THE WHORE OF BABYLON, A MEMOIR
A Novel
Katrina Prado
The Whore of Babylon,
A Memoir

A Novel

By
Katrina Prado
Psalms 35:17

Rescue my soul from their destructions,
my darling from the lions.
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Thank you to Margaret, my inspiration for Sister Margaret; and quite possibly the best boss in the entire world.

And to Tammy: “A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words.” This quote by Donna Roberts says it all.
June 30th, 2002

“You are not going out in public in that outfit young lady!” I scream. “You look like the whore of Babylon!”

My teenage daughter Robyn scowls at me. At five feet seven inches, her long, strawberry blond hair streams down her shoulders in silky ribbons, hugging her statuesque body. Her dark obsidian eyes burn with fierce intensity. Lithe, bubbling over with a sexuality well beyond her years, which I’m certain she’s not aware of; she is the definition of lovely. At least before she dressed herself in that ridiculous outfit.

“There’s nothing wrong with what I have on!” Robyn says.

She’s wearing a shell pink nearly see through tube top that ends above her belly button, and a skirt so short I’d have bet money that the manufacturer used scarcely half a yard of fabric to make it. Fish net stockings cling to her thin, beautiful legs and are finished off by spiky, black heels I can’t believe she can wear and remain vertical. Costume silver bangles and hoop earrings the circumference of cantaloupes complete her ensemble.

“I cannot believe you,” I jab a pointed finger accusingly. “You look cheap and trashy.”

“I hate you!” Robyn shrieks. “I hate this place.” She glares at me, fists on her dainty hips. “Why did we have to leave Aztec? All my friends are there. My life is there!” she shouts.

Robyn is of course, referring to our move to the chaotic, writhing sprawl of the Bay Area from the hushed quiescence of Aztec, New Mexico. As I fight the sting of tears, glaring at my daughter, I marvel at how my small, fragile family has begun to unravel.

“Daddy lost his job at Conoco,” I say defensively. “When Tasco offered him this job, we had no other choice.”

My name is Margot Skinner, and this is my story. I have decided that setting pen to paper is the only way to properly chronicle the events that so altered our lives. God knows there were enough salacious rumors circulating in town that distorted everything from my and Rob’s marriage as having been open and bi-sexual, to downright lies that we produced pornographic videos of young teens engaging in sex with older men.

And, I suppose, also to assuage my own personal sense of guilt. The guilt that all mothers experience when they feel responsible, seeing their children make bad choices. Horrendous choices.

Robyn clenches her fists. For half a second I think she might try to punch me.

“It’s my birthday. I’m fifteen years old! I’m not a baby anymore, Mom.”

“Robyn, I do not have time for this young lady. I have a test to study for and homework to complete.”

“So?” Robyn sasses back.

Where is Rob when I need him?

Always this question of how to respond to my beloved daughter. It has always been this way.

Robyn proved to be a challenge from the day we brought her home. Colicky, she cried for weeks, seemingly non-stop. Ear infections had us in the pediatrician’s office more often than at home.

When she was five, her Kindergarten teacher suggested testing, saying Robyn was “lagging a bit”. Her tests came out low, but too high to qualify for any special help. Not that anything like that was available in Aztec, anyway. By the time she was in third grade, Robyn had a reputation in school for being the problem child. The psychologist in Santa Fe diagnosed Robyn as having ADD and a non-specific learning disorder and put her on thirty milligrams of Ritalin. By the time she was in fifth grade she was taking 40 milligrams of Ritalin and 300 milligrams of Wellbutrin and cutting all her classes half the time. Her grades were in the toilet. We hired private tutors, I made the two hundred mile round trip to Albuquerque for her to see “best counselor in the state” twice a month, and we even sent her away to a private boarding school for one semester, almost driving us to bankruptcy, but nothing helped. Rob began drinking, sometimes heavily and some nights it seemed we fought until the sun rose. I had hoped the move to California would mean a fresh start. For all of us.

“You can’t stop me,” Robyn declares. In her eyes is the steely resolve that all fifteen of her years can muster.

She spins around and yanks open the front door. I blink as the door slams shut. Silence spills into my ears with such force it makes my head hurt.

Should I have tried to physically restrain Robyn? Would that have saved her? Looking back, I think the answer to that question is yes. I should have done whatever it took to rescue her. The problem was that I truly didn’t know what saving her included at the time. Or that I might need as much rescuing as my beloved daughter. On so many
occasions I have pondered my choice of words that fateful night; the night that was the beginning of the end, and I have wondered. Did I drive her to it?

Later that night I am lying in bed talking with Rob about the argument. He’s cuddling next to my limp form, his body smells of aftershave and sweat; my favorite combination. The lingering smell of old beer and an even older bar also linger on the air but I choose to ignore that.

“You should have seen her,” I say between silent tears. “She looked awful. Like a hooker,” I sob.

Rob sighs. It is the sigh of the defeated. One who believes any future effort will be wasted.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” he says.

“I know,” I add. “She’s always been such a headstrong girl.”

We remain silent a moment. Then Rob says,

“I guess being a teenager means she’s just going through that rebellious period. They all go through it.” He presses me closer. “We did; remember?”

I nod but don’t say anything. My greatest act of rebellion had been watching Rob and his high school buddies cruise the Aztec UFO Information Center’s gift shop as they shoplifted alien head key chains.

“Did I tell you, Thompson at work said his fourteen year old daughter Trish came home last week with her tongue pierced.”

“Lord,” I murmur.

“It’s probably just a phase. Hopefully she’ll grow out of it.”

“Hopefully,” I sigh.

Little did we know how tragically wrong we would be.
July 1st, 2002

The kitchen clock ticks just past five in the morning. My eyes open suddenly and at the same time, a sharp pain shoots down my neck settling into my shoulder, a result of falling asleep in the living room chair, waiting for Robyn to come home.

I throw off the afghan I used to cover myself, my body rebelling at the sudden movement. I wipe off a sheen of sweat already gathered on my face. Instinctively, I know my daughter had not come home yet, and I fight down that bowel-wrenching panic that she lies dead in some gutter, or else unconscious in a hospital room somewhere. Thoughts that bloom in my mind like tenacious weeds; unwelcome and unbidden, yet doggedly persistent.

I realize, from Robyn’s previous disappearing acts, that she is probably sleeping at her friend Jenny’s house even though she hasn’t called and her curfew is midnight. My eyes fall to the overflowing laundry basket sitting on the edge of the couch as the air conditioner kicks on. We can’t afford to run the air. I stand up and walk to the thermostat, moving the dial up to 86. Pickles, our little tabby, regards me disinterestedly from the couch.

I move to my purse, plowing through its contents for my Rolaids to quiet the persistent burning in my gut. I dig out two from the roll and greedily chew them.

“Did you see this?” Rob growls, suddenly at the doorway to the living room. He is fresh from the shower; heading to work on the weekend after a full forty hours during the week; picking up extra shifts whenever he can. The idea was so that we could save to buy a house. But with the prices of everything, including housing out here, we might as well be trying to save to buy an island in Belize.

He holds his brush in the air as if it were a wounded animal. It is his good one, the one with boar’s bristles he bought last month at the mall. Rob is fastidious when it comes to grooming. But his brush has long blond hairs in it and most of the bristles look as if they’ve been matted down with some type of gooey substance.

“And the bathroom?” he says, a clear thread of anger woven in between his words. “There’s crap all over the place.”

I nod.

“From her getting ready last night.” I face him. “She hasn’t come home yet.”

Rob is still scowling at his brush. “Good,” he says.

“Rob,” I admonish him.

“I know,” he says, frowning.” But look at this room,” he adds, waving his brush in the air.

I look around and see evidence of our daughter everywhere. Clothes strewn on the surface of every piece of furniture. Barrettes and scrunchies and tubes of lip gloss dot the coffee table. Her school ID is partially obscured by a comb. A can of Diet Coke is on top of the TV. Even from here, I notice shiny splotches of spilled soda covering the screen like freckles.

“She thinks the entire house is her own personal closet,” he snarls. He shakes his head. “I can’t wait till she moves out.”

I sigh.

“The minute she gets home she cleans all this shit up,” Rob adds. He turns to head back to the bedroom and then stops and swivels around. “And you tell her she’s grounded. She’s supposed to call when she stays over at what’s-her-name’s.”

I drop my face into the palms of my hands, rubbing the sleep from my eyes with my fingertips. I need coffee.

I trudge to the kitchen, opening the cabinet over the microwave and pull out the bag of filters and a can of store brand coffee. I think about happier days. Days when Robyn, young still, would come into the kitchen while I was making dinner; or into the bathroom as I was hunched over the toilet with a scrub brush. She’d worn a smile as big as a silver dollar. “Hello, Mama,” was all she would say. And I’d feel my heart melt with love. Two little words that said everything.

Minutes later, Rob swings into the kitchen.

“I almost forgot,” he says, “There was a message on the answering machine. Your mother called. Again.”

A horn honks in front of the house.
“That’s Dusty,” he says of his coworker and drinking buddy who gives him rides into work so I can have the car.

He pecks me on the cheek, then dashes out the door, even before the coffee is finished. I hope he won’t use his ATM card to pull any more cash out of the checking account for Starbucks. I need every cent in there to pay the bills and buy food for the week. I mentally kick myself for not reminding him of this fact. My thoughts alight on Rob’s message from my mother.

I haven’t spoken with my mother in at least two weeks. She loves to call and give me updates on my sister Petra’s perfect little life. Though Petra and I are separated by only two years, a gulf the size of The Hundred Years War lies between us. She stayed in Aztec, married right out of high school and a year ago just had her third child. Her husband, Larry, an accountant has the salary to afford Petra the luxury of being a stay at home mom. Their house is perfect. Their cars are new. Their school-aged children are on the honor roll and “The Baby” is so beautiful that Petra is thinking of having her model in baby food commercials. Mom calls me regularly to castigate me for not communicating with Petra. She also finds it necessary to list and catalogue all of her health problems, starting with numbness in her fingers to the ulcerating corn on her big left toe.

I busy myself with the task of making coffee, mentally going through my day. Print reports for work. Finish my homework that’s already late for my Excel class. Laundry. Walking across the kitchen floor, my bare feet stumble across an island of something brown and sticky. I add ‘mop kitchen’ to the list. I open the refrigerator door to get the half and half only to discover we’re out. I add ‘groceries’ to my ever-expanding list of tasks. I feel my body sag with fatigue.

And just then, I hear it. The quiet whoosh of the front door being opened with stealth. My heart flip-flops in my chest. Unconsciously, I take in a cavernous breath of relief.

“Robyn?” I walk to the edge of the kitchen and peer through the doorway. There, on the other side of the living room at the front door stands my daughter. Her mascara is smudged in thick, dark smears beneath her eyes, giving her face an innocent, panda-like quality. Her lipstick, too dark to begin with, has left her lips stained, looking almost as if she has a Kool-Aid smile. A tear the size of a quarter scars the left thigh of her fish net stockings. In her hand, she dangles her shoes in the air by their straps. She looks tired and bedraggled. She meets my eye and in that first instant a jagged pain slices my heart. I find myself wanting to comfort her so badly I literally feel my arms ache.

“Hello, Mama,” she says.

I cross my arms in front of me.

“Where have you been, young lady?”

She scowls and rolls her eyes.

“I know,” she says in a suddenly snotty voice. “I’m grounded. Big deal.”

“Why can’t you at least call?” I ask. “Is that too difficult?”

“I told you I was going to Jenny’s. She had a party for me. You know I always spend the night at Jenny’s.”

“You do not always spend the night at Jenny’s,” I say. “And another thing. You ruined Dad’s brush. He spent twenty-eight dollars for that brush!” My voice rises with each word. In my head I see dollar bills whirling madly out an opened window.

“Well have you noticed all his beard hairs in the sink?” she shoots back. “It’s hella gross.” She throws her shoes on the floor in a dramatic fashion. “Besides, you said when we moved that we’d buy a house with a swimming pool. And that I’d have my own bathroom. It’s not my fault we have to share. I hate Pittsburg!” she yells at me.

“Don’t you swear!” I scream back. I take a deep breath in a futile effort at remaining calm. “Yes, you are grounded. And I want this room picked up and the whites put away, as I asked you to do yesterday,” I say, looking at the laundry basket teetering on the armrest of the couch.

Robyn rolls her eyes again and huffs out a breath of disdain. The coffee machine hisses and coughs as if commiserating with her.

“Robyn,” I say, calmer now. “We can’t live like this. Not knowing where you are; who you’re with.” I fold my arms in front of me, feeling suddenly cold by images of an injured Robyn lying on a hospital gurney. “What if you get hurt? You didn’t even take your ID with you last night. If you were knocked unconscious or something, the police wouldn’t even know who to call.”

“I’m not going to get hurt! My God, is that all you do at night is sit around and like, think of all the different
ways I could die? Get a life why don’t you?” She flips her hair back with a fling of her wrist. “I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

“Did you make it to summer school yesterday?” I ask.

She stops, dead in her tracks, a deep scowl on her face.

“Oh Mom. Please don’t start with school again.”

Her voice is bone weary.

“Robyn, your sophomore year starts in a month and a half and you’re already behind in English and Math. If you don’t get through these summer school classes you’re going to start the new year behind and it’s only going to get worse.”

“I hate school,” she says, an undeniable streak of resignation laces her words.

I know this. She has always hated school. Her learning disability has meant that every single day is an effort just to understand what is going on. Never mind about learning the material. Never knowing the answers in class meant frequent hurtful remarks by her peers. I can only imagine the teasing she has endured. At this point, she is sick and tired of the battle.

“I know baby, but you’re on the last stretch. Three more years and you’re done.” Even after all the years of struggle, my cajoling, helping, begging, and threatening Robyn, watching as she fought to understand a concept, so often failing, I still hold an irrational thought of hope in my head. “I could teach you some basic accounting skills or if you’d learn typing, combined with your high school diploma, you’d be able to find a decent job and”

“God Mom! I am not like you!” she says, her voice wavering. “I don’t want to be like you! I’m not some pathetic little bookkeeper. Don’t you get that?” She hesitates only a second. She is opening crying now. “I miss my friends.”

“What about Jenny?” I say. “She seems like such a nice girl. Don’t her parents have money?” I ask. I can’t help but feel that if Robyn associates with the upper crust, their good fortune will somehow rub off on my daughter.

“Besides, moving to California is a fresh start,” I begin. “You weren’t doing well in the schools in Aztec. They’re still in the twentieth century, for heaven’s sake,” I say, trying for a joke.

“But I was happy there,” she pleaads.

“But you were failing.” I stop a moment and then continue. “And with Daddy out of a job, we didn’t have a whole lot of choice. Besides, we’re lucky he got this job. The whole economy is starting to get shaky right now.”

“I want my old life back,” she demands.

“I know, honey. But I’m just trying”

“Stop!” she screams, clenching her fists. The jangle of movement from her many bracelets underscores her plea. “Would you just stop trying?” she asks. “All of your trying is freaking choking me!” Her voice breaks.

She stomps away to her bedroom slamming her door so hard I feel the fillings in my teeth rattle in my head.

I check my watch. If I hurry, I can finish putting away the laundry before getting ready for work.

Robyn is in the bathroom, preening, cooling down from our fight earlier. I decide to put the laundry away for her. Clutching the plastic laundry basket, I stump into Robyn’s room, tsk-tsking under my breath. Why can’t she just get her chores done? I pluck out several pairs of her clean panties from among the washcloths and socks and yank open the top drawer to stuff them in. I shove the underwear into the drawer when the back of my hand knocks against something hard. I clear a space amongst the lingerie to find money, lots of it, held together by a rubber band.

“What are you doing?” Robyn’s voice sounds behind me, accusatory.

I spin around holding up the money.

“Where did you get all this?” I demand. I hold the wad of folded bills in my hand reminiscent, I imagine, of stashes exposed by DEA agents from nabbed drug lords.

“What were you doing in my room?” Robyn says, her voice dry and tight. She peers around, as if expecting to find that I’ve uprooted more of her things.

“I was trying to help you,” I say.
“By snooping through my drawers?” she asks incredulously. She is furious. She swipes at the wad of cash in my hand like an angry toddler. I yank back, retaining the money and frown deeply at her.

“I was not snooping. I thought I’d do you a favor and finish your clothes. I was only putting your whites away when I saw this in your top drawer.”

We stand confronting each other a second, as if neither one has read the script any further to know what the next move should be. I hold up the cash a second time.

“Where did you get this?” I ask again.

She leaps across the room, nearly falling on top of me and snatches the money out of my hand.

“It’s mine,” she says, recovering her balance.

“Where did you get it?”

“Doing odd jobs,” she says.

“What kind of odd jobs?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Raking leaves and stuff.”

This is such a bald faced lie it takes me a moment to formulate a coherent response. If my prim and prissy daughter, with her high heels, painted nails, and long blond hair has earned three hundred dollars raking leaves, I am a yak.

“Oh Robyn,” I say, shaking my head. I don’t want her to go on, digging herself any deeper. “Just stop, okay? Tell me the truth. Where did you get all that money?”

“It’s none of your business.”

She turns her back on me and walks over to her dresser, shoving the cash into her purse. She swipes the brush from the dresser and begins savagely brushing her hair.

“I can’t believe you’d go through my things like that,” she says.

She throws the brush onto the bed.

“Robyn, I told you, I was putting your underwear away,” I say defensively.

She whips around, facing me.

“You liar!” she screams. Her face is flushed by anger.

“I’ve had it,” she says. “You’re hella whacked.” She scoops up her purse and then turns around. She doesn’t even look at me, instead, marches over to her closet where she grabs a lightweight sweater.

I huff out an elongated breath.

“I have a right to know what’s going on with my own child.”

“Yeah, right. See ya,” she says between clenched teeth as she drifts by. A cat’s paw breeze of bubble gum and Hello Kitty lip-gloss floats in the air past me.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, trailing after her like a puppy.

As I walk through her room, I catch my face in her dresser mirror. I am shocked to see that I look so haggard. I run my hand through my hair, following Robyn into the living room. I clear my throat to get her attention.

“Anyway, it’s almost time for summer school. I can drive you,” I add, trying to change the subject. But Robyn is fuming. She stomps through the house towards the front door.

“You can’t just go through my things. Invade my life. It’s like, you know, I have no privacy at all.”

She stops in the middle of the living room, her face an odd mixture of fear and defiance.

“Are you walking to school?”

I ask this because normally Robyn loathes walking anywhere she can’t get a ride.

Already my mind is racing ahead. Today is Rob’s birthday; tonight after work, we’re all supposed to go to Red Lobster to celebrate. I still have to wrap his gift: a new brush with real boar’s hair bristles. I wanted this day to be a happy one for Rob. I wanted so badly for all of us to be in a good mood. Still, maybe by tonight Robyn will have cooled off.
“Remember, we’re going out tonight for Daddy’s birthday,” I remind her.

“So?” she retorts. She spins around and walks to the front door. Her hand reaches for the doorknob.

“Robyn. Don’t talk to me like that young lady.”

She opens the door and then stops and turns towards me. The crush of heat from the morning air rushes in, bringing with it a glimmer of the oppressive summer day to come. The lingering smell of exhaust floats into the house from nearby Highway 4. With an insolent glare she says:

“I want my own life.”

The front door shuts. She is gone.

Memories of fights with my mother come to mind. The exchange of angry words followed by the inevitable door slamming of my youth clang in my memory. I blink back the sting of tears. It is one thing to construct a barricade of anger to live behind. It is quite another to be on the other side of that barrier.

I have never been hated and despised with such an absolute, pure fervor by anyone before. I wonder if I can withstand the crucible of her scorn. I hope that I will emerge on the other side shined and purified. But fear wells within my heart that more likely I will come out a molten, misshapen charred carbon shell.

I look down at my watch. Almost eight. Already I am going to be late for work. I cannot think about any of this right now.

“No,” I say aloud, as I grab my car keys, my purse, and my tote, and head for the front door.

* * *

I hit the print button and check my watch, nearly seven. Everyone else has gone home for the day. Carmelita wants a vendor transaction list for every single vendor account on her desk when she comes to work in the morning.

From the corner of my eye I spot my poor houseplant I bought months ago to cheer up this dismal room and its flat, institutional gray walls. The plant, a coleus, is now mottled with drooping ocher and brown leaves. I can never seem to remember to water it regularly.

As I wait for the printouts I pick up my coffee cup and down its remnants. I frown slightly as I swallow because the coffee is so stale and cold that its taste reminds me of modeling clay. As awful as it tastes, the noxious liquid quells the burn that quietly roils in my stomach.

I had planned on dinner out tonight to celebrate Rob’s birthday. But he called at four this afternoon to tell me he was going to have to work late. His birthday dinner is ruined even before it got started. As I staple together the vendor reports I think about how Rob sounded on the phone. He sounded unhappy. Not unhappy about having to work late; just unhappy in general.

I look at my watch again. I bite my lip and pick up the phone, dialing home. I listen to a steady tattoo of thrums as the phone at home rings over and over. The answering machine does not pick up, which means one of two things: Robyn has turned off the answering machine, or she is on the phone and is ignoring the call waiting feature, figuring it is probably me on the other end calling to harangue her about something she’d rather not hear about.

I hang up the receiver and sigh, releasing an ordinary hope that she isn’t answering the phone because she’s too busy doing her homework.

I drop the vendor lists off on Carmelita’s desk and then head back to my cubicle. I gather my purse, my canvas tote, and my jacket, making sure my computer is off before leaving. The hallway is filled with shadow, lit only by tiny courtesy lights. It smells of cheap air freshener. I am struck by how empty this hallway feels and suddenly I find my thoughts shadowed by my earlier conversation with Rob and my nebulous, clouded feelings about him. Why is he not happy? Why is it that discontent seems to cling to him like shrink wrap? Like an automated recording, my head repeats these questions.

I strike out across the parking lot and unlock my car. Clots of bus exhaust languish in the air. A car alarm trumpets from a distance. I toss my bags and jacket into the passenger seat of the old, worn Corsica and head for home.

Pulling into my driveway I shift the car into park. From the corner of my eye, I spot our neighbor, Mrs. Cotillo gawking at me from behind her dogwood shrubs. I manufacture a smile as I crawl out of the car.

“Sure is hot,” I shout over the hedge, pointing out the obvious.
“um-hmm,” she responds weakly, not wanting to be drawn into a lengthy conversation about nothing in the stifling evening heat.

“Working late?” she asks, her eyes peer over gargantuan peach framed glasses.

“Just a little,” I say, gathering my things and shoving the car door closed with my hip.

She glances at the darkened windows of our house, one hand absently fluffing the back of her curly gray hair.

“First one home,” she muses.

I can’t tell if she means it as a statement or a question.

I manage a weak laugh. “It sure looks that way.”

She glances at her watch.

“What’s everything okay?” she asks. Her eyebrows knit in the hopeful anticipation that everything is not.

“Just fine,” I say over my shoulder as I clear my stoop and plunge the key into the lock of the front door.

Pickles is curled on one end of the couch. She meows once and then returns to her nap.

It’s now after eight o’clock. I flip on the living room light and peek at the thermostat; eighty-eight degrees. I jerk the lever down to eighty-three. I stand just beyond the closed front door and take stock. Along the air is the smell of old coffee. Just behind that, if I close my eyes, I think I can smell faint traces of Robyn’s latest scent. The perfume is too heavy for a girl her age, but I had been able to keep those thoughts to myself when Robyn brought the stuff home from Jenny’s a couple of weeks ago. I set down my gear and walk to the kitchen and the answering machine. It’s just as I had thought: off. My eyes scan the kitchen table and then the counters for a note of some kind, but the surfaces contain only the mundane detritus of our lives: unopened bills, pens, a couple of loose screws, and empty gum wrappers among other things. I grab a handful of Cheese-Its from the box on the kitchen table and move to the refrigerator. The salt from the crackers coats my tongue and makes me think instantly of wanting something cold to wash them down.

