavy, fast footsteps. Matt, Dylan, Stan, and Frieda came sprinting towards the front door. Samantha could hear the heavy crunch of cockroaches being crushed by their footsteps. They tried to run on their tiptoes while batting furiously at their legs. Still running, Frieda took down her bun and shook out her hair. Matt ran flat footed and grabbed Samantha’s arm to pull her out the door.

He stepped on the cockroach that'd been staring at her, and, for a moment, she felt overwhelming sadness. She wanted to pull away from Matt and bring the smashed cockroach with her. She badly wanted to save it.

Once safely outside, Matt slammed the door shut, locking the cockroaches inside. Only a few scurried out with them and into the desert. The cockroaches inside didn't slow their momentum in time, and rows of them piled up on each other, creating a brown window shade over the doors. The five-some moved back a step, shocked by the enormity of the wall of cockroaches separated from them only by a sheet of glass.

Calm slowly descended as they shook off their clothes and out their hair. Except for Stan. His breathing shallowed, and little whimpers escaped him. All of the color drained from his face, and his skin became as translucent as his platinum hair. Everything cartoonish about the Sidewinder disappeared. Stan had never looked more human than he did right now.

Samantha recognized his reaction. "He's having a panic attack."

"Calm down Stan," Frieda said, patting him on the back.

"It's beyond that. We need to call an ambulance."

"You should probably be checked out by the paramedics too," Matt told Samantha.

Matt and Dylan helped Stan over to the sidewalk so he could sit down, but he refused, so Dylan held him up. The concern on Dylan's face was ten times greater now than it had been during his and Samantha's moment earlier in the week.

Matt called 911 to get paramedics on scene for Samantha and Stan. After the paramedics arrived he called management.

“Holy shit dude,” one paramedic said to another, “it’s that UFC guy.”

The other paramedic kicked him in the shin. “Put him down on the gurney.”

“He’s not as heavy as I thought he’d be,” the first paramedic said, “you know cause he’s a professional fighter and all.”

“Hook him up to oxygen now,” the second paramedic said.

“What’d they say?” Samantha asked.

“We’re supposed to call the fumigators, and we will be closed for at least a week,” Matt said.

“That seems like a long time,” Dylan said.

Matt explained that after the fumigators came, store management would come out and do a full write-up on the store since it was closed anyway. Then they would make any additionally needed repairs before the store re-opened.

“We’ll get minimum pay while we’re closed. No commission obviously,” he told Samantha.

Closing for a week didn’t matter much to Dylan: he didn’t make commission so he wouldn’t be losing any income. Matt and Samantha would make their base hourly wage, (standard retail pay) not great, but worth the week off work.

The paramedics still had Stan in the ambulance. They were sitting with Samantha on the sidewalk, wrapping up her head, and super gluing the small cut where the bleeding had started.

“Do any of you want to go with him? I mean only one of you can go, but I thought you guys would be fighting for the chance. Him being famous and all,” the second paramedic said.

“I’ll go,” Dylan said to the paramedics. Frieda was still checking every inch of her hair, clothing, and exposed skin for bugs. It would probably take a few days before the group stopped feeling like cockroaches were crawling beneath their skin.

“Here’s the plan,” Matt said. “Corporate wants us to close for a week and a half starting right now. The fumigator will call me when they are ready to remove the circus tent, I will call corporate, they will do their inspection, call me back, and I will call each of you.”

“What about Adam?” Dylan asked. “I called and left him a message earlier, but maybe we should call him again and tell him about the closure in case he tries to show up to work later.”

“I think he’ll notice when he sees that our building has been covered by a circus tent,” Samantha said.

Dylan clambered into the ambulance, losing his footing several times. His sweaty hands slipped off the railings.

Frieda looked at Dylan uncertainly.

“You know, for legal reasons,” he said.

Samantha lingered in the parking lot waiting to talk to Matt. She wished she didn’t have a ridiculous white bandage around the whole circumference of her head. Hats had never looked good on her.

“I’m going to make another phone call. You still up for our celebration tonight?”

“Yeah, just call me.” Despite the cockroaches and her injuries and the tension with Dylan and Adam’s disappearance, Samantha felt happy. She got up from the sidewalk and grabbed her purse. For the first time since coming outside, she noticed the sun was bright in the sky and completely unobstructed. It was one of those normally resented hot days in the high 90’s, but she decided to go eat lunch, alone and outside, at one of her favorite cafes.

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Several candles burned around Samantha, and a soft female voice echoed a catchy chorus. A single bubble floated upward to Samantha’s eye level. She blew it to the other end of the tub and it reflected the lingering candlelight until it reached the opposite wall and popped. She’d run a bath for herself after telling her parents about the store closing for the week. After worrying about her head, they were delighted. Now that Samantha’s schedule was completely clear, she would be able to spend quality time with her family. Trepidation made Samantha lie about having a few off-site work meetings with Matt and the staff. At least now she would be able to leave the house sans parents without feeling guilty about not spending every moment of the day with them. Her mom and dad had just left for their weekly date night dinner and a movie. Samantha thought about how nice it would be to have a relationship like her parents’: still in love after thirty years; still

willing to put a considerable amount of work into it; and still willing to invest in each other, without letting their jobs, their daughter, and their own interests take over.

Her cellphone buzzed and bubbles, and water sloshed out over the tub and onto the lavender bath rug, turning it a deep purple. She reached for a towel (the moment was past); she drained the tub, wrapped a matching lavender towel on her head, and put on her fuzzy white robe. She picked up her phone after drying her hands. A text message, from Matt. *Is 9 o'clock okay?*

She bit her left hand pinky nail. She thought about what to text back. *I'll be there.* It'd started as *I'll be there with bells on*, but she caught her nerdiness before she'd pressed send.

Then she sent another. *Should I bring anything?*

It felt like forever before Matt responded. Samantha kept pressing the keys of her phone when her screen went back to black.

He texted her back - *I'll get it. Consider it on the frat.*

The white robe and lavender towel fell down around Samantha's feet. The smell of toasted coconut filled the air. Her head was starting to throb again, but she didn't want to take another of the Vicadin the paramedic had given her. It'd made her woozy, and she didn't want to be woozy for this. She tried to ignore the throbbing by concentrating on spreading the thick yellow body butter over her skin, starting with her neck and shoulders. The soft indie music played on repeat, and Samantha fell into a rhythm. She scooped the body butter out of the plastic tub and rubbed it into her skin until her hands felt dry, scooped and rubbed, scooped and rubbed. The room reverberated with rhythm.

She wiped the butter from her hands. Now her body was fully moisturized, but she wouldn't dress or robe until dry. She flipped her head over, and her long towel-dried hair fell down toward the ground with tremendous gravity. She turned up the volume, so the music could still be heard over the whirring of the dryer.

Her hair and body were dry now. She flipped back upright and smiled into the mirror. Tonight was a lucky night: she could tell from the bounce and shininess of her usually flat hair; from the absence of discoloration and pimples on her skin; from the smoothness of her legs. She felt it in her settled and flat stomach and her bright, clear eyes. Everything was aligned. There was something she had to do before she went to Matt's. She opened her laptop and logged into the U of W Admissions site. She went to the last page, moved her cursor over the button and pressed submit. Ever since hitting her head, she couldn't think of a good enough reason to stay in Las Cruces. Her perfectly rounded and manicured nail on her perfectly soft and straight finger leapt gracefully up off of the mouse. "Done," she said. She closed her computer after looking at the time: 8:15.

While Matt poured the wine, Samantha glanced down at the desk in his living room. She thought she saw her name and looked again. She had seen her name. At first glance, it was in what looked like a short story. Samantha desperately wanted to get rid of Matt, so she could read it.

“I really don’t want to be rude, but if I drink without eating I get really sick, and with my injury and all it’d probably be worse,” she said. “Why don’t I step out and go pick something up for us.”

“I’ll just order pizza,” Matt said.

“Oh man, I know this is weird, but I’ve always hated pizza. Weird right?”

“We could order from the Chili’s down the street and I could go pick it up.”

“That’d be perfect. Are you sure you don’t want me to come along?”

“No you should relax. Get comfortable. Snoop around.”

Samantha smiled nervously afraid her true intentions had been guessed.

Matt laughed. “I’m just messing with you.”

They ordered food, and he left to pick it up. Samantha greedily picked up the paper with her name on it. It was a list of three scenario’s. Definitely by Matt, she thought as she read it. She couldn’t believe he wrote about himself in the third person.

Scenario 1:

Matt’s pager vibrates on the nightstand next to the wriggling bodies underneath the sheets. His hand shoots out and grabs it. “Fuck,” he says.

“Yes,” Samantha replies. “That’s what we’re doing, you can’t leave now.”

“Sorry babe,” Matt says getting up and pulling his uniform on.

Samantha watches him dress. “It’s okay baby. I like to think of my big, strong man saving lives. It turns me on,” she says. She emerges from the covers wearing a push up bra and a little skirt with garters. “I’ll be waiting for you. I think I’ll bake some

cookies just for you.” She doesn’t change, just slips on her heels and tousles her hair. “Would you like that?” she coos. He turns back towards her, before he walks out the door, and gently bites her bottom lip.

“What the hell,” Samantha said. She was truly offended, a little bit worried about her choice in underwear tonight, a little shocked she was even thinking about actually sleeping with him, and very shocked he just left this out. She wondered if he intended for her to snoop. When did he even have time to write this? She read on.

Scenario 2:

Your wife is smokin’ man,” Larry says. Larry is just one of the many local firefighters who congregate at Matt’s bar Firefly.

“Yeah, I’d put out her fire anytime,” another fireman on Larry’s squad agrees.

“He didn’t do too badly, did he boys?” Samantha says. She puts one of her arms around Matt’s neck and wipes down the bar counter with the wet rag in her other. Matt smiles and pops the tops off three bottles of beer. The bar is packed, mostly with firemen and a few police officers. As soon as Matt opened his bar in New York, word got around and it became the place to be for all local heroes. They sat around and shared stories of their best and worst work memories. Remember the child trapped under the burning ceiling beam... yeah, I remember... if it hadn’t been for _____ that kid would’ve died/never recovered/never survived. Matt’s war stories were the most admired because

he paid the ultimate price—injured but still loyal to the hero he used to be and the heroes that surround him.

Samantha cringed. She couldn't believe this is what he really thought of her. She scolded herself for falling for another idiot, but she didn't leave. She kept reading instead.

Scenario 3:

Samantha's hair blows wildly in the high speed winds. The winds blow at furious speeds on the top of the fifteen story building. Just inches from the edge, Samantha peeks over. She's thinking about how miserable her life is. How alone she is.

I can remember being happy, she thinks to herself, what happened?

He knew what happened. Matt's running as fast as he can up the fire stairs. "I'm coming for you," he yells at the top of his lungs as he busts through the rooftop entrance.

Samantha looks back to see what the commotion is. Matt is running towards her with his arms outstretched. "Oh Matt, you've come to save me," she says. "I no longer have to worry about being miserable and alone. You're my hero!"

Matt grabs her off the ledge and holds her tight in his arms.

Samantha took a deep breath. This is more about him than me, she hoped. She would've told herself just about anything to justify her feelings towards him. She told

herself she couldn't base anything on his private thoughts. People would probably think badly of her as well if they could read her mind or her journal.

She heard bags shuffling in the hallway and Matt came in.

"That was fast," she said.

"I guess so. You haven't moved from that spot."

"Oh yeah, I was waiting for you to take me on the tour."

"Eat first?"

"Tour first," she said. "I lost my appetite."

Matt put the food in the fridge. He didn't seem to find any of her behavior strange. This made her happy and worried her like most of the things Matt did and said. She couldn't tell which feeling was stronger, or which feeling she had more of, so she tried to go with her original gut reaction, which was that he was hot and interested in her.

"Alright, the grand tour." They skipped an explanation of the living room since Samantha had seen it before. He led her down the hall to look at the bedroom. The bedroom set was obviously of Matt's choosing, nothing colonial about it. It was stylish, almost pornographic. The mattress perched atop a dark wooden platform, but it was the type of contemporary dark-colored wood where all the grain lines have become invisible. The platform was only a foot off the ground, giving, Matt said to Samantha, the room a soft intimacy.

"Leslie thought it was too New York. Too playboy. What do you think?" Matt asked.

Samantha studied it for a moment longer. One side of the platform only extended about half a foot from the side of the bottom of the mattress, The other side extended for two feet and had square cut-outs with red lights shining through them. Samantha thought it made for truly horrifying mood lighting, but she didn't say that. Attached to the back side of the platform was a headboard. A horizontally long rectangle with built in nightstand drawers on each side. The drawers had matching horizontally long, silver handles. The rest of the furniture matched. Matt had even brought home the four ceramic and shiny black vases that Samantha had staged atop the showroom floor dresser at work and arranged them the very same way.

“It's beautiful,” Samantha said.

“What do you like most about it?”

Samantha couldn't get over the murderous red light it filled the room with. “The lighting. Definitely the lighting.”

Unlike the invisible lines at work, Matt and Leslie's apartment was broken up into spaces by walls and changes in flooring. He and Samantha went back out to the kitchen. It was tiled white with maple cabinets and had a peekaboo window above an eat-in bar and two barstools. The peekaboo window looked out onto the pergo wood living room floor and all of the furniture Matt had purchased from Furniture Town. Despite his obvious efforts to copy couch for couch, table for table, and so on from the show room floor to his own house, it didn't give off the same feeling of home as the carefully staged spaces at work. Samantha was overwhelmed by all of Leslie's stuff strewn about, her

purse, yoga mat, women's jeans. These seemed to stand out more than Matt's bag, free weights, and guitar. The rest was clean, neutral, and all standard for apartment living.

"You play guitar?" Samantha asked. She sat down on the couch.

"I mess around some," he said, smiling widely. He picked up the guitar and brought it to the couch, sitting down next to her.

Samantha was happy Matt was playing the guitar, his eyes closed, lips moving, but no sound coming out. She didn't have to come up with conversation topics while he played. Maybe he'd play all night. She watched him play for awhile and then went and poured them glasses of wine. The cabernet had a label she'd never seen before. She carried the glasses of wine over and set them on the coffee table. Matt opened one eye and squinted at her through it. Then he opened the other, put the guitar down, and picked up his glass of wine.

"So, what do you want to do?" she asked.

Matt had already chugged his first glass of wine. He got up and brought the bottle over. "Let's race," he said, pouring himself a second glass of wine. Samantha had only taken one sip.

"Race?"

"Yeah, whoever finishes this glass of wine first gets to decide what we do."

Samantha had never chugged a glass of wine before, but she couldn't think of anything better to do, so she said yes.

"Alright," Matt said. "1, 2, 3, GO."

Samantha tipped back her glass and closed her eyes. She drank fast, but slow enough to make sure wine didn't dribble down her face onto the carpet. When she opened her eyes, Matt's glass was still full. He was laughing. "I can't believe you actually did that."

"Jerk," she said. She punched him on the shoulder. The sudden movement made her realize she was already buzzed.

"Another?" Matt said. His mouth was stuck in a wolfish smile.

"Sure. I get to decide what we are going to do now, don't I?"

"Maybe," he said. "Do I get a veto?"

"No veto," she said. "You have to trust me."

Samantha sipped her second glass of wine, and Matt his third, in silence. She considered what to do. She noticed Leslie's picture wasn't in the living room anymore. Samantha thought about her decision to leave Las Cruces. She would never get this chance with Matt again. She watched Matt, trying to read him. If he were a Furniture Town customer, she would've had him figured out already. He'd invited her over, bought expensive wine, played his guitar, asked her what she thought of his bed; did she really need any other signs? She was going to do it. She was on a risk taking roll.

Samantha moved closer to him. She put her fingertips against his neck.

"So, what're we doing exactly?" Matt asked. She could smell the wine on his breath, or maybe it was her own breath. Samantha timidly ran her hands under Matt's t-shirt, closing her eyes slightly and parting her lips. Her lips only felt air. She opened her eyes. Matt wasn't smiling anymore. He was looking into her eyes.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Please don’t ask me that.”

“I have to. I still don’t know where Leslie” -

“Are you trying to kill this on purpose? If you don’t want me, just tell me straight up.”

Matt picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. He gently threw her onto his spring free, hypo-allergenic, queen sized mattress. Samantha was nervous and afraid to breathe. Sex with Dylan had been comfortable and easy. This didn’t feel anything like that. She was worried if she stopped or hesitated he would change his mind. As he undressed her, and she undressed him, all she could think about was what she would do next.

“This red light doesn’t turn off?” Samantha asked into his neck.

Matt didn’t answer. She kept her eyes open and stared into the red light until her eyesight blurred. Everything that happened after was viewed through this filter, making the sex feel dreamlike. She felt so out-of-her body she didn’t even notice how much noise she was making. And then it was over. She should’ve paid more attention. It was probably never going to happen again, and she’d wasted it. All she could think of immediately after were his little imperfections: doesn’t apply lotion regularly (had patches of dry skin in too many places); abs not as hard as they’d looked; sloppy lips and tongue (they’d left traces of saliva everywhere they touched); and the usual clean, fresh scent of his clothing gone. He didn’t appear to be thinking about anything. He just smiled and looked sleepy. Her turned to her and gave her two thumbs up. Matt got up to

pee. He didn't stroke her hair, or kiss her cheek, but Samantha didn't even notice. She was still horrified he gave her two thumbs up. She wished someone else was there to confirm. After running her first five-mile race they gave her a ribbon. They gave everyone a ribbon. She reminded herself to watch Matt and see in what other situations he gave people two thumbs up. The sale. He'd given her a thumbs up from across the room when he'd made the fraternity sale. She was only one thumb better than the fraternity sale?