I am so exhausted I can barely think. Grabbing three potatoes from the crisper, I toss them into the microwave and then move to the living room, giving a cursory look over the couch and coffee table for Robyn’s backpack, but it’s not there. Her purse is gone too. I frown and move to her room. All I see is the usual hurricane of clothing and CD covers, and a few empty cups from fast food restaurants. The brush she tossed on her bed this morning is gone. I survey the mess again and shake my head.

“Typical,” I say beneath my breath, as if I’m afraid that even her room might hear my disgust.

I find myself wondering how I have come to this place in time.

The day after Rob was laid off from Conoco, I had found myself at Angel Peak, a tourist spot for those passing through Aztec, New Mexico. This place is not the parched and barren desert region that most people think. Angel Peak has a rich and verdant quality that engages the senses. The rock formation is forty million years old and the variegated ribands of rock in acorn browns, and fir greens combined with the mysterious scent of history make it a magical, living place. The Navajo considered this place sacred; one rock formation in particular strongly resembles a kneeling angel with a broken wing. I had found this place not only sacred myself, but oddly appropriate. I stood and stared at that angel with her broken wing. Fighting back tears, I spoke one word aloud: please.

And yet here we are, not even a year from that day, and already something about our life seems spoiled. Rob stays out drinking nearly every night. Robyn appears to be on a path towards self-destruction and it seems the only thing I can do is sit and watch as each catastrophe unfolds.

I want so badly to excise this necrotic wound that is poisoning our lives, but I have no idea how to find it, much less remove it.

I trudge to my bedroom and strip off my work clothes, dumping them into the hamper, donning my favorite pair of old sweats and a T-shirt, wondering on the whereabouts of Robyn. I tug vaguely at the various food stains on my T-shirt idly wondering about the last time it was laundered. It smells of my body lotion, Jean Nate, combined with the odor of deep fried hash browns, though I haven’t actually made hash browns in years.

Rob said he didn’t expect to get home until after nine or later. And then there’s always the chance that he made a pit stop. I can’t remember the name of the bar he likes, though he has told me several times.

When we first moved to California, he told me he knew he needed to stop drinking. And, in fact, the first couple of months we were here, I began to allow myself to believe that he’d turned over a new leaf. But it didn’t
last. One night he called about eleven thirty and said he and some of the guys from work had decided to get together. That was before I knew about his friend Dusty’s penchant for, as he calls them, “tittie bars”.

The microwave pings. Time to turn the potatoes. I sigh and plod to the kitchen.

The can opener resentfully grumbles to life as I open a can of cheese soup. It falls, in arsenic yellow colored globs, into the small pot. I realize, belatedly, that I forgot to spray the pot with Pam.

I tell myself not to mind the clock, but even before I’ve finished that thought my wrist has appeared magically in front of my face and my eyes fasten onto the tiny hands of my watch. Eight-thirty. I pour a can full of water on top of the cheese blobs, giving the whole mess a half-hearted stir before turning to my address book to look up Jenny’s phone number.

“Your daughter isn’t here,” Mrs. Kammish says.

Her curtness catches me off guard. I feel, by the tenor of her voice, that she does not approve of my daughter or me.

“Thank you anyway,” I say.

“I hope you find her,” Mrs. Kammish says.

I listen to the click as Mrs. Kammish hangs up the phone.

The microwave pings again. The potatoes are done. Not much of a birthday dinner, baked potatoes covered by cheddar cheese soup, but it’s the best I can do tonight. The kitchen reeks of hot, processed cheese that reminds me of a dirty factory.

I sit in front of my potato, soaking in the greasy, orange concoction but can’t make myself pick up my spoon. I wipe the sheen of sweat from my forehead and my eyes drift to the left. On the table are the magazines I bought at lunch. These women’s magazines seem the only thing that keeps me grounded in reality at times. The only things that tell me what’s real and what’s not.


I flip to the article about teen stress. Your child is stressed out, the article says, because she is involved in too many activities. Swim team, ballet, student body offices, cheerleading practice, and the copious hours involved in doing homework to keep up that straight A grade average will all take its toll on the young teenage girl these days.

I shove the magazine away from me. This article is not about my daughter. I have always wondered about parents of children whose lives seem so perfect. I know, at least on an intellectual level, that these families have problems too. These teenagers struggle to find themselves too. Yet I imagine that from these mothers there resonates a certain satisfaction in the job they have done raising their young. A pleasure is derived in lingering over the good grades, the sports leagues and group activities.

I sit and stare, thoughts of Robyn cloud my mind leaving a smudge of despair. Somehow, without meaning to, I have raised a broken child. Within her psyche is a fissure of defeat. I have affixed that fissure there, as skillfully as a surgeon implants a pacemaker. I brush away angry tears because reparation seems as vague and blurred as a dream.

The phone rings. I snatch up the receiver thinking it might be Robyn.

“Hello?”

“There you are, darlin’, ” Gladys, my mother says.


“I was just getting ready to call you,” I lie.

“Well, I wanted to be the first to give you the good news,” she says.

“Oh?” I say, already trying to think of an excuse to get off the phone.

“Remember last time I told you that Petra was thinking of putting the baby into that baby contest?”

“Mmm,” I try, unsuccessfully to recall that conversation.

“Anyway, she won!”

“That’s great,” I say, doing my best to inject a little enthusiasm into my voice.

“Gerber called and they want Petra and the baby to fly to New York to film the commercial!”
“That’s great,” I say again.

She goes into painstaking detail about the “grueling” selection process, the “exhausting” day spent at the photographer’s studio, and the “fatiguing” effort required to complete all the paperwork. Next is the mind-numbing description of attire that Petra had to consider to adorn The Baby, until I just want to puke.

“I mean, I know that the baby is the cutest little darlin’ on the face of the planet; we all do. Now the world will see too!” Gladys exclaims.

Though The Baby is eight months old, I don’t think I’ve ever heard my mother use the child’s actual name. I’m not sure I even remember her name myself.

“That’s really great,” I try varying my response so my mother won’t think I’m just reading from a single cue card.

“How’s that little angel Robyn doing?” she asks. “Still captain of the cheerleading team?”

I have made it a practice of lying to my mother about my daughter since we left Aztec. Gladys was so certain that uprooting Robyn from everything she knew would be the worst possible thing for her. To admit to my mother that she was right requires something that I just don’t have within me at the moment.

Also, it hardly seems fair, between my nephew little Billy The Little League Phenom, and niece Cynthia, Flute Prodigy Extraordinaire, and now The Baby’s imminent ascendancy to movie stardom, that Robyn shouldn’t also have her own shining attributes. And now that we’re a thousand miles away it’s possible.

“Yes,” I lie again. “She’s really doing well. And she made Honor Roll again.”

“My, my. It’s plainer than a cow pissin’ on a flat rock; there must be something in that California water that agrees with that little girl.”

I cringe at my mother’s Southern euphemism. She hasn’t lived in Tennessee in over a quarter century, yet she still talks as if she just got off the plane from Nashville.

“Well—” I begin, trying to get off the phone.

“Before you go, I just wanted to tell you not to worry; not one single, little, itty-bitty bit.”

Here it comes: the health report.

“Worry about what Mom?” I say, playing the game.

“You know I been going to see that Dr. Dickenson, don’t ya?”

“Oh?” I ask.

“You remember I had that cyst on my arm?”

“I think so.”

“You know; the one where every time I mash down on it, all kinds of puss come out of it?”

I shut my eyes and cringe as my mother goes on to describe the excruciating particulars about the cyst and its deviant behavior.

“Yesterday the thing got all speckled looking, like some kind of mutant bird egg or something.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Mom, I really am. Well, I better let you go so you can get some rest.”

“Oh darlin’ it’s fine as frog hair talkin’ with you.”

She keeps me on the phone for a few more minutes, trying to tease out of me the exact date and time of my next visit to Aztec to see her. I tell her what I always tell her: maybe sometime next year, and finally I’m off the phone.

I put away the food, such that it is, leaving the dishes in the sink and check my watch. Nearly eleven. I wipe down the counters with an old sponge that smells opaquely of mildew. Still no word from Robyn. We have fought before. No doubt we will fight again. I tell myself I am not worried.

I move to the living room, flip on the television and channel surf. The mindless chatter from shows I know nothing about dribbles into the room. I check my watch so frequently that after a while my eyes fail to register the
time. My eyelids begin to feel heavy and I feel myself fighting a losing battle. As I drop into a reluctant fog of restless sleep, my mind wanders over the names of Robyn’s other friends with whom she might be with, and I realize I know nothing more than a handful of first names.

I awake with a start when I hear the front door open. The remote falls from my lap to the floor with a thud as I sit forward. But it is only Rob. Though he is across the room from me, I can smell him from where I sit. I check my watch, twenty after two in the morning.

“You’re drunk,” I say.

He waves me off, tossing his keys onto the small table near the door. They land with a clatter.

“So?” His voice is belligerent.

“Robyn took off,” I say.

“Good for her,” Rob replies.

The sarcasm in his voice launches me to sudden life.

“That doesn’t worry you? Don’t you care?” I say standing up. “She’s only fifteen, Rob.”

He gives me a look. His eyes are bloodshot and bulge, as if he drank so much he is now waterlogged. He holds his palms out in the air in a defensive position.

“What do you want me to do? Call the National Guard?” He shrugs. “She’s probably at what’s her names.”

“I already called Jenny’s house. Hours ago. They haven’t seen her.”

Rob frowns.

“Well then call the cops. I don’t know.”

He frowns into the kitchen. I follow.

Rob reeks of booze and the sour odor of old sweat. His shirt and gray Dickies pants are grimy from a long day of working at the refinery. He pours himself a tall glass of milk. He grips the glass with a surprising intensity and knocks down the liquid in sloshy gulps. I don’t understand how he can drink milk at this point; the thought causes my stomach to hiccup with an acid flutter. I pat my sweats pockets for the Rolaids, but they are empty. I frown.

“Why do you drink so much?” I say. It is out of my mouth before I have time to think what I’m saying.

“Come on, Margot, don’t start.”

“No, I want to know,” I say. “You said you had to work late. And then you come home so drunk you can barely walk.”

I do not want to be carping on him like an old fishwife. But the lateness of the hour and not knowing where Robyn is has ground down all of my polite niceties.

I think of his birthday gift. A new hairbrush with genuine boar’s head bristles. I completely forgot about wrapping it, and it still sits in the bag it came in, tucked away on the floor of our closet.

“I worked my ass off today. I went out for one drink to celebrate my birthday. Is that a crime?” He wipes a patina of sweat from his forehead with his palm.

“Did you go out with Dusty?” I ask.

His face bunches into a look of disgust.

“Oh criminy,” he complains. He closes his eyes and expels a sigh.

“Never mind. I’m sorry.”

We stand silent a moment. I see the fatigue on Rob’s face and am suddenly overwhelmed by guilt.

“Happy birthday,” I say. “I’m sorry you had to work so late.”

His face smooths. His frown melts into a slack-jawed smile as he reaches an arm out for me.

“I want some pussy,” he says.

I cringe inwardly at his crudeness, but I force a smile and walk towards him, shutting off the kitchen light. How did we arrive at this place where needs and desires have been stripped down to their barest essentials? “Let’s go”, “let’s eat”, “let’s have sex”. As if gentility and its preliminaries are wasted effort.
Rob draws me close, shoves a hand down my pants and coarsely reaches for me. It’s not that I don’t like sex; I do. It’s just the getting started part that seems impossibly difficult. When Rob and I first began having sex, he’d spend nearly an hour stroking me, whispering into my ear and kissing my neck. Then he’d make his move, but invariably, I’d hesitate, falter. “I’m not quite ready”, I’d say, and he’d begin again. As the years have evaporated, so too, has Rob’s patience with me until now we have come to this phrase in time: I want some pussy.

On the bed, Rob climbs on top of me. My hands go over familiar territory; my fingertips brush over his back, his buttocks. The closest I have come, in fourteen years, is to stroke his inner thighs. I cannot bring myself to touch his penis. It is such a bizarre and foreign thing to me. Like a specimen from outer space.

He grunts his pleasure; his hands grab me on either side of my collarbone, nearly around my neck, pushing me down each time he thrusts upward. The smell of his sweat covers me. Somewhere deep in a place I cannot name I find this sensation pleasurable. As I begin to pant this is Rob’s signal that I am excited. His intensity rises and he growls, bear-like until he comes with a gasp and a long guttural groan. Did I have an orgasm? I’m not sure. I guess so. I must have.

Rob rolls off and lies next to me. We are barely touching. He sighs.

“I’m not happy,” he says.

I roll towards him, prop myself up on one elbow. My heart is suddenly pounding in my chest.

“What do you mean?”


I’m not quite sure what to say.

“Bored?”

“It just seems like it’s the same every single time.” He sighs. “Wouldn’t you like a little variety?”

“What do you mean, like me on top?” I ask, trying unsuccessfully to picture this acrobatic feat.

“Well, what about getting some movies, or maybe toys or something.”

His voice is dry and quavers; he is nervous. He has been thinking about this for a long time.

Pornographic movies? I don’t want to even begin to imagine what a sex toy might look like. A tickle of disgust crawls across my skin.

“Oh Rob, I don’t know,” I say, hesitating. My mind is on Robyn. Where she is; when she will be home? I don’t want to get into all of this tonight.

“Whatever,” he sighs. “It’s only our marriage.”

“Rob,” I begin, my stomach flops and then tightens. I fall back onto my pillow and stare into the inky darkness.

“I’m tired,” he interrupts.

The flare rises into my throat again, beginning from the angry, broiling cauldron in my abdomen. My hand reaches, instinctively, to my nightstand and the half empty roll of Rolaids. My fingers go through the familiar motion of peeling back the outer paper; then the soft, flimsy skin of foil to reach their prize. I pop a tablet into my mouth and chew hard. The chalky texture coats my tongue and teeth and throat.

I want to cry or to scream but feel girded only by worry over my daughter. My husband and his carnal desires seem trivial, at best.

“I’m worried about Robyn,” I say, my voice wavering.

“She’ll be fine,” he says.
August 5, 2002

“Like I said, I hope to be in before noon, Carmelita,” I say, trying very hard to keep the anger out of my voice.

*Why can’t this woman give me a break?*

“There are mistakes on several of the vendor lists,” Carmelita says over the phone.

“What?” I say. “What do you mean mistakes?”

“Some of these purchase were in oh-one, I think. I don’t remember any of the associations having capital purchases this year. But you show that Alliance Heating and Cooling was paid five grand in March,” she says.

Carmelita is wrong, of course. Three homeowner associations out of the forty-five plus that we manage did have capital purchases. How on earth would a purchase from last year be posted to 2002? But I can’t think about that right now.

Right now I am thinking that it is nine-thirty on a Friday morning and my daughter is still missing. She never came home and the school called half an hour ago to report her absence. She has never, not once, been gone this long. I do not want to get into all of this with Carmelita.

“The payables have to go out this week. And I think you’ve used up all your PTO,” Carmelita warns.

I grit my teeth, knowing she is right. “I’ll be in the office in a couple of hours to check those accounts,” I say, my mind racing ahead as to what I need to do next.

After at last extricating myself from the phone and Carmelita’s disapproving tone, I sit for a moment in the kitchen. The refrigerator hums. A car honks in the distance. I detect traces of cold cheese soup in the air, from the dishes still piled in the sink.

The timer on the coffee maker clicks off, and the sudden noise jolts me into action. I head to Robyn’s room, my eyes taking stock. Nothing has changed since last night. Clothes are strewn across the floor. Dresser drawers stick out like tongues, and her bed is unmade. I make my way through the chaos to the dresser, scanning the surface for any evidence that might give me a clue as to where she has gone. Only the usual paraphernalia is here: barrettes, a *Seventeen* magazine, and a crumpled up bra. With an instinctive haste I snatch the bra from the counter and press it to my nose. Closing my eyes I am overwhelmed. Robyn’s scent, a carnation sweetness, floods my brain. I remember a day at the park when she was three or four; her running into my arms after a frightening tumble off the slide. How I had pressed her flesh close, inhaling the sweet perfume of the sweat in her hair, knowing with a luminous clarity that I would never love another human being with the same fierce abandon as I loved this child.

I clench my jaw, checking my tears. Stumbling over memory lane right now will not help my daughter. I fold the bra in half, letting the straps neatly nestle in the concave petals for cups and open her top drawer tucking the bra away. I rummage through all of her dresser drawers but find only clothes shoved in heaps, a few CD’s, the names of groups I’ve never heard of before, and in the bottom drawer, beneath an old pair of l.e.i. jeans, a battered VHS tape of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*; her favorite movie when she was young. I lift the dust ruffle of her bed but find only more dirty clothes, shoes, some socks, as well as the torn fishnet stockings she wore on her birthday a month and a half ago.

Her study desk holds two different brands of hair spray, a can of something called ‘hair wax’, and lastly, a few books and a couple of binders. I thumb through the books and binder paper looking for something that might have names or phone numbers on it. I mentally kick myself for not being a more involved mother. Why didn’t I insist on meeting all her friends? Calling their mothers? I rack my brain for names that Robyn has mentioned in the past, but besides Jenny, I come up empty. I swallow down a bolus-sized lozenge of panic and prepare to leave when, in the corner of my eye, I spy her trashcan. It is heaping to overflowing the wadded up papers, old magazines, and tissues. I drag it over to the bed and sit down, hunching over the paper sprawl.

One by one, I pull out every single paper, every note, and scan through the magazines. Near the very bottom, I find a scrunched up ruled piece of white paper. I unfold it, smoothing out the wrinkles. In the upper right hand corner is Robyn’s name, the date and below that, the word ‘Math’. On the front are numbered problems in Robyn’s handwriting. Several problems, whose solutions have been scratched out and re-figured appear on the front of the page. The last problem has nothing written next to it. I turn the paper over and see what looks to be hand written messages from two different hands, probably passed back and forth during math class. I read the messages:

“But what do you really think of her?” writes Robyn.

“Jenny thinks she’s bad because she’s rich. I think she’s a bitch.”
“She gets all the guys . . .”
“Yeah well, anyone can get guys if they’re willing to do nasty things . . . you know that!”
“But Jenny likes me.”
“Do you really think so?”
“Come on Krista, don’t be such a bitch.”
And so on. Out of it I have a name: Krista. I take the paper and stand up, heading for the telephone. I call
Jenny’s house. I first ask if there’s been any sighting of Robyn, but Jenny’s mother tells me no.
“Have you ever heard Jenny talk about a girl named Krista?” I ask.
There is silence on the line a moment and I feel my heart flip-flop in anticipation.
“No,” she finally says. “I can’t say as I’ve ever heard that name.”
I thank her for her time and then call the school. The school receptionist is particularly unhelpful when I inquire
about information concerning my daughter’s math teacher. I eventually learn that his name is Mr. Thornton who is
located in room 312. The receptionist asks if I would like to leave a message, but I decline the offer. I check my
watch, just after noon. School gets out on Fridays at 12:45; if I hurry I can be down there before the kids get out. I
look down at myself. I’m still dressed in my sweats and cruddy T-shirt from last night, but there isn’t time to
change. I grab my purse and hurry out the door.

The end of the school day is a parade. Kids that look like really young versions of adults abound everywhere,
laughing, running, and calling out to each other. In the parking lot, parked diagonally are two cars; souped up
muscle machines with more gleaming silver than a pair of Boeing 747’s. All four doors on both vehicles are opened
and a deafening hip-hop beat rolls through the air like a war cry. Young men, chests puffed out, swagger around the
cars like prideful lions. Some have taken their shirts off and the oversized jeans make them look stockier than they
are. Heavy chains ornament necks that will, I think, someday be burdened by even heavier broken dreams.

The hallway smells like reheated sloppy Joes, and the floor is covered by scuffmarks and spots of old chewing
gum worn to the color of soot. At the end of the hall a cell phone chirps to the theme song of Winnie the Pooh and a
young girl’s voice answers with the predictable, first words, ‘I’m still at school,’ fading away as I round the corner
to find room 312.

Inside the classroom there is one student, a tissue thin young man with short cropped blonde hair and ears the
size of potato chips stuffing books into a ragged brown backpack. At the front of the room, sitting behind the desk is
whom I assume to be Mr. Thornton. He’s also thin, medium build with rakish red hair and sunken cheeks. Large,
1980’s style aviator framed glasses balance at the bridge of his nose. He stands to greet me, his movements turtle-
slow.

I long to skip all the formalities, and simply rush to him, grabbing him by the lapels of his corduroy jacket,
shaking loose the information I need. Instead, I swallow my anxieties and smile, holding out my hand as I approach
his desk and introduce myself.

“We missed our Robyn today,” Mr. Thornton says as he shakes my hand.
His palm is clammy to the touch and his fingers feel limp against my own reminding me of string cheese that
has set out too long.
“I was wondering if you could help me,” I say, deciding to get right to the point.
“My daughter has mentioned a girl by the name of Krista several times,” I begin, a lie forming in my mind as a
talk. “I’m having a surprise birthday party for Robyn and Krista is the one friend of hers that I seem to have lost
what information I had on her. You wouldn’t happen to have a last name and a phone number?” I ask, giving him a
helpful smile.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.
I can’t go into it with Mr. Thornton.
He frowns deeply, creating an auburn-colored unibrow and looks upwards scanning the surface of the ceiling a
few moments. I find myself wondering if this man is on Quaaludes.
After what seems an eternity his eyes find my own and he cant’s his head a little.
“Well, Krista’s last name is Jefferson, but I don’t believe that I have her telephone number. You might try the office,” he suggests.

I plaster a smile on my face and thank him for his time. Before I go I ask, “By the way, was Krista in class today?”

The unibrow breaks into two half crescent caterpillars. He adjusts his glasses, and I can see his cheek moving; his tongue working over his back teeth.

“Why, yes, I believe we did have the pleasure of her company this morning.” He smiles and folds his arms. “We were all about quadratic equations, and whether or not, ‘x’ equals the square root of—”

“Thank you very much,” I say, interrupting him.

I find the school office and try my ruse with the secretary, a pudgy, dour-faced woman with a permanent frown ironed to her chubby face, but it’s no use. I’m sure they’ve heard every excuse in the book. I am turned away with a polite but firm refusal to give out any information on any student. What. So. Ever.

I drive all over town, scouring the East County mall in Antioch, slipping into and out of its stores, hoping against hope I might find my daughter, playing hooky, skipping school to spend the day shopping and goofing off. No luck. Brendan Theaters in Pittsburg yields the same results.

It is now after five o’clock in the evening. The first thing I do upon my arrival is to check the answering machine for any messages from Robyn. But there is only a series of increasingly desperate messages from Carmelita as to my whereabouts.

I sit in the same kitchen chair I sat in this morning. Involuntarily, my hand reaches for the back of my neck, sponging the sweat from my skin. The house feels nearly ninety degrees but I refuse to turn on the air conditioner. The fading sun glares at me through the kitchen window, the sheer curtain worse than useless for the overpowering heat that radiates into the room. The freeway noises from Highway 4th throb against the quiet and I imagine I can smell the exhaust even though all my windows are closed. I have called and left messages for Rob but he hasn’t called me back yet. My chest is tight with exasperation. In three hours it will begin to get dark. My daughter is out there somewhere in the world. And I don’t have the slightest idea where to find her.