She wanted to yell over to him to bring her a towel, but instead she lay under the sheets. She wondered if he would come back from the bathroom naked or dressed. He came out naked and flexed into a stretch when he saw her watching him.

"You want to watch TV?" Matt asked.

"Sure." They dressed and moved to the living room. They sat side by side on the couch. Their shoulders touched, and Matt moved his hand back and forth from Samantha's leg to over her shoulder. Matt settled on *Law & Order*, and Samantha wondered why all men assumed all women liked this show.

The next morning Samantha tried to move, but her right side was asleep and tingly. She rolled over and fell from the couch, forgetting they had moved from the bed and had fallen asleep in the living room. The TV talked to them. Watching Matt sleep -- he snored and his eyelids fluttered lightly -- brought back her adoration for him. She got off the couch and quietly made her way into the kitchen. Pancake mix, milk, and eggs, she could make without waking him. Before she started breakfast, she wanted to wash up. She went into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, it was worse than she thought.

She needed to brush out her hair, finger some toothpaste onto her teeth, and clean the smeared mascara from under her eyes. Matt's electric toothbrush was flattened so none of the bristles stuck straight up anymore. Samantha wondered if Matt brushed too hard, and she smiled at herself in the mirror to see if her own gums were receding.

Matt walked in behind her. "Nice smile," he said. He smiled into the mirror behind her, and it wasn't the smile of a happy face. His lips were back revealing both his top and bottom teeth and stretched to the point of cracking where dryness had settled in. He picked up his toothbrush. Samantha moved closer to the door to get out of his way. He spat into the sink and stuck his face sideways under the faucet to catch water to rinse with.

"I'm going to make breakfast," she said.

Matt gurgled, and Samantha went out to the kitchen. The expiration date on the milk was one day past, but it smelled okay. She stacked the pancakes on a plate in the oven to keep them warm until Matt came out from the bathroom. What the hell was taking him so long, she wondered. Samantha started to get bored. She wanted to see if he had fallen and knocked himself unconscious or maybe snuck out a window. She tiptoed down the hall and peered into the bathroom. He wasn't there, so she peeked into the bedroom. He was changing his clothes. She watched him and thought about how much being in his house was like being at work. Maybe this is why she didn't feel so guilty when she thought about Leslie; she couldn't picture her as a real person and really didn't know much about her, so her guilt was purely abstract.

Matt finished dressing, and Samantha slid quickly out into the kitchen. He came out and rubbed his eyes. She didn't know whether or not to hug him -- she would prefer not to, seeing as how he sweated all night and she could smell him from where she stood, change of clothes and all. He walked over to her and gave her a sideways hug and kissed her on the cheek. At least his breath smelled good.

They sat at the table for breakfast. The silence was awkward, and Samantha started to feel anxious again. She wasn't really hungry and pushed her pancake around her plate with her fork. She decided to tell Matt about school. She expected he would be excited that he'd inspired her to send off her application.

"I finally sent in my application to University of Washington."

He put down his fork. "Seriously, that's great," he said. Samantha thought his voice sounded strained and uninterested. "I have to be honest though. I fantasized about running away to New York with you but I wasn't planning on acting on it."

Samantha ignored the implication. "What were we going to do in New York?" she asked, even though she already knew.

"I was going to open a bar that caters to firemen, and you were going to hang around and look hot."

"Gee thanks. Hopefully you fantasized me some better choices." She knew he hadn't but still wanted him to feel a tiny bit bad.

"Well," Matt said reluctantly, "in one we were having sex, and I had to leave to my job as an EMT, and in the other I saved you from jumping off a building."

"Your fantasies are like bad porn" --

“They’re my fantasies” --

“Well school isn’t a fantasy of mine,” Samantha said. “It’s a goal. I thought you’d be excited.”

“Why would I? We’re not a couple.”

“Well, I haven’t been accepted anyway. Even if I get accepted I don’t know if I’ll go. I was really just trying to fill the awkward silence.”

Matt reached across the table and grabbed her hand. He looked past her. “I’m sorry, I’m sure you’ll get accepted. It would be great if you did. Did you know they have a Furniture Town in Seattle too?”

“Is that so?” She really wanted to say: now who is acting like a couple.

Their conversation faded away. Samantha wasn’t good at being still. She bit the inside of her lip and examined her fingernails.

“I have some errands to run today. You want to come back tonight?” Matt asked. He kicked her lightly in the shin under the table.

Samantha considered playing hard to get but figured it was too late for that, and because she had nothing else to do, she said yes.

17

Samantha didn't feel like going home, so she turned up her radio and drove through the empty streets of downtown. She pulled over to fill her tank and noticed she'd missed a call. It was Adam. In his frustration he'd driven two hours to the Owl Bar. Samantha invited herself out. Two hours was worth it to be a good friend, plus Owl Bar had the best green chile cheeseburgers in all of New Mexico, and, she was willing to admit, she had hopes he'd finally confide in her.

Owl Bar was one of three buildings off of the Bosque exit. Dirt flew up around her car as she pulled into the unpaved parking lot. If you weren't aware of Owl Bar's reputation, there's no way you would stop there based only on appearance. The brown stucco building was windowless, and the wooden door looked like it was rotting off the hinges. Once inside, framed news articles, awards, and recognitions filled the entryway. The walls were completely covered in wood paneling. The tables were wooden; people sat on wooden benches and in wooden booths. The regulars sat at the bar with their heads down and bodies hunched over; men with bad posture and worse problems.

Adam was sitting in a corner doodling on a napkin. Samantha saw he already had an empty plate next to his elbow, waiting for the waitress to pick it up.

She sat down next to him, “Ate without me?”

“You know you really didn’t have to come,” Adam said.

“I needed to eat lunch,” Samantha said. “Nowhere better than here. What’s bothering you?”

Adam stayed silent while the waitress came over and took Samantha’s order. Samantha was beginning to wonder if Adam wasn’t going to answer her question.

“I’ve just been thinking about the day Joseph was born.” He’d been at work when Anita called him panicked. He’d rushed home in his noisy unfinished Impala and helped her out of the house, forgetting all the plans they’d made for this exact moment. On the drive to the hospital, he’d imagined their baby boy staring up at him with eyes just like his own but knew this wouldn’t happen. His baby was going to look like a stranger. Would he be able to see Anita in the baby or only Patrick? He’d wondered if maybe, just out of respect and loyalty, God would infuse the baby with something of Adam. Anything. In the hospital room, with Anita sweating and trying to stay calm, Adam realized that he’d make the baby his no matter what it looked like. Still holding Anita’s hand, he’d looked down to see the little, ghostly pale face staring up at him. Anita had smiled down at their son and handed him up to Adam. Adam hadn’t understood at the time why Anita had cried when he’d held Joseph for the first time. Later, during the divorce, she’d told him she’d never seen him happier.

Samantha ate. Her mouth burned and tears were coming to her eyes. She didn’t know what to say to Adam so she just kept eating, listening, and nodding in agreement.

“I’m lucky to have Matt on my side. He’s so sympathetic, it’s obvious he’s lost something very important to him, and I feel like he’s fighting this battle with me so I don’t end up like him.”

“Work is closed for ten days. Did you get that message?”

“Do you get that same impression from Matt?”

“I don’t really know him that well.” She could already tell that lie was going to cost her down the line. The waitress came to pick up Samantha’s empty plate and left the check with Adam. Samantha reached for her wallet, but Adam left cash on the table. They walked out to their cars together.

“It’s too bad we have to drive back separately. Thanks for coming out,” he added.

“Of course. What’re you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. Call you later?”

“Sounds great. Just hang in there. It’s clear you love Joseph more than anything in the world and because of that everything will be okay.”

She was relieved Adam hadn’t done anything drastic. He’d actually seemed quite calm. She felt silly now for worrying about Adam kidnapping Joseph. It was evident that wasn’t going to happen. She sat in her car, still in the Owl Bar parking lot and cried. The decrepit landscape burned her soul, the green chile burned her eyes and mouth, and Adam’s situation, not to mention her own actions, burned her good faith in people.

18

Driving back into town, Samantha figured she might as well go visit Dylan since she'd seen her other two colleagues today. She needed to clear her head first, so she stopped by her house, changed her clothes, and went for a run. The city had put in a six-mile, paved pathway that went from one side of town to the other. The path ran right next to the main highway in town (south to El Paso and north to Albuquerque) on one side with a neighborhood followed by businesses on the other. She ran past the squat brick houses with varying trim colors: pink, blue, salmon, green, tan, then repeat, and then Wal Mart. There was a line of cars, bumper to bumper, waiting to enter. The state bird fluttered above her in all its plastic glory. There was still a receipt inside. It stayed with her for a few paces, and then was blown under the wheels of a car on the highway. She ran past

the painted water towers and down a steep hill next to another neighborhood. These houses were stucco and had no colored trim. Dogs barked from backyards as she passed. Children screamed and sprayed each other with hoses on the pavement. Not a single lawn had grass, just dirt or pavement or rocks. A few homes had above-ground pools.

She'd run the full six miles when she sat down on a park bench to rest. She didn't want to be out of breath when she got to Dylan's, and she was only a few minutes away. Her feet echoed lightly on the pavement as she walked to his house. She knew Dylan would appreciate her finally sending in the U of W application. He'd taken a leap that'd made him happy and she'd done the same.

When she got to Dylan's, she was greeted with a post-it note on the handle of a rake leaning against the front door with the number 11 written on it. Samantha knocked at his door; no one answered, but it opened with her touch. In front of the coffee table, she saw several moving boxes with their contents strewn on top of the table. There was a picture of his family standing in a yard. She could make Dylan out on the very outside: a little fuzzy and his mouth barely smiling. Next to the picture was a rosary. The apartment was quiet except for Dylan's loud snoring. Samantha looked around. She thought something looked different but couldn't immediately identify what. And then she noticed the rest of the post-it notes. There were at least ten that she could see: 1 was on a bottle of Vicadin sitting next to a half-full bottle of vodka; 2 was on a rope hanging from the ceiling fan; 3 was on a knife in the bathtub. Samantha was frightened. She couldn't believe Dylan would commit suicide; he was finally happy. Number 4 was on the oven door; number 5 was on a cabinet full of cleaning supplies; number 7 was on the

clothes iron. His creativity surprised and terrified Samantha. What was he going to do with the clothes iron? She imagined him burning himself all over, and a wave of nausea briefly stilled her. Number 8 was on a box of fireworks. Was he going to swallow them whole and attempt to get his body hot enough, so the ingested fireworks would ignite and he would explode? Number 9 was on the front of the refrigerator. Samantha didn't think one could probably freeze to death, so she guessed he'd try to use it to smash himself. She thought he could hire a serial killer to bury him alive in it. This made her laugh. Immediately, she felt guilty and was relieved Dylan was asleep. Number 10 was on a pillow. That one was easy to identify, Samantha thought. Suffocation. She saw the empty liquor bottles around Dylan, and she was tempted to write post-it note number 15 and place it on his mouth for death by asphyxiation, but she didn't. She was too worried to even leave him alone. She leaned over him to make sure he was breathing, and she felt something sticky against her forehead. Her head injury, which she'd forgotten about, was throbbing.

Dylan had slammed a post-it note against her. "Death by Samantha," he said.

"What're you doing Dylan?"

He'd briefly grabbed her by the wrists, but now he let go and sat down. "Would you have killed me if I forced myself on you?"

"What is your obsession with dying? What happened. Did Stan do something?"

"I'm trying to make myself feel better."

"Why do you feel bad?"

Dylan told her, in slurred speech, how he'd gone to the Sidewinder's hospital room to surprise him, and how Stan had been with a couple of old high school buddies at the time. Dylan stood in the doorway of the chilled white-walled room holding a get better balloon and a bottle of whiskey he'd snuck up under his shirt. Stan had immediately started raging against Dylan, calling him a stalker fag and telling him to get out or he'd call the police. Dylan had just stood there.

"The worst part is his friends never would've known. I wasn't going to jump him in the hospital bed with all of those people around. I just don't know what he thought I was going to do."

Samantha brushed the sweat off of Dylan's forehead. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Please don't kill yourself over that idiot."

He smacked her hand away. "Why do you hate him so much? What did he ever do to you?"

"Look what he did to you."

Dylan turned towards the wall, away from Samantha.

"He cares more about his image than he cares about you, Dylan."

"And you care more about being right," Dylan mumbled into the wall.

19

Matt opened the door to Samantha in her running clothes.

"I need to use your shower," she said. Running had cleared her head some, but her visit with Dylan had messed it back up again, and she still didn't want to see her parents, so she decided to go to Matt's. A shower seemed like the next best way to relax.

“Sure,” he said smiling, “can I join you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” she said, pushing her way past him. She went into the bathroom and slid the lock into place.

The hot water felt good running over her. She scrubbed herself with a loofah whose smell she didn’t recognize. She thought about what Dylan had said to her. She didn’t want him to die and she didn’t care about being right and she didn’t know why she was giving off this impression. She tried to think of what Dr. Cabo would’ve said if he’d been watching. Was she that self-centered? This thought made her feel guilty, and her guilt spread to shoving past Matt when he had eventually been supportive of her possible move. She decided to make it up to him. Voices floated into the bathroom from the living room, and Samantha guessed he was watching TV. She slathered lotion all over herself and brushed out her wet hair. She hung up her towel and opened the door. Matt would forgive her as soon as he saw her soft and wet skin still warm from the shower. She walked out into the hallway and leaned against the corner of the wall where it met with the living room.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry Leslie, I didn’t know you were” --

Samantha grabbed the throw off the couch and covered herself with it.

“Samantha?” Adam looked back and forth between her and Matt. She smiled sheepishly. Now she felt really low. “How could you do this to Leslie? When did you become such an asshole?” Adam yelled at Matt. He turned to Samantha, “And you”... “I thought you were better than all of this shit. I thought your place here was temporary. I thought you were going somewhere.”

Samantha wanted to cry, but the things Adam was saying strengthened and flattered her, and he'd reacted so quickly. She didn't want Adam to compare her to Patrick, but that's who she was in this scenario, and Adam was maybe the only one who really believed in her. He was the one she should've been talking to all this time about her problem with accepting her job, and sending in her college application. She and Matt were sabotaging family while Adam was working for his family, a family that wasn't even rightfully his anymore, a family Samantha had become a part of, and now he was upset with her. She started to cry.

Adam ignored her. "Who knew? This whole time I thought you were my friend, but you're just like Patrick. I thought you were a good person, but the only thing you care about is yourself."

"How can you say that when I've been there for you?" She cried more. She was self-centered. Who cared if she'd been there for him. This wasn't about any of the good deeds she'd done.

"This day couldn't get much worse. Fuck all of you," Adam yelled. He was crying too now.

Samantha felt claustrophobic and ridiculous crying with Adam while Matt cowered on the couch. It was clear he was trying to think of a way to get rid of them. They heard shouting in the hallway.

"Come out and kill me Matt. You're gonna wanna kill me so dead." They heard a loud thump followed by silence. Matt opened the door to find Dylan slumped against the frame with a post-it note marked 21 stuck to his jacket collar.

“Oh christ,” Samantha said. Matt dragged Dylan into his living room.

“This isn’t good,” Adam said through his tears.

“What the fuck is going on?” asked Matt. Dylan woke up and punched the air.

Matt sat on Dylan’s chest to try and calm him down. His glance alternated between Samantha and Adam. “Anything?” he said.

“I raped her,” Dylan said, pointing haphazardly towards Samantha.

“No you didn’t. He didn’t,” Samantha insisted. “He barely even tried.”

“Why is he saying he did?” Adam asked.

“He’s trying to kill himself,” Samantha said. “Look, it’s really complicated. We should sober him up, let him rest, and then I’m sure he’ll explain it rationally.”

“You care about me?” Dylan asked Samantha. His words were hardly discernible. He tried to lift his head off the ground, but it quickly fell back down.

Samantha leaned down next to Dylan and Matt. She put her hand on Matt’s shoulder and put her other in Dylan’s hair.

“How could you let us sponsor that asshole Sidewinder?” Dylan slurred.

“What is he talking about?” Matt asked.

Adam shrugged.

Samantha looked off into the distance, avoiding eye contact. They knew she knew the details.

The three of them stood in silence, except for Dylan’s snoring.

“I should go,” Samantha said.

“I’m leaving too,” Adam said. “Go first. I don’t want to be near you.”

“This has nothing to do with you. Don’t take out your anger at Anita on me.”

“The three of you just fuck around all day like you have no cares in the world.

Some of us have responsibility to others, you selfish pricks.”

Samantha was scared Adam was going to hit something.

“Samantha needed me, and you don’t know anything about what I feel for Leslie.

Maybe this moment will bring me back to her, you don’t know.”

Samantha couldn’t believe what Matt was saying. “I needed you?! You know what? You’re right. I did need you. I needed you to be this giant asshole that you are currently being to help me see that it’s time to leave this city. So thanks. Thanks for this very special week together.”

Matt stared at her blankly. Samantha stormed towards the front door. “And you,” she said, addressing Adam, “because of your self-righteousness I really have nothing to stay for since I’m no longer Joseph’s positive, female role model.”

“See you tomorrow Stan,” Dylan said, “at work.” The words left his mouth lazily, and he passed out again on Matt’s floor with his mouth wide open. Drool puddled in the royal blue of Matt’s mod color-bloc rug.

Walking out of Matt’s apartment, she immediately felt guilty. She hated being angry because it filled her with regret. The type of regret you feel after getting trashed, making a fool of yourself, throwing up, being hungover, swearing to never have another drink, and doing it all over again next month. She wished she could turn around and apologize. They just let their feelings get the best of them; we’re all stressed right now,

she thought. She kept walking, thinking they wouldn't listen to her now anyway and just hoped going back to work would make everything normal again.