I debate with myself in my head. Am I being overly concerned? Too laid back? What to do next? Lurking in the back of my mind is the thought of calling the police. If I do call the police, I am admitting something. I am escalating this drama that is ticking on with each sweep of the second hand. Has she been kidnapped? Has she run away? And where the hell is Rob? I know the dispatch operator at Tasco transfers messages when they get them if it’s a family emergency. Why is he not calling me back?

I stump my elbows onto the table covering the bottom half of my face with my hands. I close my eyes to think. Something in my mind detonates. This moment in time is the turning point of everything that is to come. What if I do nothing? What might happen if I don’t call the police? My eyes fly open against a series of nightmarish images.

I rise and go to the phone and dial 9-1-1.

*      *      *

Two policemen stand in front of me. Surrounding them, like an aura, is the scrupulous scent of duty; their posture erect to the point of looking painful. The one asking all the questions is older, with graying sideburns and chapped lips. His cheeks glow with a robust effervescence, as if he has just returned from a ski trip. His thumbs are hooked into the waistband of his polyester pants, among a cornucopia of law enforcement gadgets, the most obvious being the gun; very black and very large, it seems to me. The faint smell of leather from their belts reminds me somehow of my father.

“Has your daughter ever not shown up at night before?” He frowns.

I clear my throat.

“Well, sometimes Robyn stays at her friend Jenny’s house,” I say. “But I’ve already called there looking for her.”

The younger officer, not looking up to meet my eyes lets out a sigh.

“Several times.” I add, tucking stringy wisps of dirty hair behind my ears.
The older officer exchanges a glance with his younger partner who writes onto a form attached to his clipboard. I can imagine the thoughts that are darting through their minds. The wayward daughter; the absent, non-involved mother. A wave of guilt blooms red across my cheeks. I look down and see the flecks of food and dirt on my old sweat pants. I must look like a mess. I prop up one arm in front of me, one hand in front of my mouth, wishing I’d brushed my teeth before they got here.

“You have to understand,” I begin. “It’s not like my daughter to be gone this long. She always calls or comes home.” I bite my lip to stop myself.

The older officer nods, pursing his lips. He’s heard this all before, I am sure. His partner, the younger man continues scribbling notes. He hasn’t once met my gaze. I wonder what he is thinking.

“Any other friends she could be with?” His brow knits.

In fact, he frowns every time he finishes asking me a question.

“I’ve called everyone that I know,” thinking of my earlier endeavor of having called twenty-two out of the thirty-four Jefferson’s listed in the Contra Costa County phone directory before finally finding Krista Jefferson’s house. She said she hadn’t seen Robyn in over a day and had no idea where she might be. “But no one’s seen her,” I finish. My hand travels to my throat. The skin on my neck feels parched, like onion paper.

“Did you two have a fight?” The older officer asks, his voice is noticeably droopier, all Father Knows Best. He frowns.

I look down. Pickles is busy making figure eights between the older officer’s legs.

“No.” My eyes seem to involuntarily fill. I look up. “Well, yes, sort of. But we seem to fight a lot lately.” I swallow my tears, willing myself to stop crying.

I watch the younger officer’s nostrils flare as he breathes in. I want him to look at me. I think that if only he would see this anguish that is crushing the breath out of me, he would understand.

“I’ve found some money,” I say; it’s almost a whisper.

This provokes the young policeman’s eyes up from his clipboard.

“A little over three hundred dollars.”

“Does your daughter have a job?”

I shake my head.

“Does she use?”

“Use?”

“Drugs, Mrs. Skinner. Does your daughter use drugs?”

My hands have found the armrest of the couch behind me. The fabric is scratchy to the touch from where Pickles has sharpened her claws. I back away from these men and sit in order to steady myself.

“I found some money,” I say; it’s almost a whisper.

I must look as if I’ve just been slapped because the older cop’s face softens.

“I’m not accusing anybody of anything. It’s just when teenagers have that kind of money lying around it could mean they’re dealing in order to support their habit.”

I search my mind for any evidence that Robyn might have started recreational drug use, but I can’t think of a single instance where I either smelled anything on her or suspected as much.

“I don’t think so,” I cede.

There seems to be so much about Robyn that I do not know. My eyes travel back down to the floor. Flakes of lint and dirt swimming the surface of the carpet remind me that I can’t remember the last time I vacuumed. Why on earth would I worry about my carpet when my daughter is missing? I shove the thought from my head. I swallow down the acid burn that flickers in my stomach, wishing momentarily, that I had a Rolaid.

“You mind if we take a look around?”

I blanch inwardly at the request, but can’t make myself refuse. What if they find something I missed? Some telltale sign that might lead them to answer the riddle about where Robyn went that might help them find her?

“Sure,” I say, and lead them to her room.
“Anything missing?” The younger officer asks.

“Maybe some clothes,” I say, “I’m not really sure,” I add almost beneath my breath.

“Her purse here?”

“No.” I say.

I wince as they walk into Robyn’s bedroom. Traces of her sweet smell are soon obliterated by the sterile odor from their uniforms; probably chemicals from the cleaners. Their boots are heavy and thick on the carpet. Her room is just as I left it; in a shambles. I have the sudden thought that the state her room is in is in some way a representation of our life. Chaotic, messy, undisciplined.

Their presence in Robyn’s room seems somehow obscene to me as they mull about, pawing through her drawers, peeping beneath her bed, slipping meaty hands between box spring and mattress. In the middle of their search I hear the front door. The officers look up at me as I bound from the room.

But it is only Rob.

“What the hell’s going on?” he asks.

“Robyn’s still gone,” I say. I give him a rundown of events to this point as I lead him to where the police are finishing up their search of Robyn’s room.

The older cop is talking to us in measured tones. All about how Robyn will probably show up in a day or two, after she cools down. How kids this age can be impetuous, hasty.

“So, like I said Mrs. Skinner, we’ll put out a runaway bulletin. It’s local, but if anyone outside Coco County runs her name they’ll see our bulletin and give us a call. Since her purse is gone and maybe some clothes, she probably just took off. Here’s my card. Feel free to call me if you remember anything more or if she turns up back at home.” He thrusts his card into my hand and gives me a wink.

The young cop has stopped taking notes and is sliding his pen into his front shirt pocket. His thumb hikes to a thin, dark eyebrow and he scratches absently, eyes blank, his mind already far away.

“But isn’t there anything you could do?” I ask.

“In the case of a child that’s been kidnapped the F.B.I. would be called.”

“But maybe she was kidnapped,” I argue.

“From what you’ve told us, I think it’s much more likely she’s just angry and is hiding out at a friend’s house for a couple of days.”

He gives me a patronizing smile and pats me on the shoulder like he would the family cocker spaniel. “I wouldn’t worry too much, ma’am. I’m sure your daughter will be home before the weekend.”

“He’s probably right,” Rob says, staring at the front door after the cops leave.

I walk up behind him, slip my arms around his torso and lean my cheek against his back, breathing him in. He smells of sweat and cigarette smoke. My hands move upwards, finding his chest. Pressing him to me, the flesh of his chest feels soft, flaccid.

“Oh God,” I whisper and begin to cry.

Rob turns around. I can see that his jaw is tight. He’s gritting his teeth, damming up his emotion.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “She’ll be home soon.”

I nod but can’t talk as I swallow down the acrid bite of fear fiercely roiling in the pit of my stomach. Beneath the tenor of his voice I hear an unmistakable note of doubt.
August 22, 2002

It is four-ten in the morning.

A week has elapsed. I can scarcely believe that seven days and seven nights have come and gone with no word or sight of Robyn. I’m amazed that the world continues grimly on; Rob and I have gone to work, managed to eat food, taken showers. Each day feels surreal, has become its own miniature horror to be endured, like an out of control amusement park ride skidding towards destruction.

Sleep eludes me most nights. I brush my teeth and don an old nightgown as if everything were normal. I fold myself into my bed, enveloping myself in the familiar smell of nylon and cotton. Tucking myself between old, too-warm sheets I maybe glance at my nails; perhaps pick up the emery board that sits on my nightstand to file an errant fingernail. But before the job is done, tears cloud my eyes and I stop. I lie down, eyes burning, the familiar heavy-handed grip of fatigue holding me firmly in its grasp; and I will the telephone to ring. I stare at the ceiling and think about praying, and maybe my lips move discreetly, air from words that feel empty and meaningless dribbles out as a small and stubborn hope dares challenge a gauntlet of despair. Where is my daughter?

I am watching Rob as he sleeps. His dark eyebrows are soft, his mouth slack, lips slightly parted. Robyn was born with his eyebrows. I remember her coming out with fierce, darks tufts of hair above her luminescent dark eyes; she reminded me of Groucho Marks. As she grew into a toddler they lightened up a little bit. But other mothers at playgrounds always commented on Robyn’s Brooke Shields eyes.

When we were first married, I used to always love watching Rob sleep. Secretly, I used to let my fingers steal across the smooth bands of hair as he slept, amazed at how soft eyebrows could feel. I used to think of Rob’s sleeping face as a perfect replica of one, perfect man at peace. But now I see different things in that calm, undisturbed face. A word, ‘failure’, flashes into my mind. I jerk my head away from him in a quick, violent motion, shaking that word from my mind.

I throw back the covers, and slip to the window. The carpet is cool against my feet even though it will be another hot day. From the bathroom, the steady plink of the leaky sink faucet marks the passage of time. I draw back the curtain and gaze out through the glass.

Somewhere out there, beneath this same slate blue-black sky is Robyn. Is she asleep? Safe? My stomach churns with a heavy sickness contemplating the alternatives. I rest my hand against the windowpane, as if this action might somehow allow me to communicate my love to my daughter.

Yesterday I had finally managed to get one local television station interested in our plight. A scraggly cameraman and a field reporter from a local channel, both of whom stank of cigarette smoke, came out and interviewed Rob and I. I was calm and did my best to speak in a slow, still voice. With clammy hands we held the eight by ten of Robyn’s freshman picture along with our phone number in twenty-six-point courier font in front of the cold, uncaring lens and were promised a spot on the six o’clock news. But due to a head-on collision that killed six on the Bay Bridge, Robyn’s story was relegated to little more than a flash of her picture on the screen after the sports highlights. Nearly the entire interview had been deleted.

Still, hope clings to me like an orphan. Her picture is out there now. Though I’d made up flyers days ago and stapled them to every telephone pole I could find in the greater East County area, I feel that having the television exposure, however brief, is a step in the right direction. I went to bed last night with the unreasonable expectation that Robyn would see herself on TV and come right home.

Suddenly, the telephone rings. I leap to the dresser, snatching up the receiver.

“Hello?” I say, breathless. I look at the clock on my nightstand: four forty-five.

“Your daughter is dead. I cut her.” The voice is gruff and full of hate. “Did you hear me? I cut the bitch—”

I slam the receiver down. The raw and sour taste of bile rises in my throat. Rob stirs.

“Who was that?” he asks.

“Another crank call,” I say.

The reporter warned us that this would happen. He said there were lots of sick people out there who enjoy it when others suffer.

I walk back to the window fighting the sting of tears, my back to Rob.

“I want to hire a private investigator,” I say.
I hear the swish and flutter of blanket and sheet.

“How much will that cost?” Rob asks as he makes his way to the bathroom.

“What difference does it make?” I respond.

The plash of urine against water followed by the flush of the toilet obfuscates my question. Rob tramps back into the bedroom, pads across the room, directly behind me.

“We don’t have any money,” he says sadly.

Though we are not touching, I can smell his familiar odor: stale sweat and morning breath.

“We’ve got two thousand dollars in savings,” I say. “And we could probably get an advance on the MasterCard.”

“Isn’t that card maxed out?” he asks. He runs his hand through his hair. “Besides, what’s a PI gonna do that the cops aren’t already doing?” he asks.

His hand snakes round my shoulder. I lean my head against his chest, tears filling my eyes yet again, stopping for the moment, the constant burn of exhaustion. The bitter tang of salt coats my tongue.

“I don’t know,” I say. My voice is so high it is nearly a squeak. “But we have to do something.”

His other hand his on my head now, fingers gently and tenderly massaging my scalp.

“She’s probably staying at a friend’s house,” he says.

I hear it; the overwhelming desire that things will be just fine in a day or two. I feel it too sometimes. As if by sheer will we could simply wish a happy ending. It’s intoxicating at moments when I am the weakest. Maybe if I just go to work and finish the laundry, ignoring the entire nightmare long enough it will go away. I clench my jaw and stiffen.

“Maybe she’s not at a friend’s house. Maybe she’s in trouble and she can’t get to us. Maybe she’s hurt, or—” I stop suddenly, unable to give voice to the unthinkable.

Rob breaks our embrace and turns away, wiping his eyes with the heels of his hands. Was he crying?

“I gotta get ready for work,” he says. A minute later the pelt of water against plastic announces that he is in the shower.

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My fingers scan the yellow pages. Most of the private investigator ads are small and discreet. I dial a local name, a Mr. Bart Strong with an Antioch number. A voice message begins but is then quickly replaced by a husky, cracked voice:

“This is Bart.”

I open my mouth to speak but suddenly find myself tongue-tied.

“‘Lo?”

“My daughter is missing,” I say finally.

We arrange a time for me to come to his office, which is wedged between a tattoo parlor and dilapidated beauty salon in downtown Antioch, near the water. The briny smell of the delta mingles with car exhaust. Gigantic elms and blue oaks line the street. The hum of traffic from nearby Third Street buzzes in my ears. With one hand on the door, I pat my purse and the twenty, crisp one hundred dollar bills I withdrew on my way over, closing our savings account. I draw in a deep breath and open the door.

Inside, a heavy patina of pipe tobacco coats the air. Motes of dust, like confetti, glimmer along bands of light from three small windows at the back of the room. Bookcases filled to bursting line both side walls. Books, phone directories and thick texts are stacked on the floor near the bookshelves, fighting for space with seemingly dozens of manila file folders. In the center of the large room is a huge desk and behind the desk, a man who looks to be in his fifties or sixties sits eyeing me. Somewhere behind me I hear the unyielding tock of a wall clock.

“Mrs. Skinner, I presume?”

I walk forward, shaking his proffered hand. His grip is firm.

“Yes.”
“Please,” he gestures, “have a seat. I’m Bart. Bart Strong.”

His eyes are a warm, inviting hazel green. He’s wearing jeans, a T-shirt and on top of that, what looks to be a khaki and olive colored hunting or fishing vest. I don’t recognize the faint undertones of his cologne.

“I need you to find my daughter,” I say. Unaccountably, relief floods my voice. Everything spills out suddenly. Robyn’s increasingly defiant behavior, the fights, the money I found in her room, the police, the seemingly useless television spot. As I talk, my hand finds its way into my purse withdrawing a photograph.

“Here’s her picture,” I say holding Robyn’s image out to him.

He takes the picture and looks at it a moment before placing it on the desk.

“She’s only fifteen,” I say. Then emotion clots my throat and I must stop.

He looks down, rubs his cheek with one hand, fingertips scratch absently at a graying sideburn as he considers Robyn’s face. My desperation embarrasses him, I’m sure of it, but I don’t care. I’d gladly beg on my hands and knees if it meant finding Robyn.

Bart hunches his shoulders, leans forward dropping his elbows to his desk. In front of him is a pipe, maroon brown with a long black mouthpiece. The smell of his pipe tobacco is suddenly fresh in my nose again. He toys with it a moment. He asks a question or two, the same types of things the police asked. Did Robyn have a habit of staying away from home? Was anything of any significance missing from her room? Was anything of any significance missing from her room?

I answer his questions, impatient to move forward. Wanting only for him to leap from the desk, picture in hand, and dash from the room to scour the earth in order to find my daughter.

He is quiet a moment.

“You do search for missing persons, don’t you?” I ask, suddenly nervous.

“Oh sure,” he says. “Most of my work these days is insurance fraud,” he jerks a thumb in the direction of the files on the floor. “But missing persons, unfaithful spouses, you name it, I’ve done it.”

“About your fee,” I begin.

“I charge five hundred a day plus expenses. That includes photographic proof. If I do find her.” He gives me a pointed look. “But I don’t do any recovery, kidnapping, or extractions.”

“Extractions?”

“If she’s hooked up with some cult. Something like that.”

I tease out the thin envelope of cash from my purse, our entire savings. How can so much money feel so puny and inconsequential?

“Here is two thousand dollars,” I say. The money falls to his desk with a breezy thump. “It’s all I have.”

He eyes the envelope a moment and then breaths in a somber lungful of air and gives me a grim look.

“Do you want the honest to God truth about your daughter?”

My bottom lip begins to quiver, just slightly, but I’m sure Bart has noticed. I bite down hard, trying to stop the tremor and my eyes well with tears. I nod.

At that moment, in the distance, a car slams on its brakes. The sliding scream of rubber against asphalt fills the air as both Bart and I lock eyes. The wailing continues for three or four seconds. And then we hear, not the scorching impact of a crash, but mercifully, silence. Bart continues.

“Honestly? Your daughter probably ran away.” He folds his hands together like a disappointed second grade teacher. “She might be doing drugs, she might not. If you’ve already tried all her friends and she’s not living with any of them, she’s probably on the streets.”

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He stops a moment letting me take this in. He looks at me steady, a gaze of solid steel.

“She could be prostituting to make money. A pimp has maybe even taken her in. If that’s the case, she could be anywhere. He’ll be keeping her as hidden as possible because she’s underage. Or he might be running an escort service, which will make it even harder to find her.”

“But she’s only fifteen,” I say.

“There’s been a seventy percent increase in the last three years of juveniles in prostitution. The average age is twelve to thirteen. Some as young as ten. Some of these girls come from bad homes where there was some kind of
abuse, be it physical, sexual or else the parents were drug addicts.”

He pauses. Does he expect me to admit something?

I sit stiffly in my seat. “There is no abuse in our home.”

A prostitute. I can’t even get my mind to wrap itself around the word.

“Nearly half these girls come from good homes. They’re good kids with good grades looking to make some money on the side. These pimps tell them they’ll be in music videos or models. Buy them clothes, show them a good time. Sometimes they use their own girls to lure in new recruits. They hunt for new blood in halfway houses, youth shelters, and bus stations.”

Money. Always an issue in our house. My mind flashes to half a dozen arguments I’ve had with Robyn about why I could never buy her the name brand purse or coat or shoes she always seemed to require.

“The FBI estimates there’s anywhere between one hundred to three hundred thousand of these kids on the streets in America. But no one really knows for sure.”

I sink into the chair. A pillowy air smelling of old leather from the cushion covers my face. I feel as if I’ve been sucker-punched and all the air expelled from my lungs. I wipe the tears from my cheeks, sniffling and Bart is suddenly offering a box of tissue. I grab two and swab my eyes and nose and mouth.

“What can you do?” I ask.

Bart shakes his head. His eyes look weary and his mouth forms a deep frown.

“I can look for her,” he says. “But I have to tell you, the odds aren’t in your favor. Kids who don’t get off the streets within a month or two are usually lost forever; dead within eight years.”

I gather my purse to my side and stand.

“Just please find my daughter,” I say.

I drive home in a fog. My eyes scan the sidewalks as I drive, searching, just in case. Nightmarish images of child prostitutes cloud my brain, lurid apparitions of little girls wearing garish red lipstick and little else flit in front of me. I simply can’t believe that Robyn would do such a thing. I find it impossible to suppose that she could find her way to some filthy motel room, allow her young, perfect body to be ravaged by a sweating, grunting, middle-aged, overweight pig of a man.

“She comes from a good home,” I say to the air, as if to refute everything Bart has told me.

I drive all over Pittsburg and Antioch, searching out the worst possible places in town, hunting for Robyn. But in the end I drive home, empty-handed.

I trudge up the walk, noticing that the grass has all but died in the front lawn. A handful of weeds eek out an existence, choked by the parched dirt. The hot summer air stinks of dirt and grime. Absently, I yank the mail from the mailbox and unlock the door. I hear the answering machine beep. I feel the ineffable rise of hope clamber in my chest, though I realize that all of the messages are probably crank calls.

Still, I drop the mail to the floor and head directly for the kitchen and the answering machine. A red digital light flashes before me. I punch the playback button and wait, my heart throbbing with desire.

The first two are indeed crank calls. The third is from Robyn’s friend, Jenny. My mouth is tinder dry as I await her message.

“Hi.” Jenny’s voice is tentative. “It’s me, Jenny. I um, saw the thing on TV,” she says. Her voice is a whisper, as if she doesn’t want anyone to know what she’s saying. “Um, I feel really bad, you know? But I um, know where Robyn is.”

* * *

“This is Rob.” He’s working a late shift to pick up some extra money.

“Rob, it’s me. Jenny said that Robyn’s in San Francisco,” I say into the cordless, which is cradled between my ear and shoulder.

“San Francisco?” Rob’s voice rattle with disbelief. “What the hell’s she doing in San Francisco?”

“I don’t know,” I reply defensively. “All Jenny would say is that Robyn was ‘partying in frisco’.”

As I talk I am bolting through the house, finding a jacket, gathering my purse, ferreting through its contents for
my keys.

“But I’m going to find out.” I say.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m driving to San Francisco,” I say.

“When?” Rob asks.

“Now.”

“Now? You’re crazy; it’s almost dark. You don’t even know the city.”

“I found a map. Remember that time we were going to go to Fisherman’s Wharf but then you got sick?” I ask, and then continue on, not waiting for him to answer. “Well I found that map of the city we bought.”

“Margot, don’t,” he warns. “Call the cops; let them handle it.”

“I already did. They told me they’d fax Robyn’s picture to S.F.P.D. and put out a BOLO.”

“A BOLO?” Rob asks.

“It means be on the look out,” I say.

“And?”

“And, that’s it. That’s all they’ll do.” I huff into the phone.

“What about Jenny’s parents?” Rob asks.

“I spoke with Jenny’s mother. She said she has no knowledge of where Robyn could be. Anyway, Jenny told me.”

“Don’t,” Rob warns.

I know he hears the hopefulness in my voice. His ‘don’t’ is as much for the action I am about to take as it is for my emotion.

“You’re not going to stop me.” I reach the door, yanking it open with my one free hand.

“Margot—”

I punch the ‘end’ button and toss the phone on the couch, sprinting for the car, slamming the front door behind me.

The City is cold. It is just after seven and most of the commuters have gone home for the day. Although traffic on the bridge coming into San Francisco was relatively light, cars seem to jumble up as I stagger along Fremont Street making my way left onto Market. The electric Muni buses dominate the landscape, rushing by with authority. I scan the streets looking for any sight of Robyn. The cold, windy air floods the car and I’m forced to roll up the window, sneaking alternate peeks at the streets and my map, which is difficult to read in the dusky evening. I don’t know, really, what I am looking for; I see a spot on the map labeled Union Square and that seems as good a place as any to start.

But I make a wrong turn and then another one and suddenly, the city streets seem too narrow; the cars drive by too fast and some just park in the road for no reason at all. I am hot, sweating now, from nervousness. I catch the name of a street, Hayes, and a small sign that says: City Hall with an arrow angled towards the left. It is almost dark now and in my indecision about where to go I stop completely. The glare of an angry horn sounds behind me. I look in my rear view mirror to see the bead of sharp, bright lights. I speed up switching on my right turn indicator only to see that at the end of the block, the street ahead is one way the other way. Another halting block and traffic thins a bit. I look around and see several adult stores sandwiched together. A man whose clothing is nearly black with filth stumbles along the sidewalk. His hair is disheveled and as I drive past, he leers in my direction and I see that most of his teeth are missing. A shiver of disgust washes over my skin. I avert my eyes and turn quickly, noting the street: Turk. It is then I see her.