Gilbert was back, and he had the news on when the employees arrived. Matt, Samantha, Adam, and Dylan's eyes bored into Gilbert. Their arms were crossed and they had scowls on their faces. Samantha had planned on making amends and trying to get everyone happy and friendly again, but they all seemed set against it, and this made her grouchy and angry all over again. The news report distracted her. Gilbert was surprised to see the state of his employees when he got back from Europe; Samantha could tell by the quarter he was flipping. It was a nervous habit he seemed to think no one noticed.

“You all look like pouty teenagers. What the hell happened here?”

Samantha opened her mouth to respond, but Gilbert gave her a look like he didn't actually want an answer, so she shut it. Matt and Dylan scowled. Adam picked at some paint peeling from the customer service desk.

“Never mind then,” he said. “We have more important problems to deal with.”

Samantha correctly assumed he was referring to the news report. The local station was covering what they were calling “The Great Furniture Heist.” They didn't elaborate much, reporting that police were currently conducting an investigation, and that more coverage would be offered later in the week. They also reminded their viewers that if they'd been a victim of a similar crime, to please call and report it.

“Does anyone know anything about this?” Gilbert asked. “The rumor is all the stolen furniture was purchased from us.”

“Do they suspect our competitors?” Samantha asked.

“I don’t know if they have any leads. The news probably just finds it intriguing, you know, newsworthy. Probably trying to scare the culprit into making a mistake.”

Matt, Dylan, and Adam didn’t show the least bit of interest in the thefts.

Samantha wanted to find out what else Gilbert thought about the situation, but she didn’t want to be the only person asking questions.

“Well, let’s get to work, people. At least we can be adults and pretend to be happy for the sake of the customers.”

Samantha stood up with a big smile on her face. She tucked her hair behind her ear. Still smiling she said, “Just tell those three assholes to stay away from me.”

“There you go gentleman,” Gilbert said. “You have your orders for the day.”

The news came back from commercials with a breaking news report. Gilbert turned up the volume. The hot female reporter, as Matt had put it, stood outside Memorial Hospital, gesturing at a scrawny looking man in a wheelchair. Samantha leaned closer. It was Stan the Sidewinder. They were releasing him from the hospital. Samantha couldn’t believe they kept him there so long for an anxiety attack. She looked sideways at Dylan to see how he’d react, but he was standing stone still. The reporter yelled over the crowd, waiting to catch a glimpse of the UFC fighter while commending his bravery. That’s when Samantha knew the news had spun the story, if not completely fabricated a new one. Apparently, the story went that the Sidewinder had corralled the humongous swarm of cockroaches into a corner thereby clearing the way for the rest of the employees to escape. Okay, not so true, but not so spun, Samantha thought to herself.

And then she thought she heard the reporter use the following words: bobcat; death-defying; choke-hold; and gangster. There was the spin and the fabrication. She wanted to laugh, poke fun, and just start general hysteria with the rest of them but refused to be the first to cave. Dylan snorted and flipped off the TV Sidewinder. Gilbert turned off the TV.

Samantha crossed her fingers in the hopes no one would come for a furniture pick-up so she wouldn't have to venture into enemy territory. She mainly wanted to avoid Adam. She and Dylan were on confused terms. She couldn't define it any better than that. Samantha's hopes were shattered when she saw a familiar face walk through the door. The man had been an extremely easy customer. Very agreeable. Didn't seem to take any particular interest in Samantha and had been polite through the entire process. She was sorry she was going to have to be so rude.

“Hi. Samantha, right?”

“That's right. Your furniture's not ready.”

“Oh, but this guy, Gilbert, called this morning to let me know it was in.”

“He's wrong.”

“Samantha, can I speak with you?” Gilbert gestured for Samantha to join him across the room. “Explanation?”

“I'm not going back there, and I'm not asking Adam or Dylan to pull his furniture. I don't want their help.”

“Pull it yourself then.”

“Did you even HEAR about my head injury? I can't go back there.”

“Of course I did,” Gilbert said, but Samantha saw from the confused look on his face Matt hadn’t called to report it.

Samantha pulled her hair back, “do you want to see the scar?”

“I swear to god your reason for being a total pain in my ass better be good.”

“I’m quitting. This is my two weeks notice.”

“That’s not a good reason, in fact that’s just a reason for me to be a pain in your ass,”

“I can’t stay here forever.” She was being selfish for living with her parents still, working at a job that, when she was honest with herself, was easy and comfortable, and, in moments of real reflection, she realized she liked being surrounded by irresponsible men. She was used to being the center of attention, and hanging around them made her feel better about herself.

“Well, should I make an announcement to the other employees?”

“Can we hold off until my last week maybe? I need to work some things out first.”

“You guys all have a lot to work out apparently.”

Samantha shrugged.

“Well work it out soon because I’m throwing you a going away party. Right here in the store.” Gilbert smiled as if this was the best idea he’d ever had.

“Sure,” Samantha said. She gritted her teeth. “Actually yeah, that’s great.”

Samantha went back to the warehouse and stood behind the massive metal shelves peeking between two boxes. She peered at Gilbert and the customer and watched as

Gilbert excused himself, following him with her eyes to the restroom door. She walked back to her customer.

“I’m sorry sir. Gilbert made a mistake. We do have the same type of set you ordered up there, but it’s a damaged piece. You don’t want that do you?” Samantha pushed on the man’s back lightly guiding him towards the door. She didn’t wait for an answer before she waved goodbye. “I’ll call you soon,” Samantha said, turning her back.

“What was that?” Gilbert rushed out, still zipping up his fly.

Samantha tried to gauge how much Gilbert had heard. “His wife called and they aren’t ready for it. He’ll be back later. Random, huh?”

“Uh huh,” Gilbert replied doubtfully.

“You don’t understand. I broke one of the warehouse lights with my head.”

Gilbert just kept looking at her.

“I have warehouse PTSD. You should feel lucky I’m not suing for damages.”

“Yeah. I feel real lucky.” Gilbert started flipping the quarter again. “So is your warehouse PTSD responsible for the bizarre accessory reorganization?”

“You noticed that?”

“Things are just getting stranger and stranger around here.”

Two families walked into the store together. Samantha recognized one of the fathers from a billboard that advertised DWI representation. He looked even more fake in real life than he did on the billboard. His skin was stretched tightly against his face, and his dark orange tan made his piano key teeth look a glowing, radiating white.

“Welcome to Furniture Town, how can we help you today?” Gilbert asked.

Samantha stood beside him, smiling.

“Something very strange has happened. You’ve probably heard about it on the news,” the other father said.

“All of our furniture has been stolen, and we need to refurnish our houses,” billboard guy finished.

“It went all gone. POOF POOF,” the smallest of the boys said joyfully.

Samantha guessed he was three or four years old. The mother patted the boys head.

“He thinks a magician made it disappear. He’s too small to understand robbery, you know?”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think the furniture stores were behind this. Trying to get your sales up?” the billboard guy said. He elbowed Gilbert and flashed knowing eyes.

Samantha tried to suppress a nervous laugh.

“It was a joke guys,” the DWI lawyer said.

The two men introduced themselves while their families hung back to browse. The DWI lawyer was named Robert, and the other man was Tim.

“I have an inside source at the police station,” Tim said. “They’re slowly getting around to searching all of the empty lots and abandoned buildings. So far they haven’t found anything.”

Samantha’s mouth was going dry, and her throat felt raw. What world did she live in when she hadn’t foreseen a police investigation, and was now in way over her

head. She'd have to burn it as soon as possible; before the police got to the Mission. She wished she knew when that would be.

“One of the strangest parts,” Robert said, “is that the thieves literally only took the furniture. They emptied out all of the resident’s personal possessions.”

“What do you make of that?” Tim asked. Was Samantha imaging it, or was he staring right at her? Was he mocking her? She took deep breaths and reminded herself there was no way anyone could know it was her. At least not yet.

“Too bad the FBI doesn’t owe me a favor,” Tim joked.

“The local police just don’t have the resources,” Robert added.

“Especially with all of the drug trafficking and kidnappings happening in this region,” Gilbert said. Samantha was impressed with how composed Gilbert seemed. She supposed it was because these were the easiest customers. They could afford to replace everything they’d lost. They seemed to think the thefts added drama and dimension to their lives, and Samantha wondered if they might even find the whole thing amusing. Samantha let Gilbert and Matt take the two families. She didn’t want to add to her guilt by earning profit off her theft. That would be overdoing it, and people get caught when they get too greedy.

21

It is true there existed many hundreds of miles of undeveloped desert in the areas between cities. From Las Cruces to Alamogordo, the road was straight, and the only civilized additions were the telephone poles that ran through the mesquite, obstructing the otherwise perfectly clear view of nothing. The land was dry and scorched by recent fires, and the only plants that grew were devilish looking—plants prickly and sharp, drawing blood from anyone who touched them. Still, the telephone poles were an invasive species. Hawks perched atop them, one after the other, enjoying the height to hunt their

prey. It was rumored the coyote howled at Wal Mart's parking light fixtures in the middle of the night when no one was around, but this myth faded when someone pointed out Wal Mart's parking lot was never deserted, and the coyote was permanently pushed to the outskirts of the city. Gilbert drove his old VW van with his staff in the back. He'd insisted they go on a work outing together since he'd just returned and morale was so low.