Up ahead a young girl. She is dressed in typical hooker garb. High heels and a mini skirt that is so short I can actually see part of her bottom, like two adjacent obscene smiles. She stamps out a cigarette and then turns facing the street. Her face is grotesquely painted and the only thing on her torso is a black bustier laced in red. She looks barely old enough to be out of elementary school. Not Robyn. Standing back from the edge of the sidewalk, she scans drivers of cars as they go by. She looks briefly in my direction and then away. She looks to be about Robyn’s
age. I nudge the car towards the curb and pop it into park, leaning over the passenger’s side I quickly roll down the window.

“Excuse me,” I say.

The girl’s face turns in my direction and it is then I see her eyes. They are filled with the darkness of a blunt void. She is chewing gum and saunters over towards the car.

“Lookin’ for a party?” she asks, plastering a fake smile onto her lips.

“I’m looking for a girl named Robyn,” I say.

“You can call me Robyn,” she says, advancing closer now.

Her perfume invades the car and I am peppered by tiers of a sweet, synthetic musk.

Her smile deepens as she props an elbow on the opened window, leaning over in an exaggerated motion, allowing me a full view of her small, juvenile breasts. Cheap red polish is chipping off her short fingernails.

“Ten dollars for a party,” she says.

“No,” I say shaking my head.

“I’m looking for my daughter. Her name is Robyn.” I thrust out the photo of my daughter towards her.

Silence glimmers between us as the realization of what I am after creeps into her brain.

She backs away, and stiffens; the smile falls from her face.

“Get lost, lady,” she spits out. Her voice is suddenly hot with contempt. Her eyes dart left and then right. She continues backing away from my car.

“She ran away,” I bark, as this young, pathetic thing ebbs from my grasp.

“Get away from me,” she says.

“How old are you?” I shout.

It is then I see fear in her face. She waves me off.

“Get the hell outta here!” she yells, beginning to walk quickly away.

“Wait!” I yell.

I jerk open the car door, clambering out of the car. My heart pounds in my chest. Does this girl know something? Does she know Robyn? Did fate bring me to the one, single person in the entire city who knows where my daughter might be?

“Wait!” I shriek out again excitedly.

I am surprised by the frigid air in this city. Nothing at all like the stifling bog of heat in Pittsburg. I tear to the front of the car, still idling, watching the girl as she runs from my view, ducking into an alleyway thick with refuse. Before I even reach the sidewalk, she has escaped into the shadowy yaw of a doorway that leads to who knows where. I fight the web of panic that spreads over me.

I stand there a moment, frozen. To my right, another homeless soul approaches. He is about ten yards away. But even from this distance it seems I can already smell the sour stench of urine and vomit that precedes him. He is rambling to an invisible partner and I am suddenly afraid for my safety. When he sees me, his pace quickens. A bell of alarm rings in my ears. I whip around, heading back for the car door.

Across the street I spy a well dressed man who appears to be heading for an aqua-colored BMW so shiny and new it looks like it came from a showroom. I catch the license plate: BLU BOY. Our eyes meet and then he looks at the homeless man making a beeline towards me. Instead of his car, he chooses to walk in my direction and I am suddenly, unaccountably flooded with relief.

When the homeless man sees the man in the suit heading towards him, he makes an about face and begins heading the opposite way. As the well dressed stranger comes closer to me, I am struck by his appearance. He is dark complected and the word ‘swarthy’ registers in my mind. His suit is shiny, a grey sharkskin hue, double breasted that seems a little too dressy for this neck of the woods.

“Perdida?” he asks in a thick Spanish accent.

A slender, sinful black mustache curls as he gives me a cruel looking smile. I look backward in the direction of
the retreating homeless man trying to conjure that old saying my mother used to recite. Something about the frying pan and the fire.

“I, um.” The words stumble out of my mouth as I back towards to my car, the driver's door handle now pressing into my buttock.

The man keeps coming, invading that imaginary social space that society allows. I try swallowing but my mouth is suddenly as dry as sun-bleached bones. The air outside is freezing but I am not cold. The pads of my fingers are behind me, resting on the cool metal of my Corsica. He is now only inches from me. The heat from his body is oppressive. His eyes narrow to slits. He cocks his head to the side, considering me.

“Jou don belong here lady,” he says. His breath is sour and stinks of decay.

I instinctively hold my breath to keep from gagging.

“My daughter,” I whisper in a blind panic. Tears spill from my eyes. I can feel my bottom lip trembling in fear.

“Jor daughter is not here,” he says.

“Jou,” he growls, “don belong here either,” he repeats.

He presses his lower body to mine. Where his pocket is, I feel a hard, rectangular object. A gun? My heart leaps to my throat.

“Please,” I plead.

We stand there a moment, his stare boring into me. The dark and cold engulf me now. His hand is on my cheek now. I pull back slightly in a reflexive jerk. In an oddly tender motion, he wipes away a tear with the back of his thumb then licks my tear from his skin.

“Jou go now,” he says, winking. He backs away slightly. Enough for me to get my hand onto the handle of the car door behind me. Keeping my eyes on him I scoot into the safety of my car.

“Jou don’ come back,” he threatens.

I feel watched. As if the windows had eyes and all of San Francisco waits with a sullen anticipation, my exit from this place.

I wrench the car into drive and speed away. I drive, reckless with emotion, sobbing as I think about my precious little girl entangled in such a gruesome world. How can I ever save her?

After what feels like hours but is probably only a few minutes, I somehow find my way back to the Bay Bridge and speed home; hopeless and without a plan.
Saturday morning.

I’ve been awake since three-thirty, fighting my churning stomach with antacids. After several hours of traipsing uselessly around my dirty kitchen, grinding my teeth and sipping tepid coffee, I decided to head to San Francisco again.

I left Rob snoring the morning away in the bedroom. He is still angry with me for my first trip to the City. Rob and I have become strangers, little atoms, bouncing off each other in our confined space, the hovel we call home.

I have come here three additional times in the past week; trolling the streets, visiting various youth shelters as I locate them, surrendering pictures of my daughter to anyone willing to take a copy.

Pale sunlight diffuses the tired, dirty streets in lacy patterns; tufts of frosty air from a rigorous August wind lash my cheeks as I make my way towards the Diamond Youth Center on Central Avenue, just north of Fell St. The youth center is the last place I haven’t yet visited that caters to the lost and neglected runaways in my search for Robyn.

Irrationally, my thoughts alight on visions of Bart Strong, the private investigator I hired to help me find Robyn. If I try hard enough, I can almost conjure up how it will be: he will call me and in a triumphant and manly voice, tell me that he has Robyn, safe and sound, sitting in his office and I can come pick her up anytime. I wipe away a mote of dirt that has flown into my eye with the heel of my hand and dispel my fantasy. Since our initial meeting we have had only minimal contact. I called him the day after my first visit to San Francisco, telling him of being threatened by the swarthy man in the business suit and the BMW with the license plate: BLU BOY. Bart said he was probably a pimp and my presence there wasn’t good for business. He promised to do some checking to see if he could come up with any concrete information, pledging a phone call within the week.

Diamond Youth Center looks more like a teenage hangout than anything else. A girl with hair several colors of the rainbow leans against the brick wall by the doorway. She has several piercings along her ears and a large silver stud in her chin, just below her lower lip. She is wearing a short, tartan plaid skirt, and beneath the skirt, bright pink tights finished off by black military style boots. She is laughing and talking with a boy who looks barely old enough to be a teenager, dressed in what looks like camouflage garb, but is covered with large silver zippers sewn at all angles up and down the legs of the trousers. Both of them are smoking. On the other side of the doorway are a handful more kids in similar attire; I scan all the girls faces, realizing in an instant that Robyn is not among them.

Though my heart sinks, I draw in a resolute breath, opening the door to the youth center. Inside, I am greeted by a gentleman who looks like a throwback from the sixties. His long, gray hair falls in spirals along his shoulders. His skin is a light brown, like aged shoe leather. A small gold stud catches the light in his left earlobe. On his desk sits a phone and a couple of two-inch dirty white binders. On the floor, next to his desk is a large box filled with containers of deodorants, boxes of bar soaps, and toothpastes. Behind him, through an opened door, I can hear the noise of teenagers; music and voices, punctuated by occasional laughter. On my left, the entire wall is wallpapered by posters and pictures of missing boys and girls.

“You look a bit lost,” he says with a sympathetic grin.

I give him a weak smile, my hand already plunged to the depths of my purse, retrieving another of the endless copies of Robyn’s pictures.

“I’m looking for my daughter,” I say and thrust the picture into his hands.

He gazes at the photograph for a couple of moments. When he looks up at me, I see a vale of compassion in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I haven’t seen her. But that doesn’t mean anything. There are nearly two million homeless kids in the United States; five thousand or so in San Francisco alone. Are you local?”

I notice that he does not perfunctorily hand Robyn’s picture back to me.

“You look a bit lost,” he says with a sympathetic grin.

“From Pittsburg,” I say.

He nods once. “I assume you’ve already contacted the police?” he asks.

“Yes,” I look down. “They seemed to think Robyn was just hiding out at a friend’s house for a few days.” I look up and meet his gaze. “But it’s been almost two weeks now.”

“That’s pretty common when you’re talking teenagers. Do you know, did the cops enter her name into NCIC?”
I frown. “What’s that?”

“National Crime Information Center. It has a missing persons file.”

I shake my head. I have no idea.

Just then, a young man’s voice erupts into an angry shout.

“Come on, man!” he yells, batting the air like a gorilla. He looks to be sixteen or seventeen. His long black hair is pulled back into a ponytail. His clothes are clean, but his jacket looks two sizes too big. He towers over a short woman, a nun in a black habit, her head adorned by a black wimple trimmed in white. She crosses her arms and draws in a breath; her shoulders seem to inflate. Her feet are bolted to the floor between the young man and the front door.

“Carlo, that is not acceptable,” she counters. “You promised me you would study. I know you can ace that test if only you will try.”

The man behind the desk chuckles. “That’s our local ‘Mother Teresa’,” he says.

Carlo hunches his shoulders. He kicks at a spot on the floor, his face scowling. “Man,” he says, glaring at the nun, “Lisa said I’m a real man,” Carlo says, puffing out his chest. “She ain’t gonna wait for me forever.”

The man behind the desk leans towards me and whispers, “she’s small, but tough. Think ‘grandmother’ on steroids. The kids love her.”

The nun shakes her head at Carlo. “She can wait a few hours; at least until you’ve finished studying.” She steps close to the boy and ribs him with an elbow. “Get on back in there,” she says, reaching out and giving his shoulder a firm pat. “Real men keep their promises.” She gives him a steady gaze.

Carlo reluctantly retreats into the back room.

“What?” says the man behind the desk.

Sister Margaret angles her head towards us and smiles. She walks to the desk and holds out her hand.

“Hello,” she says, smiling.

Her handshake is firm, though her hands are aged. Her doughy face, captured by the wimple, is the face of an old lady, except for her bright gray eyes. They glisten with an ebullient spirit.

“This is,” says the man behind the desk, “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”


“Margot, this is Sister Margaret.” He looks up at the nun. “Her daughter is missing.” He hands the photograph of Robyn to Sister Margaret. She considers the picture a moment, and then returns her attention to me.

“I remember seeing a spot on the news.”

“Yes!” I say. A flutter of hope trills in my chest.

Sister Margaret glances at her watch.

“I’m late,” she says. She looks up into my eyes. “Wanna go for a ride?”

A ride? I shrug. What have I got to lose?

“Sure,” I say.

“Come on,” Sister Margaret says, nodding towards the front door. She snatches Robyn’s picture from the hand of the man behind the desk.

Before opening the front door, she spins around. “And Jerry, if Carlo so much as steps one toe into the lobby before he’s done studying, tell him he’s going to have to answer directly to me!”

“Yes ma’am,” Jerry says, giving her a mock salute and a grin.

Outside, the air feels even colder and I tug my sweater to my chest. The haze of stale Chinese food hangs in the air. Sister Margaret is walking so briskly that I am almost trotting in order to keep up with her. We round the Center, and behind the large building is an alley. Parked in an alley is an old pickup that looks like something from The Andy Griffith Show. In its bed are a dozen large coolers in various colors and brands. The truck’s maroon paint is pocked by large deposits of rust and the front bumper is tied onto the truck with dull yellow nylon rope. Sister Margaret opens the driver’s side door, motioning me over with a nod.
“Hop in,” she says. The look of surprise on my face makes her laugh.

“Passenger side door is broken.”

“Oh,” I say sheepishly.

I slide across the worn bench seat, smoothing out the blue flannel blanket which covers various gouges and rips in the Naugahyde as I go. The smell inside the cab reminds me of a thousand pleasant memories.

We lurch forward and I try to conceal my alarm as I notice that Sister Margaret is so short, her feet barely reach the gas and brake pedals.

“Come on, you old bucket of bolts!” she exclaims, giving the steering wheel a sharp rap with the heel of her hand. The truck cannons onto the street, and rounding the corner of the alley, I feel the back end pitch upwards as the back wheel strikes the curb. The cover to the glove compartment flops open. Sister Margaret eyes the cover and then looks at me. I snap the cover closed and give her a hopeful smile.

“This whole outfit is held together by prayer and Scotch tape,” she says with a broad grin.

We wind our way down city streets, Hayes to Baker, and then onto a major thoroughfare, Oak and to another rundown looking area. Murals of colorful graffiti cover many of the dull grey walls of the buildings that otherwise look abandoned.

“How long has your daughter been gone?” she asks.

I recount the events of the previous two weeks. Sister Margaret grimly nods as I talk, as if she’s heard all of this a thousand times before.

“Did the police advise you to call the NCMEC?” she asks.

“What’s that?”

“National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They can create posters for you that can be distributed nationwide.” Sister Margaret’s voice is dead serious.

“But Robyn’s friend Jenny said she’s in San Francisco.”

“If Robyn got mixed up with prostitution like your P.I. friend suggested, then it’s possible she could already have been moved.”

“Moved?” I ask. My heart thuds in my chest.

“You mentioned BLU BOY?”

I nod.

“He is a pimp,” she says, confirming Bart Strong’s earlier suspicion. “It’s common for pimps to move their girls from city to city to evade law enforcement.

I fight the sting of tears and try swallowing down the burn that flares in my gut.

“But she’s only fifteen,” I say.

“The average age of a teen prostitute on these streets is twelve to thirirteen.”

I groan aloud.

“Customers vastly outnumber the prostitutes. For every fifteen hundred girls there are between fifteen and thirty thousand johns. These girls come from all kinds of homes. Neglect, abuse, you name it.”

“There was no abuse or neglect,” I argue.

Sister Margaret sighs. “Society puts enormous pressure on young women to be perfect and sexual from a very young age. Teenage girls are notorious for their low self-esteem,” she says. “Was she having trouble in school?”

I feel struck, as if by a dagger. I nod. Silent tears fall to my lap. “Always,” I whisper.

Sister Margaret nods.

The truck pitches to the curb and slows to a stop on a street that looks as forlorn and hopeless as I feel. Sister Margaret yanks the gearshift into park and gives me a steely look.

“Make no mistake,” she says, “You’re in a war that you must win here. And if BLU BOY’s got a hold of your
daughter, getting her back will be the fight of your life.”

The nun switches off the engine.

“Give me a hand,” Sister Margaret says, shooting out of the cab of the truck.

Even before I’ve come round to the back of the vehicle, the agile nun has already lowered the truck bed door and torn the lid off cooler closest to her. Inside, dozens of sandwiches are piled to the rim of the cooler.

“Grab that blue cooler,” says Sister Margaret.

I pull it towards me and flip off the lid. Inside is bottled water.

She turns around, leaning on the truck folding her arms across her chest, a rampart against the frigid wind that buffets both of us. The rank odor of sewer hangs stubbornly in the air. I grit my teeth to stifle a gag, and my hand dives into the pocket of my jeans for a Rolaids. Sister Margaret kicks away an empty Styrofoam container stained with spaghetti sauce that the wind has blown against her leg.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“We wait,” Sister Margaret says with a smile.

A siren screams in the distance.

“Do you have any recent video of your daughter?”

“What?”

“Home movies?” Sister Margaret adds.

I search my memory. The last time we used the video recorder was when we moved to Pittsburg. I nod.

“It’s about a year old,” I say.

“Contact the media again. See if you can get another segment aired that includes that video. And you should call the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; have them make up posters. They’ll distribute them throughout the U.S., also to the F.B.I. and the state clearing houses.”

“But the police said Robyn probably wasn’t abducted.”

“The NCMEC can register her as an ‘endangered runaway’.”

“My husband says it’s best to let the police handle all this,” I say.

Sister Margaret shakes her head. “You are your child’s most powerful advocate. Don’t surrender that position to law enforcement. They are understaffed and overworked.”

Before I can respond, I see, from the corner of my eye, a young Hispanic girl approach us. She has red platform shoes and a matching red miniskirt. She hugs a faux fur jacket to her chest and gives Sister Margaret a tired smile.

“Good to see you Felicia,” the nun says reaching into the cooler for a sandwich.

“Hey Sistah,” Felicia says in a heavy accent.

Another girl approaches. She is a young black girl, wearing shorts, so short I cringe inwardly at how uncomfortable they must be. She ambles towards us unsteadily, clopping down the street in ultra high heels. Two more girls appear behind her similarly dressed.

Half a dozen young girls crowd round us, greedily chomping down the sandwiches. Some girls eat two or three sandwiches before guzzling down the bottled water. Sister Margaret makes small talk with them, calling each by name as the girls give me a wary eye. Each one is wearing a different perfume, producing a sickeningly sweet olfactory cacophony that wreaths us.

“Yolanda, where’s your coat?” Sister Margaret asks one of the girls who’s only clothed in a mini skirt and halter top.

“Sistah, I done tol’ you my name is ‘Delicious’,” the young girl says giving the nun a pointed look. The other girls laugh good-naturedly.

Sister Margaret trots round to the cab of the truck and opens the door. From behind the bench seat, she pulls out an old navy pea coat. As she approaches Yolanda, she flings the coat at her.

“If you catch cold, you’ll end up in the ER again,” Sister Margaret warns.

“Nag, nag, nag,” Yolanda says, rolling her eyes. She shrugs into the coat giving Sister Margaret a grudging
look, but it’s plain from the relief on her face that she is grateful.

Sister Margaret then whips out Robyn’s picture.

“This girl’s name is Robyn. Anyone seen her around?”

My heart thuds in my chest, not only at the abruptness of the nun, but also as each one of the young girls cranes their necks for a peek at my daughter.

One of the girls emits an audible tsk-tsking as she shakes her head no. Two of them withdraw back to the grimy streets.

“This is Margot, her mother,” says Sister Margaret. “She just wants to make sure that Robyn’s okay.”

I dart a concerted glance in the nun’s direction, but she ignores me.

“If you see her, tell her to make contact.”

The girl in the red platforms nods, giving me a wary look.

Eventually all of them drift away.

“I want Robyn home,” I say sternly.

“I know that,” says Sister Margaret. “They know that too. But you have to know how to talk to these girls without scaring them off.” Sister Margaret arches an eyebrow at me.

And so the morning progresses. They come in twos or threes. All of them young. All dressed in ridiculous outfits. All of them hungry.

“How often do you do this?” I ask, as we enter a lull.

“Five days a week.”

“Is it the same group of girls?”

Sister Margaret shakes her head. “Different every day.”

“Where are their parents?” I ask.

“Most of these girls’ parents are either addicts or prostitutes themselves, or worse.”

“Worse? What could be worse than that?”

“Remember Yolanda? Her mother actually sold Yolanda to johns when she turned eleven in order to support her crack habit. She was placed in the foster care system and shuttled from one home to the next for two years. She ran away from the last house because they beat her. She’s thirteen.”

A car alarm screeches a block away.

“The ones that do come from decent homes a lot of times are just too embarrassed to go back home.”

“Don’t you try to get them off the street?”

“You think I’m doing this for my health?” says Sister Margaret jerking a thumb in the direction of the coolers.

“The convent I belong to, The Sisters of the Presentation was founded by a nun whose dream was to establish a safe haven for child prostitutes; boys and girls.

The goal is to get them to stop tricking and into the youth center. But you have to establish trust. That takes time. And that’s something that none of these girls have a lot of.” Sister Margaret squares her jaw and looks away from me.

In the distance, three more girls amble towards us. Sister Margaret seems to give one of them in particular a familiar grin.

“See that one there? The one in the black stockings?”

I nod as they approach.

“That’s Chevy. That girl’s got more troubles than Carter’s got pills. Her mother was a prostitute and both of them lived on the streets. I don’t think she ever did one thing for Chevy. She died of a drug overdose two years ago. Chevy was left to either stay with her mom’s abusive on and off boyfriend or fend for herself. She’s sixteen now. She tends to mother the younger ones.”

“Morning, Sister,” Chevy says as she approaches.
“How you doing today?” Sister Margaret says to the girls, giving each of them a sandwich. Chevy tucks her long, black hair behind her ears and then attacks her sandwich.

“Pretty good,” she says between mouthfuls. “This here is Bambi,” Chevy says of the girl on her left, “and this is Destiny,” pointing to the young girl on her right.

“Nice to meet both of you,” says Sister Margaret.
Bambi and Destiny murmur nearly inaudible greetings.

“This is Margot,” Sister Margaret says with a toss of her head in my direction as she shows Robyn’s pictures to the three girls. “And this is Robyn.”

“Any of you seen her?”
Bambi and Destiny barely look at the photo. But Chevy’s large black doe eyes consider Robyn’s picture for several seconds. It is then that I see it. A flicker of recognition skims across Chevy’s face. I’m certain of it. I step forward and seize Chevy’s arm.

“Please,” I say. “Do you know where my daughter is?”
Chevy wrenches free, giving me a scowl.

“Hey!”
“It’s okay, Chevy. Margot’s just worried about her daughter, that’s all,” says Sister Margaret.
I grab a bottle of water and offer it to Chevy. “I want to help you,” I say. “Will you help me?”
Chevy considers me a moment before relieving me of the bottled water.

“Yeah, maybe I seen her around. Maybe.”
“Just let her know her mom is worried about her, that’s all,” says Sister Margaret.

“Yeah, whatever,” says Chevy. She bats her eyelashes at us and turns on her heels. “Come on, let’s go,” she says to her companions. As the girls leave, Chevy gives me a backward glance, meeting my gaze and then nods her head once, as if acknowledging there is some sort of a connection between us.

Desire propels me forward, but Sister Margaret’s firm grip stops me.

“You cannot go where they’re going.”
Arrested, I blink away the tears. “I want my daughter.”
Sister Margaret steps between me and the three retreating girls, looking up at me with those ebullient gray eyes. She smiles.

“Tell me dear, don’t you have any faith?”
“Look, I’m not trying to be a bitch here, but the Labor Day weekend is coming up and we’re still waiting on your final accounts payable reports so we can finish the July financials,” Carmelita says, frowning as she talks. She leans forward, hands folded tightly in front of her, elbows planted firmly on her desk regarding me a moment.

I stare down at the dregs of coffee in my cup, which rests in my lap. The foment in the pit of my stomach could momentarily be staunched if only I took a sip, but I can’t.

“This isn’t like you, Margot. You’ve always been such a super achiever. Connie in Accounts Receivable says you even dropped out of the advanced Excel class you were taking at Los Medanos. I know you want to get out of doing just A/P work and I’d like to bump you up to assistant bookkeeper, but you don’t show up for work. You don’t return my phone calls.”

It’s only eleven twenty in the morning but I attempt to picture myself on my lunch hour, gazing contentedly at the magazine rack at Long’s, letting my mind meander across outrageous headlines of the glossy covers, but I can’t do that either. A single tear falls from my cheek.

“Robyn has run away,” I say, scraping the tear from my face. There. I’ve said it. Acknowledged it publicly to my outside world. At once it feels terrifying.

Carmelita’s jaw drops. Her perfectly manicured eyebrows rise in shock. I relate the abbreviated version of events to her, keeping as much emotion out of my voice as I can.

“The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has faxed her picture to police all over the country. Also to airports and bus stations.”

“My God, Margot, I had no idea.” Carmelita sits back in her chair. Her hands fall to her lap and her shoulders drop. “Is there anything I can—we can do from here?”

I shake my head. I share the suspicion that Robyn might be living somewhere in San Francisco, but omit the notion that she might be prostituting herself, or worse, being pimped out by BLU BOY.

“Since she’s still considered a runaway, the F.B.I.’s CASKU unit won’t get involved.”

“CASKU?”

“Child Abduction and Serial Killer Unit,” I say in a barely audible tone.

“My God,” Carmelita’s hand rises involuntarily to her mouth. She looks as if she will be sick. Her eyes dart from me to the framed picture of her son and daughter at the corner of her desk.

“Everybody’s been interviewed. Teachers, her friends at school. Jenny’s been called into the police station twice, but the only thing she’s repeatedly stated is that she got a phone call from Robyn telling her that she’s okay and living in San Francisco.”

I close my eyes, letting the fingers of one hand press against the flames battering my gut. In my mind’s eye I picture the foil wrapper of the Rolaids I left on the desk in my office.

“The police checked something called the LUDS on Jenny’s phone in order to find the origination of Robyn’s call. They traced it to a payphone on O’Farrell Street.” I skip the part about the pay phone being located inside the O’Fallell Theatre, which features live strip shows.

Carmelita begins gathering the sheaf of papers on her desk, as if she were brushing a pile of leaves together.

“Don’t worry about this,” she says of the reports. “Connie can fill in for you and get these—”

Just then, Belinda, the secretary pokes her head in the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she says to Carmelita and then angles her gaze towards me.

“Your husband Rob’s on the phone. He says it’s urgent.”

I stand up before I remember the cold cup of coffee in my lap. It plashes to the carpet, making mottled, toothy stains. I snatch up the receiver of Carmelita’s phone and jab the flashing button.

“Rob?”

“She called!” he says. The hope in his voice makes my heart nearly lurch from my chest.

“Where are you?”
“At home,” he says.

My mind refuses to understand the sequence of events. It’s eleven-thirty on a Thursday morning. How can Rob be home? How can Robyn have called him and not me?

“What are you doing at home?”

“She wants to be picked up,” he says. “Come home. Let’s go get our daughter.”

The blaze searing my stomach is exceeded only by the summer heat of Pittsburg trapped inside the old Corsica. Beads of sweat blanket Rob’s forehead as he drives.

I steal a Rolaids from my purse and pop it into my mouth. Rob notices from the corner of his eye but doesn’t say anything. He rakes the back of his hand across his forehead and then glares at the dashboard. The air conditioner sprays out tricklets of lukewarm air. He angrily fidgets with the knob.

“Damn this thing!” he says finally. “Friggin’ thing’s broken,” he says, striking the dashboard with the meaty heel of his hand.

“Never mind that,” I say. “Let’s just get there. It’ll be cooler in the City.”

“Yeah,” he says under his breath.

The car accelerates as we fly along the Eastshore freeway, approaching the MacArthur Maze.

“Where did she say she was again?” I ask, glancing vacantly at the industrial wasteland of Oakland speeding past my window. Up ahead I see the Bay Bridge. I sit forward slightly in my seat; a futile effort at getting to Robyn more quickly.

“Some place called the Bread and Butter,” he replies. “She said it’s a restaurant slash supermarket thing.”

I nod. The Bread and Butter Market is across the street from the O’Farrell Theatre strip club, the same place that the police traced Robyn’s calls to Jenny. Anxiety stokes the already burning fire in the pit of my stomach. I pull another Rolaids from my purse.

“Those things aren’t candy, you know,” Rob says, keeping his eyes on the road.

I cross my arms in front of me.

“Let’s just get there,” I say.

Rob combs his fingers through his hair, pressing on the accelerator. The silence between us feels heavy, oppressive.

“Thompson at work said he saw the TV spot,” he says referring to yesterday’s airing of our home video taken of Robyn a little over a year ago by KTVU.”

“They should have aired more of the video,” I say.

“Criminy, can’t you just be happy it was aired?” he snaps.

“Please, Rob, let’s not get started.”

“I’m not starting anything . . . just pointing out that nothing is ever good enough for you.”

Alternating bands of sunlight and shadow bathe the car as we pass the steel cables of the Bay Bridge.

I swallow down my irritation at his comment.

“Just please don’t start nagging Robyn the minute you see her,” he says.

Flames of rage suddenly billow up my cheeks.

“Nag?” I spew out, incredulous. “What choice do I have? I feel like I’m all alone sometimes!”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. You’re never home! And when you are home, it’s always ‘tell Robyn this’ or ‘tell Robyn that’; jeez Rob, you could stand to do some disciplining once in a while too.”

Suddenly, an ambulance is screaming past us on my right. Irrationally, I think it must be heading for the same destination.

“I feel like a single mother sometimes, that’s all,” I say, resigned.

Rob grimaces; he huffs out a disgusted breath.
I close my eyes to a vague perception that I smell alcohol on his breath. Or do I? It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to think about that right now.

Rob shoots me an angry look. “You’re a piece of work, you know that? I work my ass off to provide for this family, and what are the thanks I get? Huh?” He jabs his palm into the air in my direction.

I close my eyes letting waves of anger wash over me.

“I work too,” I say. A silent, involuntary burp scorches my esophagus. I purse my lips; push my tongue back against my throat.

The Corsica feels as if it’s careening out of control along Highway 80 towards the James Lick Skyway.

“That’s right, I forgot,” he says in a sarcastic voice. “You’re the only martyr allowed in this family.

“Take Bryant,” I reply, ignoring his taunt. “We can take Seventh Street all the way up to Leavenworth. “O’Farrell’s a one-way so you’ll only be able to turn right.”

I roll my window down halfway as Rob maneuvers the car along Seventh, past Market Street and onto Leavenworth. A froth of chilly San Francisco air chuffs into the car. I inhale deeply, as if the cold air will quash the blistering fire gurgling in my abdomen.

“Here’s O’Farrell,” I say.

My eyes scan every female I see walking the sidewalk or sitting at bus stops along the way, hoping against fruitless hope that I might see my beloved daughter. I spot an address on a storefront.

“We’ve gone too far,” I tell Rob. “We’ll have to double back. Make a left up here at Stockton.”

Rob steers the car onto Stockton Street and I notice he too, scans any female he sees on the street as he passes.

“Another left onto Geary, then Franklin and then left again back on O’Farrell.”

“I know that,” he snaps, though I have serious doubts about that.

Rob noses the Corsica forward as directed, managing to get stuck behind a large white delivery truck that double parks in front of a Chinese restaurant just as we make our way onto O’Farrell Street.

“Oh Christ,” he mutters, jutting around the truck, nearly getting sideswiped by a passing black Mercedes. The driver of the Mercedes honks.

“Up yours,” Rob growls beneath his breath, flipping his finger in the direction of the departing Mercedes.

I lean forward in my seat, palms on the dashboard, straining to see the Bread and Butter Market as Rob scours the near horizon for a parking spot.

“There it is!” I say, pointing to the market as we pass by. Rob slows the car, both of us studiously peering towards the market’s window in a vain attempt to see inside. We have to park nearly a block away. Making the dash down the sidewalk, we pass an indigent old man with no legs sitting in a wheelchair who is pawing through a public garbage can. I realize, as we sprint past him, that I’m already breathing through my mouth, a wasted effort to avoid the rancid odor of the filth of the streets.

“Inside,” Rob says needlessly, as he opens the door for me to the Bread and Butter Market. I fly inside with a breathless impatience.

At the front of the store, on one side are shelves stocked with exotic looking wax covered cheeses along with rolls of meats and sausages in varying shapes and colors. Directly across the aisle stands a man, who looks like he could have just escaped from jail, perusing a rack of porn magazines containing lurid photographs of women in various grotesque sexual poses. Incongruent to the disgusting environment, the delicious aroma coming from the deli, at the back of the market, makes my mouth involuntarily water.

“Check the back,” Rob says, “I’ll go through the aisles.”

I race forward calling Robyn by name as I go, scanning left and right until I’m at the back of the store where the deli is located. A man and woman dressed in business attire are ordering lunch. I can hear Rob’s voice calling Robyn’s name behind me. Seconds later, he appears from the last aisle. Our eyes meet and instantly, I know Robyn is not here. A fissure of despair cleaves my heart. I swallow hard to stop what I know will be an ocean of tears if I should begin to cry.

“You seen a girl, blond hair and dark eyes come by here?” Rob asks the thin man behind the counter.

“Her name is Robyn,” I add, jerking her picture from my purse and holding it up for the clerk’s inspection.
Everyone’s attention is on us, their eyes sweeping from the photograph to our faces.

“Nope,” the clerk replies in a disinterested voice.

The business man looks at us as if we are aliens from Mars. The woman with him steps back a pace, as if she fears catching something from us.

I say and do nothing. I know this action well. It is the natural response of people who are terrified of our bad luck. People whose gaze tells me that Rob and I exist in the valley of the damned. Some of Robyn’s teachers reacted the same way. I cannot fault anyone for not wanting to be in our shoes.

“Come on,” I say, urging Rob to the front of the store. Near the front window are a couple of tables with stools around them. A disheveled man sits at one of the stools, hands tucked beneath his thighs, rocking back and forth, staring at the food on his plate. “I wanted a roast beef sandwich. I ordered a roast beef sandwich. I wanted a roast beef sandwich; I ordered a roast beef sandwich.” He mutters over and over again as he rocks.

We query the clerk at the front register, a fat balding man with a black mustache, but he only gives us a gruff reply with a shake of his head. He claims to have seen no one matching Robyn’s description. Ever. And by the way, he wants no trouble in the store.

Heading back outside, we search two full square blocks encompassing the Bread and Butter Market, querying everyone we see on the street as we go, including the line of homeless men and women waiting in line for a meal and a bed for the night at Glide Memorial Church. Our search is fruitless.

“We need to call the police,” I say.

Rob squeezes his eyes shut and then washes his face with his hands. “Yeah,” he replies.

We ask to use the market’s phone and after waiting fifteen minutes, we figure it’s going to be a while, Rob says, “I gotta eat something. You want a sandwich?”

The burn in my stomach has begun to flare higher, up into my throat. Though I have a couple of Rolaids left, I know a bit of food would calm the fire heaving in my gut.

“Yes,” I say, “whatever.” I wave him off as he retreats back to the deli.

The disheveled man, still whispering his mantra, at last stands up, seizes his roast beef sandwich and tosses it into the garbage before plodding outside.

I sit on the stool he just vacated and my thoughts turn to Chevy. In my mind’s eye her soft brown doe eyes appear. She smiles at me, and I wonder: did she make contact with Robyn? Did Chevy convince Robyn to call home? This whole ordeal simply cannot be a coincidence. I make a mental note to ask Chevy the next time I see her; if I ever do. I’m bounced out of my reverie by Rob tapping me on the shoulder.

“My card was denied,” he growls, thrusting the Visa into my face.

I dig through my wallet and hand him a ten dollar bill. Rob wanders back to the deli. I peer at my watch; nearly two-thirty. We’ve been waiting for the police now for nearly half an hour.

Rob returns, plopping a turkey sandwich with all the trimmings down in front of me. Though it looks and smells delicious, fingers of nausea begin to coil around my stomach.

Rob angles his sandwich around left and then right, finding a suitable spot and chomps down, talking as he chews.

“So, what’s the deal with the Visa?”

“I told you,” I say defensively. “I took an advance out and gave it to Sister Margaret, remember?”

“You said you were going to help her hand out food to the hookers,” he says.

“Well, the nuns have to have money to buy the food,” I counter. “Besides, you should see these girls. Any one of them could be Robyn.”

“Well, they’re not Robyn. Criminy, Margot, we barely make enough between the both of us to cover the rent and utilities. We can’t afford to feed half of friggin’ San Francisco.”

“I don’t want to feed half of ‘friggin San Francisco’, ” I reply, quoting the air with my fingers. “And I told you, we’re doing fine. We can make minimum payments on the cash advance as long as we need to. If we can make the
Corsica last one more year, that’ll help. And we’re saving lots of money now that I’m packing your lunches.”

Rob rolls his eyes as he pops the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth. “Yeah? Well a man likes to eat more than just baloney all the time.” He swabs the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

“You really need to meet this Sister Margaret person,” I say, changing the subject. “You know what she asked me?”

Rob gives me a shrug as he shakes the last remnants of the potato chips from the bag into his opened mouth. I have a sudden image of an open-mouthed blue whale pulling plankton through its baleen. I shake the picture from my head.

“What did Sister Margaret ask you?” he says in a flippant tone as he crunches the chips.

“She asked me if I had any faith.”

Rob grunts, and then grabs his soda, taking a long pull on the straw. I watch my husband carefully for any reaction about the subject, but he declines to offer me anything. I have thought a lot about that question posed to me by the nun with the bright gray eyes. As if faith were the kind of thing you could just go out and buy, like laundry detergent and then be done with it all.

“Do you?” I ask.

“Do I what?”

“Have any faith?”

Rob shoves the air towards me with his palms.

“Hey. Don’t go there with me. You know how I feel about all that stuff.”

I nod. From Rob’s strict Catholic upbringing had come his fatiguingly irksome one-liner about being a recovering Catholic. Memories of my own Baptist background complete with the terrifying hellfire and brimstone sermons that seemed to stretch in ever-increasing length every week until I came to dread Sundays with an unflinching hatred still loom in my own memory.

“I know, I know. But—”

“Didn’t you tell me once,” he interrupts, “about that preacher your mom liked so much and how he caught got with his pants down, literally, in some motel with the church secretary who was married or something?”

“Yes, Rob, I remember that and I remember all your stories about how the nuns mistreated you in school. But Sister Margaret is different.”

“Yeah, right.” He grabs my plate and considers my uneaten sandwich.

His eyes catch something in the window. I crane around, to get a look at whatever he is watching. An older woman, obviously a prostitute and a middle-aged man exit the O’Farrell Theatre arm in arm, laughing. The woman glances in the direction of the Bread and Butter Market as they walk; her uneven smile reveals several missing teeth.

“Oh jees,” Rob says, cringing. He consults his watch. “Criminy, where are the friggin’ cops?” He stands up and huffs out an exasperated breath.

And then, as if cued on a movie set, a black and white patrol car eases into view and double parks in front of the market. Two policemen emerge from of the car looking all business and walking tall. It isn’t until they are at the door of the market that I realize one of them is a woman.

We are questioned together and then separated. Rob is ferried towards the back of the market by the tall black cop, out of my sight and earshot. I am ushered towards the front window by the young Chinese woman whose condescending smile makes me already dislike her. We go through a series of standard issue question and answers. I try to contain my impatience with her as the swirl of fire in my stomach begins turning again into nausea. I clasp my midriff with my hand, which startles the policewoman.

“You look a little pale. Are you okay?” she asks me.

“I’m fine. Please. You’re not listening to me,” I say in protest. I suddenly feel clammy; I wipe my hair back from my face with my forearm. “My daughter. Her name is Robyn. Here’s her picture. She’s—”

“I know, Ma’am. She ran away.”

“She didn’t just run away,” I reply curtly. “I already told you. She’s listed as an endangered runaway. Her picture’s been distributed by the NCMEC. You should have a record of that. She called my husband,” my voice
cracks with emotion, betraying me.

“Calm down, Ma’am.”

“I am calm!” I reply angrily. “Why don’t any of you people take me seriously?” I realize I am on the verge of hysteria. I pull down a deep breath of air, trying to still the passion of my despair.

The crackle of the policewoman’s radio perched on her shoulder breaches our war of words. She turns her attention to the radio and responds. I step towards the front window and lean my forehead against the cool pane of glass, closing my eyes. My God I feel sick. The aching in my stomach feels as if it has pushed deeper into my body. Instead of the usual ebb and flow of pain, it is now a persistent, roiling, volcanic explosion, seemingly burning flesh upon flesh.

It is when I open my eyes that I see it. Through the window; I see the car, the BMW from my very first visit to this God-forsaken part of town. BLU BOY. I watch, frozen for precious seconds as the BMW slowly cruises by, its driver flashing me an evil grin, his arm around the blond in the seat next to him.

“Robyn!” I scream.

I explode out the door of the market before the policewoman reacts. Already, all I can see is the fading letters of the distinctive license plate as the BMW jets away, its tires defiantly screech at me, the sweet blond head of hair fleeing from my view like a ghostly apparition.

And just as suddenly, a convolution of events takes place. A fiery arrow of distress pierces my body, throwing me to the ground. Hunched over, my body writhes, in a futile effort at escaping the savage, white-hot pain detonating throughout my abdomen. I feel the hands of the policewoman on my back, shouts of concern drift by me. I think I may even hear Rob’s voice, distraught, hovering near my side, but I can’t be sure of reality; the pain has taken control of me now. I open my mouth to talk but no words come out. I am retching, my body twisting in agony, as I vomit a spray of bloody foam into the putrid gutter of the streets of San Francisco.

*     *     *

“You’re in post-op. The doctor said the surgery went real good.”

Deep inside a formless darkness I hear Rob’s voice. My mind is veiled by layers of woolly fog. I will myself to move, but my body stubbornly resists. My consciousness drags from shadow to thought as I open my eyes. I see Rob’s face, his body is bent over me and then I become aware of his hand on my own. He squeezes my fingers.

“Hey Babe,” he says, bending down to kiss me on the forehead.

“Robyn,” I say, my voice froglike.

I try sitting up but a shock of pain radiates through my abdomen. I cough, attempting to clear my throat and that too, produces another spasm of agony. I groan, releasing my head back down on my pillow.

“Relax,” Rob says. “You just had laparoscopic surgery to repair a bleeding ulcer.”

My hand finds the three small patches of bandages on my stomach.

“They want to keep you overnight just to make sure.”

“What about Robyn?” I croak.

“They were in pursuit when the ambulance came and got you. The cops promised to send somebody by the hospital to let us know what happened,” Rob says.

His hand on my shoulder feels dictatorial.

“The Bread and Butter, BLU BOY,” I mumble, fighting against an anvil of somnolence.

“Shhh,” he whispers. “You need to stay quiet.”

A nurse drifts by, and plays with one of the tubes attached to my body and I fall back into a black void.
September 3, 2002

I am dreaming the sweetest dream. I am cradling my infant daughter, nestling her as she dozes contentedly in my arms. I touch my face to her and smell her baby scent, its sweetness so dear, the aroma stirs a tickle of ecstasy deep in my heart. Her fine, downy hair is moth-wing soft and I have never been so happy in all my life. And suddenly, like the bursting of a balloon, she is gone.

My eyes open to the small hospital room. The room has no windows and is dark save for a small, weak light off to the side by the sink. Several feet away from me sits Rob, his crumpled form asleep in a chair. A mottled gurgle of sound escapes me as I bring my hand to the incisions on my stomach. Rob stirs.

“Hey,” he says, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Robyn?”

“No one from SFPD’s come by yet,” he says, standing up. “But they promised they would as soon as they had something definite to tell us.”

He walks over, washing the exhaustion from his face with his hands.

“What time is it?” I ask.

He consults his watch.

“It’s seven-thirty in the morning. Labor Day weekend.”

“Rob, it’s important that we contact Bart Strong, the private eye.”

I feel his mood immediately cool.

“If the police come up empty-handed, Bart might not. He can do things the cops can’t, you know.”

Rob frowns. “A private eye takes money.” He gives me a look.

“I’ll get another advance on the credit card,” I say, coughing out the cement dryness of my throat.

“That card’s already maxed out,” he snaps.

“Then I’ll get a new card!” I rasp out with irritation.

A tap at the doorway interrupts us.

“Mr. and Mrs. Skinner?”

A tall man in a dark beige sport coat walks into the room. His dark hair is neat, combed back. As he approaches the bed, from the shadow between his coat and crisply pressed shirt, I catch the outline of a gun and holster strapped to his side.

“I’m Detective Covey.”

“Where’s our daughter?” Rob says.

I inch up in the bed, ignoring the pain in my abdomen. My eyes stay fastened on Detective Covey’s stoic face, and I find myself thinking that if he doesn’t play poker, he should.

“The two patrolmen, Eddy and Wong were able to track down the BMW with the license plate BLU BOY, but your daughter wasn’t the passenger riding with Antonio Peña.”

Rob’s shoulders drop. I close my eyes; grit my teeth against a tide of hopelessness. Detective Corey sighs and clears his throat.

“Peña is a pimp, as you probably know. The woman he was with is Joyce Desky, a twenty-four year old known prostitute.”

“Can’t you just arrest Peña?” Rob says.

“Look, I know you’re frustrated, but we can’t just go around arresting people for driving around the streets of San Francisco.”

“He was taunting us,” I say.

“That may be,” Detective Corey says, “but when Officer Eddy stopped Peña, he realized that the young woman in the car wasn’t your daughter. Peña was able to show a valid driver’s license as well as proof of registration and insurance. The officer had no other probable cause to detain him.”
“This is bullshit!” Rob growls. “Our daughter is out there somewhere!” He stabs the air with his finger.

“Settle down Mr. Skinner,” Detective Corey’s voice hardens. “As a matter of procedure, Pittsburg P.D. should request you both take lie detector tests, just to rule you out.”

“Lie detector tests?” Rob’s eyes bug out. “You’ve gotta be friggin’ kidding me!”

“Relax. It’s standard procedure.”

“Standard procedure my ass. Just because you guys can’t do your job, you pick on the parents. What a waste of ___”

“Rob,” I say, reaching out for his arm, but he jerks away from me.

“No!” he says to neither of us. “Our baby is out there somewhere, maybe hurt, maybe dead for all you care, and all you can do is tell me is take a friggin’ lie detector test?”

Detective Corey turns his attention to me.

“If you suspect that your daughter is being held against her will, or has been abducted, the first step is a lie detector test to rule out the parents. It’s as simple as that.”

I close my eyes as the detective concludes with assurances that San Francisco P.D. will do all it possibly can to resolve the ‘situation’. He leaves us with his card and then is gone.
September 8, 2002

“Look Mom, I really have to go,” I say.

For the last twenty minutes, Gladys has been giving me a protracted description of the complete medical examination by the newest love of her life, a Dr. Hunter.

“I’m sorry to keep you honey, I just didn’t want you to worry.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I say.

We complete our conversation with the standard Q and A on when we can all come out to “visit for a spell” and then I hang up.

I push the dial button and phone the office letting Carmelita know about my surgery and that there are no new updates on Robyn.

“We’re praying for you and your daughter,” Carmelita says over the phone.

“Thank you. Hopefully she’ll be home very soon,” I say.

“Oh, just one more thing,” Carmelita says. When do you think you’ll be back at work?”

“The doctor said I’d be fine to come back next week. No lifting more than ten pounds, no Ibuprofen, and take all these meds” I say, staring at the table of prescription bottles in front of me.

“Like I told you,” Carmelita responds, “don’t worry about a thing. The important thing is that you heal.”

“I feel fine now,” I say, probing my abdomen gingerly.

“Oh, one more thing,” Carmelita says. “There’s some vendor, a Moore Floral and Nursery that keeps calling for you, but won’t leave a message. Do you know what that’s about?”