They rolled up to the checkpoint, and the border patrol agent (it's a common mistake to think border patrol only patrol the literal Mexico/U.S. border) motioned for Gilbert to roll down his window. Gilbert shook his head no and opened his door.

"Sir, do not get out of your vehicle." The border patrol agent grabbed his radio like it was a gun.

"Oh man no, I'm not getting out. My window is broken."

The agent didn't relax. "Are you all American citizens?"

"Dylan isn't," Matt shouted from the back.

Gilbert laughed. "He's only joking."

"Can you please pull over to the side. Have all of the passengers get out of the vehicle, line up against the wall, and get out their drivers licenses."

"Come on man. He was just joking with you," Gilbert said.

"Sorry MAN. It's policy. Now please." A black crow's abrasive caw echoed the agent's voice. Gilbert pulled up and over next to the small white and green border patrol office. Grainy sand swirled around them. They all held their I.D.'s.

“Where are you five on your way to?” A second border patrol agent approached them from the shack behind, switching places with the first border patrol agent who’d taken Adam’s I.D. with him into the hut.

Before they could answer, the first border patrol agent waved for the other to come join him. Samantha watched them speak seriously in the hut. Adam seemed unfazed. Samantha wondered if he had this problem a lot.

“Sir, your I.D. has been flagged. We need to take you into custody and drive you to the Sheriff’s office.”

“What did I do? I’m a U.S. citizen. I was born here.”

“We can’t release that information, sir. Please come with us.”

Samantha and Gilbert protested but the border patrol officers wouldn’t give them any more information, and Adam was quickly loaded into the large border patrol SUV with green striping on the side.

“You won’t be able to speak with him for at least several hours, so we suggest you go on your way and enjoy your excursion.”

Pranking Dylan and getting them stopped was bad enough; with Adam in custody the trip seemed doomed as a lasting mood lifter.

Gilbert and the remaining three reloaded into the van. Gilbert insisted the cooler stay in the front seat along with the sleds, camera, and yoga mat. When Samantha had first got in, she’d asked Gilbert about the mat.

“There’s no better place to meditate than the gently sloping hills of white sand,” Gilbert had said.

“You’re going to meditate at the office party? What’re we supposed to do?”

“Socialize of course. Enjoy each other outside of the office.”

“You have no idea,” Matt had said.

Samantha called Anita to let her know what’d happened, and, with much pleading, Anita asked Samantha to please keep everyone away until they could work through the problem themselves. Samantha thought something in Anita’s voice suggested she knew this was coming.

“Anita seems to think everything will be ok. That it’s just a misunderstanding. She doesn’t want us to turn around.”

“Onward then,” Gilbert said.

After the payment and registration gate, it’s a little bit of a drive until you get to the good dunes free of brush and plants. These first dunes were where park rangers lead nature hikes and moonlight strolls. The pure sand dunes, the ones that were white and shiny and sparkled for miles and miles were the best for rolling down, writing in, making sand angels, and sledding on. All the same things you’d do in the snow without the freezing cold and damp. White sands was where the beach met the snow because like the sand at the beach, little heads stuck out giggling in excitement.

The rangers had cleared a driving path in the sand that led to a large circle of picnic tables and grills. Gilbert pulled over next to one. The people who were there before had etched a giant “suck it” in the side of the dune.

“Your first job,” Gilbert pointed to Matt, “is to replace that message with FT party 2012.”

Matt took off his shoes. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I want to take a picture.” Gilbert rifled through his cooler.

Dylan laughed at Matt’s punishment.

“You sir, obviously need a job,” Gilbert said to Dylan.

“I’m good.”

“Uh-uh, everybody needs to be a helper.” Gilbert handed him a bag of raw hamburger meat already formed into seven small burgers. “Why don’t you fire up the grill.”

“What should I do?” Samantha asked.

“How about you pour the lemonade, and Dylan can help you set the table while the burgers cook.”

Samantha got out the paper plates and plastic utensils and started to set the table.

“There’s a tablecloth,” Gilbert said with his back turned.

Samantha sighed, picked up the place settings and laid out the tablecloth before setting the table again. A gust of wind formed a small dust devil that picked up the styrofoam and plastic wear.

Dylan left the burgers unattended and ran after them. The plates spun in the middle of a mini-tornado. A park ranger drove slowly alongside Dylan.

“Sir, we will have to fine you if you insist on littering.”

Dylan flipped them off without making eye contact.

“You didn’t think that was funny sir, because I have to tell you it’s fucking hilarious.” The rangers laughed and sped off. Matt laughed loudly from his dune. His

jeans were rolled up to his knee, and he was halfway through his message. Gilbert shouted “gustnado, gustnado!!” The dust devil died off, and everything in its midst fell to the ground. Dylan went back to collecting the place settings. He wiped them off with the bottom of his sweaty shirt.

“That’s gross,” Samantha said. “I’d rather eat sand.”

“Hey, I’m doing the best I can. I ran after them, didn’t I?”

“Yes, that’s very kind of you,”

“We should’ve gone to the Bosque,”

Samantha had been the tiebreaker when they voted on where they were going. It was a debate between picnicking and sledding White Sands and hiking at the Mesilla Valley Bosque. As much as she liked hiking, the Bosque was known for its wildlife -- rattlesnakes, scorpions, and tarantulas. None of these things had grown on Samantha no matter how much her mother tried: taking her to a reptile farm, buying her a book about why rattlesnakes are misunderstood, and keeping a pet tarantula in a fish tank. Gilbert and Dylan had voted White Sands, mainly because Dylan was out of shape and didn’t look forward to a sweaty, exhausting hike, and Gilbert much preferred yoga and meditation on the dunes to listening to Dylan gripe about being fat. Samantha couldn’t help but laugh. Dylan had gotten a workout after all.

Now here they were sitting around a picnic table staring at each other. Dylan and Matt were on one side and Samantha on the other. Gilbert was off sitting cross-legged on the top of a sun-drenched hill. Samantha thought she heard chanting, but Gilbert was too far away for anyone to see if his mouth was moving.

Samantha looked at Matt and put her hand over her mouth.

“What?”

“You’re chewing with your mouth open.”

“And?”

“And it’s gross.”

“Don’t look at my face then,” Matt said.

“Ridiculous,” Dylan said.

“Right?” Matt said.

“No, I mean you two fighting like little kids. And you should chew with your mouth closed,” Dylan said.

“It’s disgusting,” he added.

Samantha smiled.

“But maybe you should stop looking at him all the time.”

They stopped arguing when Gilbert came up to the table. Even worse than sitting alone all together, was getting another attitude lecture from Gilbert when he didn’t know the whole story, and no one was willing to tell him. Eventually, they bonded over their mutual frustration with the boss. By the end of the picnic, Matt was civilly helping Dylan clean the grill without being ordered to, and Samantha and Dylan were laughing at a joke Matt made about park rangers. Matt even took Samantha to the side and apologized for what he said about her to Adam.

“I panicked. I never know what to say when someone criticizes my behavior. I shouldn’t have put it all on you.”

Samantha felt like she should forgive him, but now that she knew the kind of man he was she knew he wasn't worth staying for. She hoped next time she wouldn't make the same mistake.

The smooth maple legs of the kitchen table rose up in a slight u-shape in support of Samantha's family's sustenance. Three bowls of spaghetti sat around the table.

Samantha and her mother and father ate methodically: Samantha because she was about to break big news; her mother because she knew her daughter and she could tell something was wrong; and her father because neither of the women at the table were speaking.

“Exciting, right? We’re hardly ever home together at dinner time,” Randal said.

“Just come out with it,” Sandy said.

Samantha finished chewing her spaghetti and stuck a piece of garlic bread in her mouth. Sandy had put down her fork, and Samantha worried that if she didn't say anything her mother would never eat again.

“Ok mom, but you can't freak out.”

“Can I freak out?” her father asked.

“Aren't you funny, and I submitted my U of W application finally, and I won't know for awhile if I got in or not but I'm moving there anyway and moving in with Jess.”

“Honey, did you get all of that?” Sandy asked her husband.

“Nope. You'd think after all these years we could understand our own daughter.”

Samantha hated when they talked about her like she wasn't here. They were teasing, but still, this was serious business. She took a big drink of water and stuck more garlic bread in her mouth.

Her mom laughed. "We already know sweetie. Jess called today and blurted out the big news."

"And you're okay with it?"

"Your mother cried for hours."

"Well your father went and bought moving boxes."

That was easy, Samantha thought. Now if she could only have Jess break the news to the most unsupportive person she knew. They were meeting at Milagro's. Not exactly a good spot for her to be giving people news, but there weren't a lot of choices.