“Oh that. Yeah, they submitted an invoice from 2001 for some yard maintenance for that property in Martinez, but I don’t show an open P.O. Just tell Peggy to make sure she doesn’t pay that bill until we get it straightened out.”

“Oh, one more thing,” says Carmelita. “No one knows what kind of printer cartridges you always order. Peggy wanted me to ask you if you get it from Office Depot.”

“In my bottom drawer is a file that has all that info,” I say. “Have Peggy look there.”

We say our good-byes. The phone immediately rings. Carmelita with ‘just one more thing’, I’m sure.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Skinner?”

It’s the voice of Bart Strong, the private investigator. My heart flips in my chest.

“Yes?”

“Bart here. Sorry I’m just now getting back to you. Family reunion back east.”

I update him on the recent spate of events, including Rob and I scheduling the lie detector tests.

“I just don’t understand why law enforcement isn’t doing more,” I conclude.

“Listen,” Bart says. “I talked with a cop friend of mine in the department. Every time a foster kid decides to stay out late or spend the night at a friend’s house, the law requires the foster family to file a report. Between foster kids, and abused kids, as well as the garden variety runaways like Robyn, you’re looking at hundreds and hundreds of kids. Police just don’t have the resources necessary.”

“But these are children,” I say in a petulant voice.

“Society’s been pushing the envelope for years. Remember those Brooke Shields ads for jeans in the eighties? She was just a teenager. And those ads were tame compared to what Abercrombie and Fitch is putting out today.”

Their latest catalogue shows college aged teens nearly naked, having orgies.”

“My God,” I whisper.

“And that’s not all. My friend says there are ads out there targeting thong underwear to seven to fourteen year old girls.”

“What is wrong with people?” I exclaim.
“When you’ve got little girls advertising lingerie, it’s not that big a leap to start looking at them as sexual objects. Pimps are just capitalizing on this trend.”

I feel like gagging. This can’t be happening. What has happened to our world; to basic decency? And what’s worse, my daughter is caught up in this vortex of filth and depravity. My heart swells with worry. I push away the desperation that threatens to subsume me.

“I want you to kidnap my daughter,” I say.

I hear Bart take a sharp intake of breath.

“Listen Mrs. Skinner. I told you when you hired me; I don’t do extractions.”

“Well then give me the name of someone who does,” I demand.

“It’s not as easy as you think. There are companies out there, KRE, and others who—”

“KRE?” I ask. I am toying with one of my prescription bottle of pills.

“Kidnap, Rescue and Extortion,” Bart responds. “But they’re expensive. Nine to ten grand and up, depending on the circumstances.”

I close my eyes. He might as well have said nine to ten million. There’s no way I can get my hands on that kind of money.

“Abducting someone gets into a lot of fuzzy areas where the law is concerned.”

“I don’t want her ‘abducted’, I want her rescued. There’s a huge difference.”

“Not in my book. And not in the eyes of the law,” he says. “Besides, if you were to do this, then what? You think she’s going to stay at home and be a good little girl?”

“I’ve found a place,” I say. “In Southern California. It’s a rehab exclusively for teenagers. The facilitator has already said that there’s a huge chance that Robyn’s got a chemical dependency issue on top of everything else and we can most likely get the insurance to pay for her stay there.”


I slam down the prescription bottle onto the coffee table.

“Never mind, then. I’ll save her myself.” I hang up the phone.

I look over the notes I’ve made on the inside flap of the phone book. *Peaceful Acres, in Newport Beach, California. A lockdown facility that promises to “deprogram” youth brainwashed by cults; intensive counseling for all sorts of teenage disorders, ranging from drug addiction to anorexia.* A “panoramic, natural setting resting on the beautiful Californian coastline”, John Simpson, one of the facilitators, told me over the phone.

Waves of the hundred plus degree heat from outside weigh the air inside the house. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and pick up the cordless. I want to talk to John Simpson again. In our previous conversation earlier this week, he made it all sound so simple. Robyn would be kept to a rigorous schedule of one on one counseling and group therapy. She would have the opportunity to talk to other girls who have been through similar situations. And she’d be near the sea. How good would this be for my daughter? Just the thought makes me smile. But before I can dial his number, the front door opens. Rob is home.

From the look on his face I can see that his mood is dark. Since our fight four days ago, we have been distant but polite to each other. He has come and gone, seemingly sporadically at times, but always dutifully returning no later than eight at night to heat me up a can of chicken noodle soup.

“Hey,” I say.

He tosses his keys on the table but doesn’t answer me. I can tell by his walk as he stumbles into the kitchen that he is drunk. Again.

I hear him get a glass from the cupboard. I ease up off the couch and amble into the kitchen after him. He’s pouring himself a large glass of milk, which means he’s really drunk.

“I hope you’re friggin’ happy,” he says, slamming the refrigerator door closed.

“What?”

“Cops said I was being deceptive on that friggin’ lie detector test.”
I lean back against the counter and cross my arms in front of me. How can this be? I look down at the floor. What is there to say? I walk over to him.

“Oh Rob,” I say, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

He wrenches away from me.

“Don’t,” he says.

“Won’t they let you take it again?”

“Don’t you get it?” he says. He spins around, nearly losing his balance. His hand jerks outward, catching the fridge door to steady himself.

“I failed the friggin’ test!”

“But you were nervous.” I pause a moment. “And probably angry; couldn’t that skew the results?”

He turns away and troombs into the living room. I follow after him. He is in his recliner, sitting forward, his elbows on his knees, head down between hunched shoulders.

I sit on the couch facing him.

“Rob, honey, it’ll be okay,” I offer, not really believing my words.

He looks at me. Tears are streaming down his face.

“No. It’s not. It’s never gonna be okay. It’s never been okay,” he says in a hushed voice.

In all the years we’ve been married, I’ve never once seen Rob cry. Seeing his weakness stirs a mix of pity and embarrassment inside my heart. And also fear. How can he say it’s never been okay? What does he mean? Do I really want to know?

“Just stop, alright?” I say. “We’ve got to stay focused. Our daughter is out there somewhere and we have to do whatever it takes to get her home.”

He closes his eyes, but the tears keep coming. His jaw hangs open, slack, making him look older than he is. He huffs out a subdued breath.

“There’s something I never told you,” he whispers.

I feel the blood drain from my body. A stab of fear pierces my heart.

“What are you talking about?”

He sits up, wipes his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

“About six months ago, I came home early.” He pauses, takes in a deep breath and then continues. “It was a little after three in the afternoon.”

“I didn’t think there might be something wrong with the fact that a middle-aged man was in our thirteen year old’s bedroom?” I ask, barely able to maintain my composure.

“What do you want me to say, Margot?” He looks at me and then back down at his shoes. “Of course I thought
about telling you. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that maybe Robyn was telling the truth and it was no big deal.”

“Or was it that you came home early because you were drunk and you didn’t want me to find out?” I stand up, fists balled on my hips. “Isn’t that the real truth?”

“No,” he says weakly, shifting in his seat.

“No?” I snort out in a sarcastic breath.

I open my mouth to let out a tirade of fury, but am stopped up short by the ring of the telephone. The cordless is still on the coffee table. Rob looks up at me with hooded, hang-dog eyes. I snatch the cordless from the table.

“Hello?”

“Margot?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Sister Margaret, dear. Listen, something’s happened. There’s been,” she pauses, “an incident.”

“What happened?”

“It’s Chevy. She’s been beat up. She’s at the hospital. San Francisco General. And she’s asking for you.”

I glance at my watch; nearly nine at night.

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

* * *

The hospital corridors are dimly lit and quiet. A helix of industrial grade disinfectant curls around us as we walk down the hall, Sister Margaret whispering quietly as we go.

“The police found her. She’s beat up pretty bad. Some cuts and bruises, of course; also a dislocated shoulder, three broken ribs and a fractured skull. The doctors said the CT scan revealed a severe concussion.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Well, at this point, they say there’s no bleeding inside the brain, but she’ll need to be monitored for awhile to make sure no bleeding starts. She might have short-term or long-term memory loss, or both. And depending on the severity of the concussion, she could require occupational or speech therapy.”

“Who did this?” I ask.

Sister Margaret gives me a peculiar look and I realize that I am holding my stomach as we walk, trying to mitigate the pain from the surgery.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

I give her an overall gloss about my ulcer and recent operation.

“Should you be out of bed?” Sister Margaret asks in alarm.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Really. What about Chevy? Do you know who did this to her?”

A man with a goatee wearing a white lab coat breezes by us, carrying an armload of patient charts.

“Chevy told the police she didn’t know her attacker, but between you and me, she admitted it was Antonio Peña.”

“BLU BOY,” I say, more to myself than to her.

Sister Margaret nods. “But without a positive ID, the police can’t arrest him.”

Sister Margaret punches a large, square button on the wall and suddenly we’re inside ICU, where the atmosphere turns immediately somber. We are in front of a door, but before we go in, Sister Margaret looks over to the nurse’s station, where a petite, young woman with curly blond hair gives the nun a pointed look. Clearly, visiting hours are over as it is past ten o’clock at night.

“Five minutes, Sister, not one second more,” the nurse says in a heavy New York accent.

Sister Margaret smiles, giving her a nod. The nun obviously has some pull around here. I reach to open the door for both of us, but suddenly feel Sister Margaret’s firm grip on my arm. I turn and look at her.

“Chevy’s hurt pretty bad. She could use a real friend right now—not just someone who’s using her as a means
to an end.”

“I understand that,” I say.

“Do you?”

I push past the nun and make my way to Chevy’s hospital bed.

Nothing Sister Margaret has said prepares me for what I see. In spite of the guttering light I can easily see that Chevy’s face is cut and bruised. Her left cheek from chin to eye socket is swollen. She has tubes everywhere and behind the bed, a monitor pings softly with each beat of her heart. She appears to be asleep.

As I draw closer, my heart slowly breaks as my eyes catalogue every appalling wound on the young girl’s body. A deep gash on the left side of her forehead is covered by Steri-strips stained by dried blood. Her left eye is swollen shut and is the color of eggplant. Both arms are mottled with abrasions, and her left forearm bears bruising that is visibly the shape of someone’s fingers. A jagged swath of her beautiful black hair has been razored away at the top of her head, revealing more Steri-strips and more dried blood.

I reach out to touch her, but realize that there probably isn’t a single spot on her young body that doesn’t hurt. She stirs faintly and her right eye opens. Her lips form a nearly imperceptible smile.

“You came,” she mumbles.

She lets out a pained breath. Tears well in my eyes and spill onto the blanket. She looks so helpless and small in the hospital bed. A thousand thoughts ricochet through me. Does she know where Robyn is? Why does she do this? Why do girls let monsters like BLU BOY control their lives? And then Sister Margaret’s admonition about Chevy needing a friend rushes back into my mind.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’m here, Chevy.”

She mumbles something I can’t make out.

“What?” I say.

“Phoenix,” she murmurs.

“Sometimes pimps move their girls to different cities to stay one move ahead of the police,” Sister Margaret says.

“Is Robyn in Phoenix?” I ask Chevy.

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait, straining with every nerve in my body to hear her response. But she only lets out a faint cry that sounds like the mewl of a kitten.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Don’t try to talk.”

“BLU BOY . . .” Chevy begins, and then stops. Her body slumps back into the mattress of the bed, exhausted. Her face is slack, emotionless. She is out.

“Shhh,” I whisper between tears.

I wipe my face, swallowing hard. A hopeless, helpless despair quakes through my body. I grit my teeth against what my life has become, against what this world has become. I fight back the tears, but it’s no use. They come, freely. I bow my head and give in to my emotion, my teardrops silent witness to my overwhelming anguish.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. Sister Margaret gives me a reassuring squeeze.

“Let’s go.”

Sister Margaret leads me to her old, battered truck and takes off, and soon we pull up to a curb. I peer out the window at a large imposing building; a church.

“Come on, dear.”

I slide across the seat out the driver’s side door, numbly following the nun. Outside the air is frigid. Chevrons of wind serrate the night, making me hug my arms to my body for warmth. We walk round to the back of the building where an old wooden door lies hidden between the shadows of statues and brush. Sister Margaret produces a key and unlocks the door.
St. Dominic’s is massive. Incense and history and candle wax braid the air and in spite of my despondency, I feel a measure of comfort. The only light comes from a bank of small electric candles off on the side wall. Above the candles is a large framed picture of a woman clothed in blue and white garments. A single red candle is lit at the very front of the church next to a large gold box. Also at the front, is the altar and above it, an enormous crucifix.

“Jesus is here,” Sister Margaret says quietly.

She motions for me to follow her to one of the pews towards the front of the church.

“Oh Sister, I don’t know about—”

She grips my arm, propelling me forward.

“Come,” she says.

“But I feel like there’s no hope,” I say, trying to stifle my tears.

“Giving up hope is a dysfunctional coping mechanism,” she whispers. And then, “As long as Robyn is alive, there’s hope.”

And then we are kneeling in one of the pews. Sister Margaret’s head is bowed; she is praying quietly. The crucified Jesus is looking down on me; his eyes seem to be staring into my own. His pained face is everything I feel and all I can do is weep. I rest my elbows against the pew in front of me and bury my face into my hands.

I can no longer cope. I want my daughter home, my family intact. Rage and frustration churn within me and rail against the ineffectiveness of the police, Rob’s earlier admission tonight, and my own personal sense of uselessness. I see a kaleidoscope of events: Sunday dinners, birthday parties, opening Christmas gifts beneath a bushy, green tree, all explode from view. As if I will never get those things back. A heavy blackness overshadows me, and for a single second I understand why people commit suicide.

Then, in the middle of my despair raddled thoughts a glint, nearly imperceptible and absurd at the same time, worms its way into my consciousness. If I did have hope, what would it look like? A movie image suddenly intrudes. In my mind’s eye I am seeing Mel Gibson in *Ransom* in that TV studio in front of all that money, challenging his son’s kidnappers; taking them on, as it were. And I think to myself, why couldn’t I do the same thing? Why couldn’t I be the aggressor in all of this mess? An image fixes itself in my mind. An image of me, taking my daughter back by force, to safety. Why couldn’t I? What on earth is stopping me? And for the first time since this horrible nightmare began I feel a glimmer of something. I am afraid to call it hope, yet I dare not call it by any other name.

I am going to rescue my daughter.
September 10, 2002

I inspect my provisions: a large canvas bag containing a small box of crackers, a few bottled waters, Rob’s old binoculars, and a blanket. Though I am perspiring freely now, I know that once I’m in the city it will be cold, especially after dark.

I check my watch, almost eight. Rob should have been home a couple of hours ago. He hasn’t shown up nor has he called. I swallow my disgust over his absence and replay yesterday’s conversation with him.

I told him of my intention to stake out the Tenderloin until I found Robyn and then drive her to the treatment facility in Newport Beach, and after his initial skepticism, he seemed to be on board with the plan. I told him we should plan on leaving around 7:30 so we could get to San Francisco just before dark to begin our surveillance.

And yet, here I am, alone. I look around to see if there might be something else I should take with me and my eye rests on the Peaceful Acres brochure still lying on the coffee table. I scoop it up and shove it into my purse.

Yesterday’s conversation with John Simpson went well. After confirming coverage of the health insurance for Robyn’s stay, his voice positively dripped with encouragement, even offering a free plane ticket for Robyn and myself to Southern California. Since I have no idea how Robyn is going to react to her rescue, I told Mr. Simpson that I would be delivering her by car within a day or two. He assured that they would keep a place reserved for her and reminded me that the sooner Robyn got there, the sooner she could begin her rehabilitation.

I look at my watch again; nearly eight thirty. I sigh. It looks as though I will be doing this alone. I do not know how on earth I will be able to get Robyn into the car with my compromised physical condition, but I remember being in the church. I remember the feeling that swelled in my heart, like watercolor paint seeping across paper in an ever larger circumference. Is it Providence? Naïveté? Only God knows for sure. I only know that I am going to save Robyn. I draw in a resolute breath, a sort of psychological girding of loins, and hoist the canvas bag to my shoulders, along with the blanket and a smaller sack containing magazines, and being careful not to engage any stomach muscles, open the front door.

“Hey.”

“Bart!” I gasp in surprise.

On the porch stands Bart Strong and another man, smaller in stature, dressed all in black with a gorgeous jet black moustache.

Bart gives me a sheepish smile.

“I got your message,” he says. “Glad you passed the lie detector test.”

I give him a look.

“Something tells me you’re not here just to congratulate me,” I say.

I’d left a message on Bart’s answering machine this morning after my visit with Pittsburg P.D., telling Bart that I’d passed the test and of my plan to snatch Robyn from the streets of San Francisco.

Bart smiles.

“Technically I’m not here at all.” He tosses his head in the direction of his partner dressed in black.

“This is Freddie.”

Freddie gives me a swift nod but says nothing.

“Does Freddie have a last name?”

“Uh, the less you know the better,” Bart says.

Behind them, at the curb in front of the house is a large, dark blue non-descript van.

I give both men a questioning look.

“Let’s go get your daughter,” Bart says.

“Ma’am,” Freddie says. He gives me a chivalrous look as he relieves me of the canvas bag, blanket, and sack.

I crawl inside the van, sitting gingerly on the backseat behind the driver’s side and motion Freddie that I’m ready. As he muscles the sliding side door closed I catch the Venetian blinds of my neighbor, Mrs. Cotillo, flutter closed. I sigh and make a mental note to avoid Mrs. Cotillo the next time I see her.
As the two men take their seats and fasten their seatbelts, I look around me at the van’s furnishings. Behind me are a variety of plastic lattice-sided crates filled with equipment. Some things I recognize; flashlights, a camera with what looks like a telephoto lens. Farthest from me, close to the back doors, is a large, black canvas bag. There are also a couple of silver ribbed metallic cases of varying sizes whose contents are a mystery.

We drive in silence for the most part to the City, each one deep in his own thoughts. I am thinking about Rob. About his absence tonight, about the increase in his drinking, and most of all, about his admission from two nights ago. A Ferris wheel of whys circles in my head. Why would he not say anything about the strange man coming out of Robyn’s bedroom? Why would he put his own needs ahead of his daughter? Why has our marriage deteriorated to such a degree that we no longer communicate with each other?

“There it is,” Bart says of San Francisco as we approach the Bay Bridge, interrupting my thoughts.

I dig through my purse for my wallet.

“I got the toll,” I say.

“No, ma’am,” Freddie says in a resolute voice.

He eases the van to the toll booth and has retrieved his change before I can even open my wallet.

And then in minutes we are cruising the streets of the Tenderloin. It is night now, but not dark. The City has come alive with lights and activity. Fiber optics and flashing neons promoting various clubs and bars, and large plasma screens advertising everything from Coca-Cola to condoms infiltrate the windows of the van.

“Anyone for water?” I ask, digging through my canvas bag.

“I’m fine,” says Freddie.

“I’ll take one,” Bart answers.

I reach forward, holding out the bottle of water to Bart’s meaty hand, and it is then I see it. A small black metal object in an ankle holster, glinting in the fusillade of light bearing down on us. A gun. I feel a catch in my breath but say nothing. Bart takes the water without meeting my eyes.

“Thanks,” he says.

He pulls out a blowup of the picture of Robyn I gave him at our first meeting and sets it on the drink holder between him and Freddie.

We drift silently, down Van Ness, up O’Farrell. Skimming Polk, we make a left onto Eddy Street. Gliding, sharklike, the three of us scan every single young woman we see. On most of the corners, hookers clot together like mushroom spores, in all shapes, sizes, and colors, but none look remotely like Robyn.

As we continue our dragnet along Eddy, I am struck by how predatory all of this feels. Like a Great White shark hunting the murky depths. We are the hunters and the prey is my daughter.

It is then that we pass by The Phoenix Hotel, and I get it.

“That’s it!” I yell.

“What’s ‘it’?” Bart asks.

“The Phoenix Hotel! Chevy, the girl that was beat up whispered the word ‘Phoenix’ to me.” I give them both a brief gloss of my visit with Chevy at the hospital two days ago.

Bart and Freddie exchange glances.

“The Phoenix is a known party spot,” Bart says. “Lots of dope and hookers,” his voice is optimistic. “Peña could very well be running his girls through The Phoenix.”

“Good a place as any,” Freddie says.

Without signaling he navigates smoothly through the maze of one-way streets, a right on Hyde to Turk and then a left onto Larkin, as if he’s done this a thousand times. Miraculously, Freddie is able to snag a parking spot near the corner of Larkin and Eddy, across the street from The Phoenix Hotel.

“You really know how to maneuver this van, even without using your turn indicators” I say, teasing Freddie.

“A word of advice about driving the mean streets of San Francisco,” Freddie says in a deadpan voice. “Using your turn indicators is a sign of weakness.”

Bart laughs.
Men and women walk up and down the street. Most young; some not so young. A fair percentage look to be homeless or drug addicts or both. A few wander into the Phoenix. I look up and down the street but see no sign of Robyn. Also, no sign of BLU BOY, for which I am grateful. Within minutes Bart says:

“See that?” he motions with his head towards two guys standing together near the trees of the hotel.

“What?” I ask, oblivious.

“Guy just copped some dope,” Freddie says.

“Yup,” Bart responds.

I do not see this actually happen and realize how grateful I am to be with these two.

“I want to thank you both for doing this,” I say.

“Ma’am,” Freddie says.

“So here’s what’s going to happen,” Bart begins. “If we see her, Freddie’s our guy. You,” he says looking directly at me, “stay in the van. Robyn’s going to be freaking out and will need to see your face the second we open the doors to the van. Freddie will get her inside here and she’ll be subdued and then we take off for Newport Beach immediately. Got it?”

I notice that Bart is only looking at me. I nod, wondering what he means by the word ‘subdued’, but keep silent.

“What about the police?” I ask.

“We shouldn’t have a problem. Even if there’s a cop nearby, Freddie here should be able to get her to the van without an incident.”

I catch Freddie looking at me through the rearview mirror and I find myself wondering just who this Freddie person is. I notice that even as our conversation progresses, all three of us continue making frequent glances out the van windows. After a few minutes Bart falls silent and once again the three of us are left to our own thoughts.

As I scan the street, I find my mind wandering to the time when Robyn will have completed her treatment. What will she be like? Will we do all those mother-daughter things I read about in my magazines? Will she and I be exchanging things like blouses and shoes?

All of that though seems as far away as the stars and after twenty or so minutes, realize that I’m on the edge of my seat, every muscle tensed in anticipation as I peer through my window. I realize suddenly that I am exhausted. This is the most energy I’ve expended since my surgery. I also realize belatedly, that I’ve forgotten my medicines. I let out a silent breath of exasperation and reach for my bottle of water.

I sit back in my seat and check my watch, just after ten thirty. I keep my eyes on the activity of the streets. People continue to come and go. The Phoenix Hotel is a very busy place and through the window I can hear music coming from the bar at the hotel, which must be deafening inside. Ten thirty turns into midnight, which slides uneventfully into one forty-five, and still no sign of Robyn.

I stifle a yawn and pull out the brochure on Peaceful Acres and peruse the captions beneath the colorful photos by the glare of a nearby streetlight.

“You been there before?” Freddie asks. His eyes are looking at me looking at the brochure.

“No,” I say. “But it seems like the perfect place for Robyn. And they told me our insurance would completely cover her stay there.”

“It sure doesn’t hurt to have good insurance,” Bart says.

Freddie lets out a snort. “The better the insurance, the more enthusiastic the treatment facility.”

“It does seem like a nice place, though,” I say.

Freddie nods once. “Better than most,” he says.

I meet his gaze in the mirror, but he looks away, out his driver’s side window.

“How do you know?” I ask.

Bart looks at Freddie, but his face remains angled away from both of us. Bart looks down but says nothing. The streetlight makes Bart’s graying sideburns glisten silver.

“He had a daughter,” Bart says, almost beneath his breath. “On the streets; on drugs.”
I am caught by the word ‘had’, but say nothing.

“That’s how we met,” Bart says.

I nod. I find myself wondering what happened to Freddie’s daughter and if this is why he is helping me tonight.

“What’s her name?” I ask.

Freddie’s eyes stay fixed on the activity across the street. “Amanda.”

The mood inside the van is suddenly somber. I can’t think of a single thing to say. Minutes flit by like schools of fish.

“So,” Bart begins. “This horse walks into this bar.”

Freddie gives Bart an inquiring look.

“And the bartender says to the horse, ‘why the long face?’”

I laugh in spite of the ridiculousness of the joke. And then Freddie laughs too and now everything feels okay; at least on the surface.

I take another sip of water, hoping to settle my stomach that’s beginning to knead with irritation, and twisting the cap back onto the bottle feel my mouth release into yet another yawn.

Bart looks back at me.

“Did you hear the one about the policeman, the priest and the rabbi?”

I shake my head. “Please, not another bad joke,” I respond.

“So the policeman says to this priest—”

“Here she is!” Freddie says.

He is out the door; calmly, smoothly, making his way across the street towards the trees in front of the hotel.

My heart leaps as I stare at my daughter, and it’s as if I can’t get my fill of her; and though she is dressed in typical hooker garb, and her hair looks ratted and messy, it is my darling Robyn.

“You stay put,” Bart says, exiting the van.

Suspense crawls up my throat as I watch events unfold.

Freddie angles away from Robin about twenty feet down the block. He takes a position behind one of the trees and in his dark clothing is nearly completely hidden. Bart continues forward at a saunter in the general direction of the hotel. His hands are in his front pockets. He stops on the corner and leans casually against a stand of newspaper dispensers and then pulls out a cigarette from his front breast pocket. Lighting it, he makes eye contact with Robyn. He gives her an informal hailing nod. She looks away and then back at Bart and licks her lips. From the glare on the window and my distance, I can’t get a read on her face. Is it fear? Anticipation? My stomach clenches with a heavy revulsion. I wipe a tear from my eye threatening to obscure my vision. Bart looks up the block and then down the block and then slowly approaches Robyn. He is close enough to touch her yet makes no move to grab her, simply engages her in conversation and it is only then I realize what is going on. He is posing as a john; he is propositioning my baby.

I swallow down a hot and sour clot of bile and remind myself to remain calm.

Bart and Robyn talk. Robyn nods in response to something Bart has said. Bart then hikes a thumb in the direction of the hotel and then quickly motions down the block towards where Freddie is hiding. Robyn shrugs. Bart continues forward at a saunter in the general direction of the hotel. His hands are in his front pockets. He stops on the corner and leans casually against a stand of newspaper dispensers and then pulls out a cigarette from his front breast pocket. Lighting it, he makes eye contact with Robyn. He gives her an informal hailing nod. She looks away and then back at Bart and licks her lips. From the glare on the window and my distance, I can’t get a read on her face. Is it fear? Anticipation? My stomach clenches with a heavy revulsion. I wipe a tear from my eye threatening to obscure my vision. Bart looks up the block and then down the block and then slowly approaches Robyn. He is close enough to touch her yet makes no move to grab her, simply engages her in conversation and it is only then I realize what is going on. He is posing as a john; he is propositioning my baby.

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And just as they pass Freddie, everything becomes a controlled frenzy of activity. Freddie is suddenly on the other side of Robyn. Bart and Freddie have her and are forcing her across the street. Robyn sees the van and begins a frantic struggle. As the trio jerk and heave closer, I can see the fury and terror in Robyn’s eyes. Through the thin metal of the van I hear her erupt in screams which are quickly muffled by Freddie’s gloved hand. “Oh baby,” I whisper.

Onlookers barely give the unfolding scene a half second’s attention; nothing more than an uninterested glance. Just another wild night in the City.

The double doors at the back of the van explode open and suddenly Robyn and I lock eyes. Her face is instantly
a convulsion of recognition and indignation. I imagine too, that I see a desperate plea for help, though if I am scrupulously honest with myself, I do not see that. Her face contorts into a blaze of rage and fury and from her covered mouth she attempts an incendiary scream, which Freddie’s hand again muffles.

Bart has Robyn’s bottom half firmly gripped in an unyielding bear hug while Freddie is somehow able to control her arms. Her body writhes with a choleric violence as they gently ease her on her back on the carpeted floor of the van.

“The bag!” Freddie says. His voice is taut but controlled.

Bart heaves his girth across Robyn’s legs and twists to his right, yanking the black canvas bag within Freddie’s reach. Freddie tugs at the zipper of the bag, and within seconds extracts two sets of Velcro restraints. Bart marshals one set on Robyn’s ankles and then slaps the second set around her wrists, now bound in front of her body. Freddie begins digging around in the bag.

With Freddie’s hand off Robyn’s mouth, she detonates into a diatribe of profanity.

“What the hell are you doing? Let me go, damn it!”

Suddenly, from the depths of the black bag Freddie draws out a syringe.

“What are you doing?” I shout over Robyn’s tirade.

“It’s necessary,” Bart growls.

Bart lobs me a grave look as Freddie wrenches the cap off the syringe, jabbing the needle into Robyn’s arm. She lets out a squeak of pain and within seconds her body falls slack. Her eyes roll back and her eyelids flutter closed.

“What did you give her?” I ask, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice at seeing my daughter’s inert form. I am already out of my seat, stroking her hair back from her face, caressing her cheeks, her forehead.

“Relax,” Freddie says. “It’s sodium thiopental.” And with that he slams the double doors closed.

Did I envision such drastic steps when I was filling my little bag with crackers and magazines and bottles of water? Did I think, as Bart warned, that Robyn would come along willingly, grateful for my parental intervention? The truth is, as I sit, cradling my daughter’s limp body in my arms, I don’t really know what I thought.

I only know that as Freddie wheels the van out of San Francisco and speeds into the black maw of night, I am filled with a profound yet subdued sense that everything is suddenly right with the world.
September 11, 2002

I plug my key into the lock of the front door and let myself into the house. It’s only eleven thirty in the morning and already it is sizzling outside. The house isn’t much cooler. My muscles groan with exhaustion and my eyes feel like two round smoldering orbs of lava. Inside, familiar smells surround me; filaments of Robyn’s Hello Kitty body spray and the floral scent of used dryer sheets wend their way through me. And then the stink of old booze.

I glance at the small table by the front door and spy Rob’s keys. Fatigue jettisons from my bones and my body is suddenly nearly oscillating with white-hot rage.

“Hey Baby,” Rob says. He stands at the entrance to the kitchen. “I made coffee.”

His body language is the very definition of contrition, yet I feel so angry that I don’t dare open my mouth to respond. I stomp into the kitchen, tossing my bags onto a chair and then, crossing to the counter and the coffee pot, punch the ‘off’ button.

“How did it go?” Rob’s voice is behind me. “Is Robyn in that place?”

I remain silent.

“Your mom called.”

I remain silent.

On the kitchen table, next to my stand of pills is a large box of Hostess powdered sugar donuts.

“I bought donuts,” he says needlessly.

I snatch one of the small prescription bottles and ground the child-proof cap into the heel of my palm, but I can’t get the lid to release.

“I’m sorry,” I feel Rob’s hand on my shoulder and I jerk away. At the same time the cap flies off the bottle and a spray of orange and white capsules showers the table and floor.

“Look, I know I really screwed the pooch on this one—”

“Don’t!” I spit out.

I spin around, leaving the mess of pills and head to the bathroom. I need a shower.

“I was thinking,” Rob begins. “Maybe after Robyn gets out of that place, we could move back to Aztec. But we wouldn’t have to stay with your Mom or anything,” he quickly adds. He prattles on about eking it out, how sort of romantic it would be starting all over, just living the simple, unencumbered life.

“And I swear to you,” he says. “I’d go to A.A. I would. I think I even remember where meetings were; behind that First National Bank, on Chaco Street.”

His voice is distant, like a radio station that only partially comes in so that I hear only every other word or so. I am suddenly tired, I feel like now I can finally sleep. Really sleep for a thousand years without a care, now that Robyn is safe and sound. I collapse to the bed. I sit slumped and mop the hair off my forehead and with it a sheen of sweat. Rob stops his little fairy tale and peers at my face.

“Are you okay?”

His arm finds my shoulders.

“Hey,” he whispers.

“Nothing,” I murmur, my eyes staring blankly at my lap.
He sits beside me, cloaking me. The pong of stale sweat curdles my nostrils. It seems a Herculean effort to say even a single word, but I manage.

“What did you say?” he asks, his voice filled with anxiety.

I turn and meet his gaze.

“Please, just leave.” My voice is as dry as dead leaves. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”
The coffee maker burbles and coughs to life as I review my to-do list. Finish cleaning the house; put the laundry away, and my appointment. My hand edges to the Los Medanos Community College catalogue on the counter, my fingers skimming over my handwritten note concerning my appointment with a counselor this afternoon. Though it is a Friday, I arranged with Carmelita to take the day off. Carmelita was so grateful that the situation with Robyn had been solved if it meant getting me back to a semi normal schedule.

I smile inwardly as I open the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink and retrieve the Comet and sponge. It seems indescribably splendid to be thinking about school again. Already my mind is beyond the two years I’ll be at Los Medanos and is plotting how I’ll manage getting to classes at the UC extension in Concord. By that time Robyn will be college-aged herself. Perhaps the two of us will go to school together; trading silly commentaries on our professors, sharing notes as we sit in the cafeteria, books and papers sprawled over a table, as we linger over café mochas and decadent cinnamon rolls.

Earlier, I dusted and vacuumed the entire house, taking special care in Robyn’s room, having arranged everything just so. Yesterday I bought and hung new curtains with a matching comforter and pillow shams, all in a lovely pink with lavender and green colored sweet peas. I am hoping that when she returns and sees her room so perfect, so welcoming, she might realize how much she is loved.

As I cross the living room making my way to the bathroom, I glance at the living room window; the curtains are parted slightly, permitting streaks of morning sunlight into the house. I imagine that the days must be growing cooler, disregarding the sweat that covers my body like a wetsuit.

I soak the sponge beneath a rush of cold water in the bathroom sink and shake the green powder across the top of the wet sponge. The tang of the disinfectant coils through the air, giving me a feeling of deliverance from the past two months of hell. I scrub the porcelain to a bright shine and then start in on the silver spigot. This ritual, this ablution, is a comfort. It is a reminder that everything can be made right if only enough rigorous effort is exerted.

As I finish scouring the bathroom sink I think of Rob. He’s been gone two weeks, has called and left several messages, but we haven’t yet talked. In truth, I don’t know what I want to say to him. Most of me misses him terribly. Beyond that I haven’t allowed myself to give any thought.

I am midway through sluicing water along the walls of the bathtub to remove the last of the cleaner when the telephone rings. I mutter to myself as I peel off the yellow rubber gloves and sprint for the phone. The remote is in its stand in the kitchen, right next to the caller ID display. I know there are two messages left by my mother, and until now, I’d managed to forget about the need to return her call. ‘Unknown caller’ shows on the readout. I know from previous phone calls that it isn’t John Simpson from Peaceful Acres. I think momentarily of letting the answering machine pick it up, but then think better of that decision and grab the phone, depressing the ‘talk’ button.

“Hello?”
Silence.
“Hello?” I say again.
“Es no finish, señora.”
My heart is suddenly a staccato of gunfire in my chest. I will never forget that voice. It is BLU BOY.
“You will never see Robyn again!” I yell into the phone. “Do you hear me?”
I hear laughter, the sound of evil incarnate.

“No puede hacer nada.” He laughs again and then his voice is a thin whisper: “she es mine.”
“You will never ever touch her again. Never!” I scream. I click the ‘end’ button and drop the phone. It clatters to the counter. My body is shaking with rage. The phone begins ringing again. ‘Unknown caller’.

I let it ring but the caller hangs up when it comes time to leave a message. I pull out a chair from the kitchen table aware that my legs feel like wet ribbon. How did BLU BOY get this number? I can’t believe that Robyn would have given this monster her home number. Maybe Chevy knew and BLU BOY beat it out of her. If he knows the phone number, maybe he knows the address too. A feather of dread whispers down my back.

I stand suddenly and lurch for the front door, twisting the lock with all the force my hand can muster. I am on the couch now, peering surreptitiously from behind the drapes, looking for the telltale BMW. But all I can see is my neighbor, Mrs. Cotillo, watering the dogwood hedge that separates our property.
I storm back to the kitchen and call the Pittsburg P.D. but they offer less than any help, telling me that without a crime having been committed, there is nothing they can do. I phone Bart Strong but only get his answering machine. I leave a message.

Now what? After whisking Robyn out of ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’, I hadn’t planned on this animal invading my life; our lives. I expected that with my daughter’s departure he would find some other poor soul to prey upon. What did Sister Margaret tell me; there are hundreds of runaways on the streets of San Francisco. My stomach is suddenly roiling with an acid foam. I reach for my bottle of Axid and open it, popping two of the white tablets into my mouth.

I have never before in my life understood how one human being could take the life of another. At least not until now. I could kill BLU BOY this very minute without batting an eyelash and walk away feeling completely free from any wrongdoing.

An hour passes and then two. I cannot clean, nor can I think straight. Shards of fear and dread needle my skin. The appointment with my counselor looms. I should be in the shower, getting ready, but I seem frozen inside the house, cocooned by an oppressive disquiet. My mind tells me that Robyn is perfectly safe, down in Newport Beach, tucked safely within its confines, getting the help she so desperately needs. No one knows where she is other than Bart, his helper Freddie, Rob and I. John Simpson, the director of Peaceful Acres said that Robyn would not have access to the outside world for the first thirty days, and even after that she would be allowed contact with immediate family only. There is no way that BLU BOY can know where she is, much less get to her. And yet. I try dislodging the fear from my body by briskly running my fingers through my hair. My mouth still feels dried up as dryer lint and my heart hammers inside my ribcage.

I wander back into the kitchen and bolt down three more Axid’s, realizing that I need to talk to someone. My mind jumps immediately to Sister Margaret. I reach for the phone just as it rings again. For one harrowing second I worry it might again be BLU BOY, but caller ID says: ‘Aztec, New Mexico’. It is my mother. I groan but pick up the phone anyway. I need to hear somebody’s voice in my head other than BLU BOY.

“Hello?”
“There you are!” Gladys’ southern accent already grates on my nerves.
“Hi Mom. Look, I haven’t called you back because it’s been really—”
“How you doin’ Sugar? I hadn’t heard in a couple of days and thought you might have forgotten about my biopsy.”
“On your arm, right?” I say, proud to be able to call to mind her latest medical predicament.
“My land, you should have seen the size of that needle!” she bellows. “I liked to had a conniption, it hurt so bad.”
“When do you get the results back?”
“Day after tomorrow, bless Patsy. The sooner the better, I say. But look, I didn’t call just to bore you with all my problems.”
Really?
“I wanted to let you know how the photo shoot went.”
Ah, The Baby and her commercial launch into greatness. Gladys recounts each and every elaborate iota of information about poor Petra’s dreadful ride to the airport, the traumatic flight, the harrowing cab ride, and the unmitigated filth of the city. Followed by the glitz and glamour that surrounded The Baby, the pomp, and the fanfare, as studio execs fawned and slavered around the sweet little dear until I think I might go into diabetic shock. Gladys finishes by telling me to be looking for the launch of the new Gerber Baby Food commercials soon, staring the cutest little baby on the planet.
“But listen to me go on,” she says. “How’s Robyn?”
“She’s doing great,” I say, my eye on the latest magazine cover lying on the table. The cover article is about the latest pop sensation, Avril Lavigne. Her face is that of a child. Her eyes are heavily made up with thick black eyeliner. Another sign of the times.
“She got the lead in the school play,” I lie. “She’s playing Juliet.”
“Oh my!” Gladys says.
“And she placed first in the spelling bee,” I add, my thoughts far away, wondering about how BLU BOY got
our phone number.

“Oh, I didn’t realize they had spelling bees for high schoolers,” she says.

I am jolted from my daydreaming.

“Oh, it’s just a local thing that the English class did. No big deal,” I say.

“So anyway,” Gladys says, changing the subject. “Is it still hotter than the hinges of hell out there? News said you got a real spell goin’ on.”

I toy with my prescription bottles, arranging them like little soldiers.

“I have to go, Mom. I have an appointment,” I say looking down at my watch. Already I am half an hour late to see my counselor. My heart sinks. I extricate myself from the telephone conversation with my mother and decide to blow off my appointment with my counselor.

Instead, I call Sister Margaret. I tell the little nun all about Robyn’s rescue, Rob’s arrest and subsequent departure from the house, and of my overwhelming feelings of betrayal. Sister Margaret said she could use some help the next morning at the church and could I please be there by nine in the morning.
September 27, 2002

“Grab those candles; replace those on the altar that are in the candlesticks up there.”

From a box on the front pew I remove two large, crème colored candles and hand them to a small Hispanic woman with hair as silver as a candelabra. From the number of people milling about, slowly exiting the church; it is evident they have just had a morning service. There is a young man with dark brown skin still sitting at the organ, toying with soft, dulcet chords that float through the air like winged seraphim. Sister Margaret though, is a flurry of activity, directing several volunteers who are dusting and sweeping the mammoth area that is St. Dominic’s Catholic Church.

“We’ve got less than three hours until a wedding,” Sister Margaret says to no one in particular. She is busying herself with deadheading a vase of roses left by a parishioner. She plucks the faded blooms and tosses them into a large plastic trash container at her side that one of the volunteers has just dragged to her side.

I have come to this place and I don’t know why. I am not a religious person by any stretch, certainly not Catholic, and yet. Sister Margaret seems to be the only person that I am able to talk to without fear of judgment or recrimination.

As I pull faded gladiolas and wilting lilies from a huge glass vase, my chest is squeezed by strangled emotions. What have I hoped to find within these neo-Gothic stone walls? The high altar looms, castle-like, enormous and beautiful; its carved crucified Christ with bowed head seemingly endorsing my presence here. The stained glass windows, twenty plus feet high above the altar evoke a sense of transporting one’s soul back into history itself. How can I not find comfort here?

We prep and preen vase upon vase of blooms until my head nearly aches from the sweetness of the blossoms. Sister Margaret dusts off her hands and then instructs one of the male volunteers to remove the plastic garbage can to the parking lot to be dumped in the trash bin. She stumps her hands on her hips and regards me a moment.

“Come on,” she says, “follow me.”

The nun is on the move again. We amble to the right, between columns to an open area. At its center is a gold box and beside it, several lit candles. There is a small grouping of pews and except for one older Vietnamese man at the very back, the area is unoccupied. At the front, above the candles is a large white statue of a woman holding a baby. Mary and Baby Jesus. Sister Margaret makes her way to the front pew, pulls down the kneeler and then lowers herself to her knees and crosses herself.

I am unsure what to do, and so stand there dumbly. Those vivid gray eyes smile at me in a friendly, mocking sort of way and she motions for me to sit down next to her. After a brief moment, she lifts herself off the kneeler and sits next to me. From the shadows of her habit, she removes a long circular string of crystal beads interspersed with gold plated roses. At the very bottom is a crucifix. It looks like a necklace. She hands it to me.

“This is a rosary,” she says. Then from the same hidden pocket she pulls out a small booklet titled, “How To Pray The Rosary”. “Here, put this in your purse. You can read it later.”

She stuffs the little booklet into an open pocket of my purse.

“Do what I do,” she says. She takes hold of the crucifix with her right hand and crosses herself again. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” she says. I clasp the crucifix in my right hand and cross myself in the same way. It feels strange and intimate at the same time. She prays words I’ve never heard before, but that somehow sound familiar. She moves her fingers along the beads with each prayer, demonstrating for me to do the same. I recognize the Our Father, but am not sure if I should pray with her or remain silent. As she leads me through a series of Hail Mary’s, I begin to feel the constriction in my body loosen. A sensation, ephemeral yet immutable at the same time falls over me as the recitation of words becomes a sort of meditation of grace. After the first set of beads, Sister Margaret stops and crosses herself again. She sits back in the pew.

“That was one decade,” she says. “But you’ll read all about it in that little pamphlet I gave you.”

“But I’m not Catholic,” I say.

“Hey,” she says, winking and ribbing me with her elbow. “Nobody’s perfect!” She lets out a quiet cackle.

“Listen, Sister Margaret, this was very nice, but it doesn’t really solve anything. My husband is still a drunk and he is still gone.”

“Are you going to find him and drag him into a hospital?” she asks.
I let out a flustered giggle. “No,” I answer.

“Well then, there you go!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You pray, dear. Pray to know God’s will.”

“I’m not so sure about this whole ‘God’s will’ thing; I mean there’s so much evil in the world. So many people who do bad things. Sometimes it seems to me that God doesn’t care.” I say this in a whisper because I suddenly feel ashamed of my own doubt.

Sister Margaret looks up at the statue of the Madonna.

“If you take all of the evil in the whole world, throughout time; all the Hitlers, and killers, murderers, every bad thing you can possibly think of and lump all of that together, all of it combined wouldn’t be equal to a single drop in the ocean compared to God’s love for us.”

“But then why is there evil in the world? How can God allow all of that?” I ask. I’m aware that I must sound like a petulant child, but she brought up the subject.

“The more important question to ask is, ‘why do we allow it?’”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean how can a middle class, average person walk down the street, say, walking to their daily job, and pass by someone who is obviously homeless, hasn’t eaten for a week and is dying of AIDS, and do absolutely nothing? Or how can a businessman, on his way to a lunch meeting at a fancy restaurant, step over a drunken bum in the parking lot and do absolutely nothing? Is this God’s fault? Or is it ours? We can hardly blame God for allowing the suffering that we ourselves let our brothers and sisters endure every single day.”

I had never thought about these kinds of issues this way. I remain silent, and stare at the rosary in my hand.

“In the world there is a disconnection. There is an ‘us’ and then there is a ‘them’. When we evolve to a point where the ‘us’ realizes that we’re exactly the same as the ‘them’, we could end to world hunger, and homelessness just like that,” she says, snapping her fingers. “Once we see that the homeless vet isn’t just some man, but he’s our brother, our father, our uncle, we will truly be able to say we are Christ-like. Until that time, we reach for that ideal.”

“We can’t all be Mother Teresa,” I say. I do not mean to sound so ill-tempered. The words are out of my mouth before I even think.

“Saint Paul says we are all different parts of the same body. You can’t have a complete body if all the parts are just eyeballs. How could you eat if you didn’t have a mouth? In the same way we are each called to accomplish different things. I was called to be a nun. You were called to be a wife and mother.”

“I guess,” I say, thinking of Rob probably drunk is some bar. “At least the mother part.”

“If what you say is true and your husband Rob is an alcoholic, he has a disease. The same as if he had cancer or diabetes. Now, would you just abandon him if he had cancer?”

“Of course not,” I respond.

“Okay then.” She stops as if those two words explained everything.

“But I don’t know what to do!” I say.

She laughs, shaking her head. “I told you, dear. Pray.” She smiles at me. “When you have forgiveness in your heart, all things are possible.” She inhales a deep breath and then raises and drops her shoulders. “Alright then. Come on. I want to show you something else.”

I do not think I want any more revelation in my world today, but I say nothing and follow Sister Margaret to the very back of the church and into a small room containing empty vases, candles holders and the like. From a cabinet, the nun extracts a plain white box.