"I'm leaving for college," she said breathlessly as soon as she saw him in line. "Next week."

"In Washington?"

"Yep." Matt already knew she'd applied, but she thought she should tell him it was actually happening.

"Congratulations. Should we have one last goodbye?"

Samantha didn't care if Matt was serious. She'd save him the embarrassment. She laughed and told him it was a night she'd always remember, and that he'd been the one to finally make her believe she'd be okay no matter where she decided to be. Then she gagged a little for being such a cliché. Matt didn't seem to notice her choice of

words. She looked out the window and saw an attractive woman with a bob walking towards them. They sat down.

“Is that Leslie?” Samantha asked nervously.

“Yeah, she’s back. I told her to meet me here.”

“Should I leave?”

“Why? I’m not going to tell her. Are you?” Matt asked.

“Well, no, but isn’t this going to be awkward?”

Matt didn’t have time to respond. Leslie was at his side with a beaming smile.

“Sorry Samantha,” she said. “I’m not a huge fan of PDA, but I haven’t seen this guy in forever.” She sat down in Matt’s lap and kissed him. Matt smiled and touched her hair when she laid her head against his shoulder. “So, what did I miss?” she asked.

23

Samantha left Milagro's reassured she was doing the right thing. Matt had propositioned her literally five minutes before Leslie was back in his arms. She dialed Anita for an update on Adam now that enough time had passed. Anita answered the phone and spoke to her in a rushed voice, offering only the vaguest of details. Samantha learned that Adam had threatened Patrick in a letter he'd mailed with no return address. Apparently, in his intense anger, Adam had signed the letter. Patrick had immediately guessed who it was from anyway, and he'd called in a favor from a friend at the police department. They issued Adam an arrest warrant, and when Anita arrived to see Adam his eye was bruised, and he had a small round burn on his arm. Adam refused to tell Anita what had happened, and she wasn't sure what was going to happen next. She said she'd keep

Samantha in the loop, and then she hung up without allowing Samantha time to ask any questions.

Information continued to be sparse the next day at work. “I got a phone call from the police department this morning,” Gilbert said. “They want each of you to come in for questioning.” Samantha went into major anxiety mode. She bit her fingernails, twirled her hair, and breathed quickly. She couldn’t go in for questioning like this. She had a better idea: it was time to finish shopping for the necessary supplies.

Almost everything Samantha knew about law she got from TV: police could easily trace credit card receipts; they could also ask the employees of camping stores for a description of whoever bought a ridiculous amount of kerosene; almost any DIY illegal activity could be found on the internet. Google taught her about jet fuel, different ways to ignite it, how to hide her tracks, etc., but she couldn’t find a name of someone crooked who could sell it to her. She’d known better, but still hoped to find “jet-fuel-hoarder-who-sells-to-anyone-without-asking-questions” yelp page. Instead, she’d ended up asking Matt. He’d provided the information under false pretenses, and now she was a little worried he would make the connection and know it was her. It was too late now. The jet fuel-hoarding airplane mechanic lived in Deming (according to Matt). She didn’t know how much she’d need, so she took a cut of the cash she’d stolen from work and the moving truck. When she pulled up, a man was sitting on a small trash heap in his front yard practicing his casting.

“Are you Flashpoint?” Some nickname, she thought.

“That’s me. I don’t get many visitors of your age and gender. Are you selling me something?” He wore rubber wading boots, white-washed cutoff denim shorts with heavy fraying at the cuffs, and no shirt. His white chest-hair made him sparkle in the hot Deming sun.

“Actually, I need to buy something.”

He looked at her quizzically.

“Jet fuel?” she added. She hadn’t meant it to be a question.

He asked her what she planned on using it for, and she thought he wasn’t going to sell it to her. Maybe he was a retired airplane mechanic who worked with criminals but also had a moral streak. It turned out he was just asking because there were various types. That’s good to know, she thought.

After telling him exactly what kind of fire she wanted to start, he recommended jet fuel type B. He explained it was much more volatile, but the 30% kerosene to 70% gasoline ratio would be easier to ignite. She wouldn’t need as hot a heat, and the oxygen from the air outside combined with a tool like a welding torch should start it just fine with enough time to let her get out without getting hurt. He put his hand on her shoulder and gravely told her to use it as soon as possible. It was especially volatile when kept in warm temperatures. Since she didn’t have a giant freezer room to keep it in, she agreed, the sooner she could use it the better. She’d keep it in the truck in the Furniture Town garage until then. He helped her load the canisters. After the last one was loaded, she paid him, and he resumed his spot on the trash pile. She waved goodbye, and he gave her a sharp salute.

24

Samantha had been hiding the stolen furniture for weeks. News reports had been scarce because of the frequent and ridiculous coverage of Stan's hospital stay "due to the

cockroach infestation at the very store he was sponsoring.” Reporters liked to say these lines with extreme hyperbole as if it was the most ironic set of circumstances they could’ve ever possibly imagined. The stars spied on Samantha from their expanse of black, and now Samantha wished for light pollution; regardless, only a few hours away from her party, she acted. Gilbert had closed the store for the day to allow for a follow-up inspection in case of any remaining cockroaches. He was so disgusted by bugs it verged on being labeled a disorder. Samantha stood in the parking lot with ten different day laborers she’d picked up from Home Depot with an offer of one hundred dollars apiece. Cash she’d stolen from work. She’d already dug herself in pretty deep -- why not take \$1,000 more from work to top it all off? The original few who had helped her steal the furniture weren’t around anymore.

The abandoned mission next door held furniture stacks, and behind the building more stacks were covered in tarps and cardboard. She directed the day laborers to remove these and bring all of the furniture pieces to the middle of the parking lot. Samantha could hear the men mumbling. They weren’t bringing any furniture over. She went to find out what was holding them up. They didn’t want to touch the stuff. Everything was covered in a layer of dust, and even in the dark from where Samantha stood she could see different sizes of animal feces everywhere. She reminded them of the money while cursing to herself for not bringing gloves. A criminal mastermind she still was not. Something about that made her feel a little better.

The idea was they would stack each piece of furniture until they had a fairly sturdy tower, but nothing so high it might topple. The workers did this with the precision

one might see in a kid playing Tetris. When they were finished, the tower was sure to be over forty feet. The men were stacking geniuses. Samantha hadn't thought about how they would get the furniture on top of the stack as it grew, but they managed to stack pieces that acted as steps. She'd never seen the Egyptian pyramids up close, but she imagined her furniture stack was a beautiful mini-version with items built from wood instead of stone bricks. The men worked faster and faster as they found a rhythm, and before long they only had nightstands, vanities, two-drawer filing cabinets and other small pieces. The last piece was being placed on top, like the angel on a Christmas tree, when a worker shouted down at her. His words reached her as a soft whisper. People were beginning to notice this tall dark shadow in the distance.

Samantha went inside Furniture Town to see if her mysterious tower had been picked up by the news yet. They just wrapped up a report about Stan being swept out of Las Cruces by Frieda, and the sudden loss of guaranteed high news ratings left a large chunk of time for "The Great Furniture Theft" follow-up. KVIA featured a story recap for those who may have missed it: the strange break-ins included emptying out the homeowners' belongings before the furniture was taken from their homes. The contents of their dressers, night stands, and entertainment units were piled where the corresponding furniture used to be. The news station follow up said that the break-ins had seemed to stop, and the police were still working on several possible leads. The female reporter said she called the sheriff for comment, but he'd declined to give information, insisting he would hold a press conference when the time was right. The screen flashed to a typed list of questions the reporter had for the sheriff: How is it the

police can't find hundreds of pieces of missing furniture? How many vacant lots could there really be in Las Cruces? Have Furniture Town's rivals been questioned? Samantha didn't read the rest.

Although Samantha couldn't see it, she knew what was happening inside the homes of Las Cruces this evening:

The sun set lazily over the small town of Las Cruces, New Mexico while its families, rich and poor, predictably sat in front of their surround sound flat screens and portable black and whites. The families were bound together by an obscure commonality. Most of their televisions sat on the floor; some families had already replaced their furniture, but others were still holding out hope the police would find their missing items. A reporter showed an interview with the Morales family who had termed the break in at their house a dumb-man's robbery because the only items stolen were furniture. The robbers even went so far as to empty clothing and jewelry out of dresser drawers and speakers and DVDs off of entertainment unit shelves. Mr. Morales seemed surprisingly elated to be on TV; he spoke rapidly and excitedly about the robbery of their home.

Children came in from playing outside. Parents returned from work and hastily put together dinner for anyone in the family who hadn't already grabbed scraps of random fast food in between their afternoon activities. Deep sighs were let out as families sat down on their couches, preparing to watch the evening news. The news always drew people in with local entertainment coverage -- smarty-pants Susie surprises locals with perfect attendance from preschool to last year of high school -- because

everyone likes to hear about themselves and the people they know. Then the news would turn serious, but most of the time this only consisted of car crashes and kidnappings.

Tonight though something was different, and as soon as the blank stares had settled they were gone again. People moved forward in their seats. Children turned to their parents with wide mouths wanting to ask questions but not wanting to miss what the news-lady was saying:

The station has just received a press release from the police department stating that their best lead so far involved day laborers throwing more money around than usual. Also, they're closing in on the abandoned lots. They started their inspections on the outskirts of the city, and, in a spiral shape, have been making their way back into the center. The police are also looking into the possibility that this is just a stunt meant to distract them from drug smuggling crimes.

Samantha felt guilty and exposed. She turned off the TV in case she was beginning to look guilty and obvious too. It was only moments before they would find her. People had probably already called in the strange shadowy pyramid lurking in the dark. It wouldn't take much to guess what the pyramid was comprised of, she thought.

She glanced out the window, saw that the day-laborers were growing restless, and turned the news back on. The news lady had her hand up to her ear, listening to an ear-piece. Samantha could picture all of Las Cruces holding its breath, waiting for her to speak.

We have exciting news from Furniture Town. If you are able to get down to their store in the next hour, they will replace all of your missing pieces for you.

She repeated herself. Word-for-word. Four times. Samantha could imagine families breathing, pausing, and then flying into action; they would put more acceptable clothes on, most had already changed into pajamas, sweatpants, or stained tops, and then

gather the kids into action searching for car keys, loading everyone into the car, and waiting for mom to finish double checking their inventory of missing furniture. Some families would even bring pictures of their furniture-less house for effect (in case the news crew was there).

Samantha went outside to scan the workers' hands for cellphones. Someone had ratted her out. She wanted to know who made the phone call, but none of the laborers looked suspicious, only tired and in a hurry to finish. Samantha was panicked, but she couldn't back down now. So what, hundreds of people would make their way down and see the fire. It would be too dangerous for them to come close. After lighting it, she would just have to circle around and slyly join the mob as if she'd been there the whole time.

She gave the men the canisters of jet fuel. They covered their noses and mouths with the arms they weren't using to carry and started at the top, generously covering the furniture with the liquid. Samantha wasn't worried about running out. They circled down until the whole pile was covered. Samantha took the last canister and poured it in a thin, long line leading out from the furniture mountain until the can was empty. She hoped Flashpoint was right about the fuel. She didn't want the plan to blow up in her face. Literally.

The sky was darker now. The stars, afraid or offended by what Samantha was planning, disappeared into the dark. Samantha distributed the money, thanked the workers, and asked them to leave. She was worried they would have stray drops of fuel covering them, and she didn't want anyone to get hurt. She stood at the end of her line

with her father's industrial welders torch kit. She'd done hours of research and discovered the torch included in this kit would transfer some type of current to the base metal, which would create the sparks needed to light her kerosene line (not its intended purpose) and direct the oxygen needed to keep the fire burning. That sounded like what Flashpoint had described to her. It'd been surprisingly difficult to find any information on how to commit arson. The majority had come from fire department webpages, and they were trying to prevent them. As she fired up the torch, she heard what started as mumbling and exploded into the sound of an organized march. The city was coming. She needed to light the pile before they came too close. She took a deep breath, fired up the torch, and the fuel line exploded into a narrow alley of fire. The marching continued in reverse; the sound of steps was quieting. They were retreating to a safe distance, and Samantha followed them.

The fire spread quickly from the kerosene on the concrete to the forty-foot furniture pile. An explosion was heard, and the smoke cleared to reveal an orange fire. Flashpoint had said the fire wouldn't burn blue because the jet fuel didn't have a high enough burn point. Instead the flames would instead stay a vivid, awe-inspiring orange. Samantha thought it was beautiful, and she'd made it. The fire moved along the surface of the wood like waves over the sand. Parking her car miles away from the fire in the midst of the mob's vehicles, Samantha worried the fire wouldn't continue to spread, but her worry was unfounded. As the fire burned brighter the mob turned angrier.

It burned, and burned, and burned, and for a moment, Las Cruces was the brightest city in the entire world. No one could see anything or anyone else. Minds

erased of everything but bright, pure light. Bodies released of all sensations except sudden and encompassing warmth.

The smell of aircraft and campfires wafted through the air. Samantha wanted to cheer, but thought better of it. She stood with the rest of the city framed by the flames in the distance. Children forgot their upset families and danced and screamed in excitement until their parents could corral them back into the cars. It was much too dangerous to move any closer. Loud crackles emanated from the stack making the fire seem closer than it actually was.

Dozens of police cars with sirens blaring formed a line, blocking the crowd from moving any closer. No one was trying. Samantha could hear the sound of the fire trucks coming up on them fast, but she didn't want it to end. This is what she'd worked so hard for, and she couldn't even remember why. She looked around at the crowd. All she'd done was invaded the privacy and safety of the people in her city. She saw hundreds of sad faces. Not even the children were smiling and dancing anymore. They stood in front of their mothers and fathers, happily welcoming the arms that wrapped firmly around them.

Victory was nothing like what she imagined it to be. Instead, she was faced with the danger of being charged with theft, destruction of property, reckless endangerment, and probably more things she couldn't even imagine. Then she saw her own family. Her mom and dad ran to her and held her like she was small again. They were so happy she hadn't been hurt. Samantha knew she'd made the wrong choice. Dr. Cabo would probably retire as her therapist after he heard about this.

The police were making rounds and taking statements from the now thousands of people watching. The fire still burned strong. The fire trucks had pulled up, still far from the fire to assess the situation. A young cop made his way around to her. He asked her to account for her day and could they search her car if need be, etc. Her parents kept interrupting with answers of their own. Their instinct to protect their young, even when they assumed her innocence, probably saved her from prosecution. That and the soon-after assassination attempt on the Mayor. He'd refused to help Mexico in, what he distinctly called, THEIR drug trafficking problem. Mexico had taken offense to the Mayor's denial of his city's role, and rumors speculating the Mexican government's involvement in the assassination attempt spread. Samantha never heard from the police again.

She looked around for Matt, Adam, and Dylan. She saw Adam and Anita standing with Joseph and Patrick in the distance. Anita held Adam's hand, and Patrick held Joseph's. Matt and Leslie were a few feet closer than Adam. Matt was holding Leslie, and she was crying. Samantha thought she could see tears running down his face as well. Dylan walked up to her. He was with Gilbert.

“What do you think of your party?” Gilbert asked.

25

Furniture Town wasn't yet opened for the day. Sofa Village had caught fire and suffered severe damage, yet the employees were conducting interviews only two staging floors away. Samantha hadn't considered the consequences of fire only a few hundred feet

from a room full of upholstered items. Matt, Dylan, and Gilbert sat on one side of a kitchen display table across from a pretty young girl. Samantha had agreed to offer her opinion on possible future hires. Samantha guessed the interviewee to be twenty-three or so. She knew from her resume the girl hadn't worked much retail before, making her a less than ideal candidate. One, who in Samantha's opinion, shouldn't even have earned an interview. Samantha stood behind the interviewers, listening.

“What are your future plans?” Gilbert asked.

“I'd like to save money for college. I think.” Samantha cringed at the naive girl's desperation for approval. Samantha too had flicked her nails against the pads of her fingertips, bit her lip before each question, and tried hard to look them in the eyes when she'd answered.

“Great, thank you. Can you just wait outside for a moment?” Gilbert asked.

Her name was Jenny.

“I like her,” Dylan said. “She's adorable.”

“Customers will like her. Sweet. Pretty. Well-spoken.” Gilbert added.

Matt looked up at Samantha. He seemed unsure. “What about the guy we interviewed before her?”

“He's a convicted felon,” Dylan said. “Manslaughter. Bar fight. Remember?”

“Well, we've never tried the slightly threatening sales approach before,” Matt said.

“What do you think, Samantha?” Gilbert asked.

“She’s naive, she’s not going to be able to lift a thing, she has no relevant experience, and she’s completely unqualified.”

“It’s a done deal then,” Gilbert said. He called Jenny back in.

Jenny walked in and Samantha walked out. Samantha could only see cold, hard pieces of wood. She put her hand on a dresser; however, the cold of it beneath her fingertips made her lift her hand until it hovered just inches away from the top. The cold was blowing in from the empty steel shelves of the warehouse. Sharp, frozen air stung her eyes, so she went to the windows and looked outside. On the outside there were no trees, but she could feel the warmth even through the window. She looked at the steel shelves once more. They were gray and threatening in the flickering fluorescent light. In the other direction the sunlight coaxed her outside. Standing in her sunlight she had visions of moving northwest. Beyond Las Vegas and into central California she would feel the spray of salt water on her face. Despite the heavy fog and towering cliffs, she would drive confidently up the coast and into Oregon. Washington would greet her with a white mountain behind a forest of green trees, and it would house deer instead of snakes. She’d understand how sunlight could be radiant, and how it can be felt on your face without suffocating the life around you. Samantha felt the sun recede behind a cloud, but it was too late. She’d already decided to turn away from the desert. In her mind she was gone. The forgiving blaze of pink and yellow sunset lingered behind her as she drove away.