“I thought Chevy might like this,” she says, opening the box.

Inside is a pale rose colored print blouse. The pintuck design at the shoulders is completed by flutter sleeves and long ties at the neck done into a pretty bow.

“Wow,” I say, unable to imagine Chevy in such an article of clothing.

“Think she’ll like it?”
“It’s beautiful,” I reply.

The nun carefully folds the blouse back into the confines of the box and replaces the lid. “Do you have the time?”

“Time?”

“To come with me and give this to her,” she says, producing her keys from the shadowy pocket of her habit. I open my mouth to fabricate some sort of excuse, but those bright gray eyes will brook no refusal. She thrusts the box into my hands.

“Come on.”

She takes me to a large building nestled between other large apartment style buildings. The name on the window of the front door reads SafeHouse.

“Safehouse is for women eighteen and older who are trying to get out of prostitution. It was co-founded by my order, The Sisters of the Presentation and a woman by the name of Glenda Hope. The founder of my order, Nano Nagle, dreamt of establishing safe havens for prostitutes nearly two hundred years ago. This place is the fulfillment of that dream. It’s a place to start over,” Sister Margaret says as we walk through its main corridor. “I got special permission to house Chevy here while she recovers from her injuries.”

“How long can she stay?” I ask.

“As long as she wants to.” She leans closer to me and whispers, “and I’m hoping this might even get her off the streets permanently.”

We turn a corner, to another hallway. The halls smell of fresh paint. Inside Chevy’s room, the décor is simple but inviting. A strawberry colored swag over the window lets in soft rays of the morning sun. There is a small vase of fresh flowers on a simple pine dresser opposite the bed. The bed itself doesn’t have a headboard, but the quilt on top matches the window swag and looks homey and warm.

Chevy is in the bed, asleep. Sister Margaret raps softly on the opened door of the room and the young girl opens her eyes. Even from this distance I can see that the wounds on her face are nearly healed. The large gash that was so prominent on her forehead looks now to be a distant memory covered by three Steri-strips, and her left eye that was blackened and swollen shut looks nearly back to normal, the dark eggplant color is now much lighter and edged in yellow.

“Knock, knock,” the nun says.

Chevy opens her eyes and seeing us both, smiles.

“Hey,” she says, her voice cracks.

“Thought you could use some company,” Sister Margaret says.

Chevy balls her fists in a muted stretch and then sits up in bed.

“Sure,” she replies. “Kinda boring around here.”

Sister Margaret stuffs the boxed blouse into my hands and says sotto voce, “I think I hear my cell phone,” and ducks out of the room. I heard nothing and am suddenly alone with this little girl, standing awkwardly holding the gift.

Chevy smiles again. She eyes the box.

“Oh,” I say foolishly, “this is for you.”

I walk to the bed and hand her the present. Chevy opens the box and pulls out the blouse, holding it up to her shoulders.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It is,” I agree.

“I should try it on,” she says, undoing the bow. She slips the blouse on over her pajama top and gets the buttons done, but struggles in retying the bow. Her finished effort produces a twisted jumbled mess that looks more like a restraint than a bow.

“Here,” I say, “like this.”

I sit on the bed next to her and retie the tie ends into a neat bow.
“There,” I say. I look around and spy a handheld mirror on top of the dresser and retrieve it, letting Chevy take a look at herself in the pretty blouse.

She blushes and grins.

“I look like a real lady,” she says.

“You do,” I agree.

We talk, haltingly about a variety of subjects. Chevy recounts to me her physical therapy and how she feels almost back to normal. I tell her of Robyn’s rescue but leave out my marital issues. Chevy is silent for a moment.

“Robyn is very lucky,” she says. “Havin’ a mom like you.” She draws a hand to her mouth and begins biting a fingernail.

I smile but say nothing. My heart is suddenly riven with emotion thinking of my last encounter with my daughter. Watching her ferocious struggle against deliverance from a world so depraved as to have no redeeming value. A world that only wants to use her up until nothing is left. I grind my jaw against the sting of tears as Chevy talks, and I manage to force a weak smile onto my face.

“I remember trying to talk to my mom about these things,” she says.

She brings a hand to her mouth again and begins work on another nail. I push a wisp of hair out of her eyes.

“I told her, like, we could do better, you know? But she wasn’t interested. The next day I found her. She’d OD’d.” She looks down and purses her lips.

“That must have been very difficult for you,” I say.

The longer I stare at her, the more my vision begins to blur. I see Robyn’s face instead of Chevy’s. I have to blink to restore my vision.

She shrugs in response to my comment and begins chewing on her nails again.

“I guess,” she says finally.

“Have you ever thought about finishing school?” I ask.

“Sometimes. But you gotta, you know, like be organized.”

She begins her teenage catalogue of excuses about why she never finished school and my mind is again wrenched back to life with Robyn. The struggles with learning, the unfinished homework and the endless succession of parent teacher meetings.

“What’s it like?” she asks.

“What’s what like?”

“Working in an office? Isn’t it boring?”

“Not at all,” I respond. “Bookkeeping is very rewarding because you create order from confusion.”

Chevy gives me a wistful look and then says, “sometimes I wish my life was, like, you know, different.”

And that’s when it hits me. The disjointedness of life. Chevy, who has had absolutely no breaks in life, no chances, no nothing and Robyn, who has had a good family, has had everything a child could want or need; they both end up working the streets. The impossibility and hopelessness of it all.

Chevy is rattling on about what she imagines life as a grownup will be like; her little hopes and dreams. As she talks my eyes well with tears.

“Why do you do it?” I ask, interrupting her stream of consciousness.

“What?” she asks, looking puzzled.

“How on earth can you prostitute yourself?” The question itself makes me want to retch.

Chevy sits up, wipes away my tears.

“There’s lots of reasons,” she says. “For me, it started out as a way to get money just to eat and stuff.”

“Robyn always had food on the table,” I say in protest.

“For Robyn it was different.”

“Different? Different how?”
“At first it seems glamorous. You know, thinking about guys wanting you; the money and the clothes and the nightlife. It seems like the life of a movie star or something. But, like that’s not how it really is and you don’t find out until it’s too late.”

“Oh God,” I cover my face with my hands.

“Heh,” Chevy says. “It’s okay. Don’t cry.” She is stroking my hair and murmuring words of encouragement. Her kindness plucks me from my despair.

I mop my face brusquely with the back of my hand.

“Well this is something,” I say, reigning in my emotions. “The patient comforting the visitor.”

“It ain’t no big thang,” she says with her teenage inflection, laughing.

I reach over and give her a hug, being careful not to squeeze her too tightly, mindful of her healing ribs.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” she whispers into my ear.
October 7, 2002

It’s just after seven when I cross the threshold from work. The house is hot, as usual; the weatherman warning against a “protracted heat wave the likes of which we’ve never seen before.” I close my eyes to the heat and think about the sweet relief of a cool shower washing the heat of the day from my body.

I drop my purse to the floor and close the door behind me. The little pamphlet that Sister Margaret gave me the other day about praying the Rosary falls to the floor. I pick it up and fan through the pages. Inside are various pictures with titles like, “Second Sorrowful Mystery”, and “Fourth Glorious Mystery”. Though reading through the entire pamphlet seems daunting, I open to a single page of Christ holding bread out to his disciples gathered round him at the table. The title at the top of the page is “Fifth Luminous Mystery”. I begin reading the meditation below the picture when I am interrupted by the telephone. I stuff the booklet back into the folds of my purse and sprint to answer the phone.

“Hello?”
“Mrs. Skinner?” a male voice asks.
“Yes?”
“John Simpson here. From Peaceful Acres.”
His voice is taut with an unnerving disquiet. My heart flips in my chest.
“Yes?”
“I’m afraid I have some bad news.”
“What’s wrong?” Needles of fear prick my spine.
“Robyn was doing really well; we felt she was ready for a field trip to an NA meeting with the main group of young adults.”
“And?”
“It was all a ruse. She snuck out of the meeting, gave our administrator the slip, I’m afraid.”
My body is suddenly gelatin weak. “How can this have happened?” My voice has risen in volume and timber.
“Look, I’m very sorry, but like I said. We thought your daughter was really getting the program when it turns out all she really wanted to do was gain access to the outside world so she could escape. There’s no way we can foresee that kind of deception.”

I realize that any continued conversation will just turn into a pissing contest and so thank Mr. Simpson for his time and hang up the phone. Helplessness splatters through my body like spilled red wine on white carpet. I glance at my watch while simultaneously dialing Bart Strong’s number. I have no hope that he will pick up at this hour, but it doesn’t matter. He owes me a phone call anyway.

To my shock and satisfaction he picks up on the first ring.
“Bart Strong,” the familiar husky voice answers.
I explain what happened.
“BLU BOY must have found out where she was, and convinced her to leave the treatment center. He was probably waiting for her when she ran off.”
“Maybe,” he says. “Or maybe she just ran away on her own.”
“I’m going back to San Francisco tonight,” I say.
“Hold up a minute. You don’t even know if that’s where she is.”
“Right now it’s the only thing I have to go on. Maybe I can get someone in the Tenderloin to talk to me.”
“I wouldn’t count on it. Look, sit tight for a few minutes. I’m going make a couple of phone calls.”
I huff out an impatient breath and give my watch yet another glance: seven twenty.
“I’m leaving at eight,” I warn.

Hanging up the phone I immediately begin mobilizing various articles that I surmise might be useful for my foray into the dark San Francisco night. I stuff a flashlight, a pair of binoculars I picked up a month ago at an Army
surplus store, my ubiquitous bottle of water, a sweater, and my Rolaids, just in case, into a small canvas bag.

I pace the living room, one eye on the portable phone on the coffee table, one eye on my watch, willing the minute hand to hasten its glacial sweep towards the twelve. With five minutes to go, I am suddenly startled to hear a knock on the front door.

I flip on the porch light and peer through the peephole. I twist the lock back and open the door.

“Freddie? What are you doing here?”

The man who helped Bart and I rescue Robyn stands before me; again, dressed all in black, his black moustache the most prominent thing about him.

“Got a call from Bart,” he explains.

The dark blue van is parked in front of the house.

“Let’s go,” he says.

He opens the passenger side door to the van and I get in, tossing my canvas bag onto the floor in front of me. He closes the door for me and heads for the driver’s side, but not before our eyes meet.

As he hops into the van, I peer out my window to see Mrs. Cotillo staring at us. This time she makes no effort to hide the fact that she is watching my movements. I want to smile, but I don’t. I turn my face away as Freddie pulls from the curb.

“So, what kind of work do you do?” he asks.

“I’m an accountant,” I say; “actually just a bookkeeper,” I amend, though technically not even that is true. “But I’m going to be going back to school to get my degree.”

Freddie nods but doesn’t say anything.

“What about you? What do you do?”

“Actually, I’m a dentist,” he says.

“Really?” I say, surprised.

“I have a practice in Antioch.”

We fall silent a moment.

“Got any other kids?” he asks.

“No. You?”

He shakes his head. “Amanda was an only child too.”

I purse my lips together, my eyes dart from the blur of the East Bay rushing by my window to Freddie’s austere profile. Curiosity about what happened to his daughter Amanda pushes me to ask intrusive questions.

“You mentioned before that Amanda hooked on drugs?”

“Yeah. She had it bad. Started experimenting when she was a freshman in high school, hanging out with the wrong crowd. The usual story.”

“I wait for him to give me more information, but his eyes travel to the speedometer and then back to Highway 24. The sky in front of us is a dusky violet crisscrossed by nectarine colored skeins of fragile clouds.

“And that’s how you met Bart?”

Freddie nods.

“I was desperate. Amanda kept running away. Bart was the only one who seemed to care.”

“But things didn’t turn out okay,” I ask, but it comes out sounding more like a statement than a question.

“Things went south. We tried to do an extraction. In Stockton. A boy, a local gangbanger was killed; Bart got arrested for manslaughter but the DA couldn’t make it stick.”

Freddie is silent and I can’t think of a thing to say. He clears his throat.

“Amanda OD’d anyway about a month after that. Whole thing left a bad taste in everyone’s mouth.”

“And that’s why you do what you do? Help parents try to save their kids?”
“Something like that.”

“Dentist by day, superhero by night,” I say with a smile.

Freddie smiles but says nothing.

The City is cold as usual. Freddie again displays his driving prowess, piloting the large blue van as if it were a sleek race car, up and down the streets of San Francisco until we are in the heart of the Tenderloin District. Once we hit Turk, Freddie slows to a crawl; both of us scanning the streets; two sparrow hawks searching for the little mouse.

As we approach Larkin, Freddie’s eyes zero in on someone. I follow the direction of his gaze to a small bundle of people strolling down the street, but can’t tell who he has actually spotted.

“What?” I say.

“Someone I know,” he says easing the van into a parking place. He switches off the van but leaves the keys in the ignition. “A guy that used to hang out with Amanda’s friends. He might know something. Stay put. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Within minutes the group has both moved from view and I sit and look around at the bright and glaring lights of the city. Somewhere in the distance I hear a siren intone its mournful tenor. My eyes never stop scanning every person I see in the dim hopes that I might find Robyn, but of course I never do.

Five minutes turns into fifteen and then twenty-five. I reach down at my feet for my canvas bag and my bottle of water, but I evidently didn’t screw the cap on securely enough because the bottle is empty and the bottom of my canvas bag is soaking wet.

“Damn it,” I say to the air.

I suddenly feel parched and look around the inside of the van but apparently Freddie isn’t in the habit of carrying liquid refreshments. I stare out the window at my surroundings. Behind me, across the street and down the block in the shadows is a liquor store. I peer in the direction that Freddie disappeared but see nothing. I pull a five dollar bill from my wallet, and then stuff my purse beneath the van’s seat and yank the keys from the ignition.

Outside the night air is charged with competing odors: Chinese food, bus exhaust, and a noxious thread of stale body odor. Cars jet by, in a single direction, everyone seemingly in a hurry. I wait for a lull and then dive across the street in the direction of Fox Liquor and Grocery. As I make my way down the sidewalk a chilly breeze whips into my skin, but my sweater was another casualty of my water bottle and so I clench my teeth against the cold as I skirt a handful of orange and white construction barriers approaching the liquor store. A few feet away from the entrance of the store is a Muni bus stop. A handful of sad looking people are loitering near the graffiti-laden bench. A large, articulated Muni bus rumbles to the stop just as I approach. Everyone at the stop traipses up the short staircase and into the bus and in another second the bus itself trudges away, as it belches out a pall of heavy exhaust. I purse my lips and hold my nose against the stench.

I realize suddenly, that I am alone. The darkness feels threatening somehow. I shoot a glance over my shoulder and quicken my pace and am only a few feet from the entrance to the liquor store when I am abruptly yanked backward by the hair. I let out a squawk of surprise and instinctively reach back with both hands to fend off my attacker. But within a fraction of a second, both of my hands have been twisted behind my back, rendering me helpless.

“Help!” I shout to the cars rushing by. “Help!”

I feel something hard jab against my spine. And a voice, the voice of evil whispers in my ear.

“Jou are very slow learner.”

It is BLU BOY, Antonio Peña.

“Jou feel dis?” He thrusts the object deeper into my back. He is walking me backwards as he talks. “Jou don scream, or I shoot.” My feet struggle to find purchase, as he wrenches me backwards faster than I can maneuver. I imagine that from a distance it must look like some kind of macabre dance. I make a move with my head trying to see where he is taking me. Instantly, the business end of a silver barreled gun is shoved against my cheek, almost into my eye.

“Walk,” he commands, jerking me backwards by the hair.

I search frantically for sight of Freddie returning to the van but he is nowhere. If BLU BOY gets me into his car I am dead. He could take me anywhere, put a bullet into my head and dump my body. My mind races as we move
further and further from the safety of the lighted liquor store. I silently vow that no matter what, I will not get into
his car. No matter what. But that is not what BLU BOY has in store for me.

The alley behind the liquor store is rank with the stench of rotting garbage and urine. Shadows seem to tremble
in doorways and behind filthy garbage bins. Behind us, movement. Suddenly two silhouettes have me pinned against
the bricked wall of the liquor store. Both are wearing dark, hooded jackets, their faces shrouded like specters. BLU
BOY stands in front of me inches away. He has shoved the gun into the front waistband of his jeans. Behind him,
cars stream by on Larkin Street, their lights creating a strobe of light and shadow that fire and then collapse against
us.

With the precision and speed of a bullet, BLU BOY’s fist launches into my solar plexus, first his left and then
his right. Instantly, all the air in the world is crushed from my body. My eyes well with tears as I strain to draw in a
breath. BLU BOY’s hand snaps closed around my face, his fingers mashing my cheeks so hard that my left eye is
nearly obscured by my own flesh. I think of Chevy lying in that hospital bed, bruised and broken. My bowels churn
in terror.

“This world is mine,” he menaces softly. With his free hand, he points to the ground beneath him.

His breath is fetid.

“These girls are mine,” he whispers, pointing towards shadows down the alley.

I struggle to see if Robyn is there, but BLU BOY slams my head back against the brick. A sharp spike of pain
shoots into the back of my skull.

I tug against his grip, trying to wrestle myself free to call out Robyn’s name, but he is too strong.

“Jou interfere again, I kill jour daughter.”

He releases my face as his right hand pulls the gun from his pants. He points the barrel between my eyes. The
ferrous odor of steel and gun oil drifts into my nostrils. He caresses my face with the back of his hand, and I am
surprised to discover his skin is as smooth as stainless steel.

“Jou come back to my world again, I kill jour daughter.”

He presses the barrel of the gun to my forehead.

“Jou go to the cops, I kill jour daughter. Sabe?”

My legs feel butter soft, and weak. My entire body shakes with fear and my voice, when I find it, vibrates with
a luminous dread. I grunt out in a brave whisper:

“You hurt Robyn, and I swear to God, I will kill you.”

BLU BOY laughs heartily. And then without warning he draws the gun up and then backhands me against the
face. Bright stars of shock fill my eyes as the barrel of the gun bludgeons my cheek. I howl out in pain just before
everything goes completely black.
October 8, 2002

From the murky brume of unconsciousness, I become aware of a man’s voice.

“Yeah, that’s my thought too. Um-hm. I don’t think she should take any chances; this guy’s playing for keeps. Yeah, I will. Thanks. You too, Bart.”

I try raising my head, but judders of pain torpedo through my body. My hand goes instinctively to my face; fingers tenderly probe a jagged, zipper like wound just under my right eye. It stings to the touch and I can also tell that the skin surrounding the wound is swollen by the acute pangs my fingers are causing. My entire torso is racked with a gut-splitting agony; drawing in air inflicts little bayonets of pain.

Though the room is dark, I can make out the coffee table, my purse and travel bag, tossed on top of the easy chair across from the couch, where I am lying. Pickles lies next to me. When she feels me stir she begins purring. I am home. The hallway is framed with light which means the voice I heard was coming from the kitchen. It is Freddie’s voice. I try to sit up, but my body revolts. I yelp out a sharp groan.

Footsteps. Freddie emerges from the shadows with an icepack in his hand.

“You’re awake,” he says.

The darkness and Freddie’s presence in my house make my brain oscillate with confusion.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“A little after three in the morning. Here, put this on your cheek. It’ll reduce the swelling.”

He proffers the icepack and sits on the couch next to me, elbows on knees, hands clasped together, staring down at me. He reaches out and draws back my hair that has fallen on my face.

“I came back to the van but you weren’t there.”

The terrifying incident with BLU BOY is suddenly front and center in my memory.

“I found you in the alley. You got beat up pretty bad.”

“It was Peña,” I whisper, as if even in the safety of my own home BLU BOY could hear me.

“We should call the cops,” Freddie says.

“No!” I bellow out, and then immediately shrink back into the cushion of the couch in pain. Freddie grabs my shoulder.

“Easy there.”

“He said he’d kill Robyn if I went to the police.”

“We don’t even know for sure if Robyn is with him. At least getting law enforcement involved covers our bases.”

I twist my body facing Freddie and give him a look.

“No cops. Period. I know Robyn’s with him; I feel it. Besides, he’s on notice now. He knows I’m not about to back down.”

“Don’t be foolish. Peña’ means business. He could put a bullet through your head with no compunction whatsoever.”

“Yeah? Well all I need is a gun and I’d be happy to return the favor.”

Freddie’s jaw line tightens. He gives me a stern look.

“You’re playing with fire, Margot. This guy is the real deal. He’s not going to be frightened by some mother on a mission.”

“And I’m not frightened by some punk on the streets who victimizes children!” I spit out.

And then my strong veneer cracks. The pain of just breathing, the thudding in my head from being pistol whipped and the ache in my heart knowing that Robyn is again out there somewhere becomes a tidal wave of despondency. A tear breaks from my eye, runs down my cheek and into my open wound. Its sting produces more tears.

I am unable to speak. Freddie holds me and lets me cry.
“I know,” he whispers. “I know.”

The warmth of his body is a blanket of comfort and he smells of crisp autumn leaves and a comforting woody tinder.

“I want you to have this,” he says, pulling back from me.

From a hidden breast pocket in his black vest he produces a gun. It is small, a silver barrel with black grips. I recoil.

“No,” I shake my head. “I couldn’t.”

“It may not come down to what you could or could not do,” he says. “It may turn into what you have to do.” He presses the weapon into the palm of my hand.

“It’s a Colt. Double action .38 special. It’s small enough to conceal, but it’ll do the job if you get into an impossible situation.”

I stare at the metal object in my hand and curls of a surreal sensation drift through me.

I look at Freddie. “I wouldn’t know how to use it if I had to.”

“I’ll teach you,” he says. His voice is calm, dispassionate.

I find myself amazed that he can be so composed. His thumb traces an imaginary line down my cheek as his other hand closes my fingers round the Colt, now warm from my skin.

I close my eyes and as I allow myself to absorb Freddie’s quiet poise, a trickle of something akin to peace wends its way through me. I feel his lips kiss my forehead and the caress detonates a memory of something precious I lost a very long time ago.

As Freddie leans in to kiss me again, the rattling of a key in the front door invades the silence between us.

Rob’s imposing presence blots out the front porch light.

“Rob!” I say.

“Margot?”

“Mr. Skinner,” Freddie says, rising from the couch, holding his hand out in greeting.

“Well,” says Rob, “now that we’ve got everybody’s name, maybe somebody can tell me what in the hell is going on.”

Rob gazes from me to Freddie and then back to me again.

“Your wife has been injured. But she’s okay,” Freddie says.

“What the hell is going on?” Rob responds.

“Calm down, Rob,” I say. “We were in the City looking for Robyn. I was walking into a convenience store to buy a bottle of water when I was attacked by some hoodlums. I’m fine. No harm was done.” Freddie and I exchange glances.

I have already decided that the best course for now is to lie to Rob about BLU BOY. Rob has proven to me that he’s a loose cannon and the last thing I need is for him to storm into San Francisco, proverbial guns blazing, especially since I know he’d go straight to the SFPD.

“Yeah,” Freddie says following my lead. “Couple of street punks but I chased them away.

Rob seems satisfied by this explanation. He moves to my side, sitting precisely where Freddie was and wraps me in his arms.

“Oh God, baby, are you okay?” his voice is muffled as he presses me close.

His grip sends wracks of misery through my body. I grimace silently.

“I’ll be going,” Freddie says, letting himself out the door.

I watch the front door close.

Rob releases his grip around me, takes me by the hands and peers into my face.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I know I need help. Please, please.”

He releases my hands, grasps me by the upper arms and looks me straight in the eye.
“I’m an alcoholic. I need help; I know that. I will do whatever it takes to make this work.”

Sister Margaret’s words run through my head: ‘If your husband had cancer or diabetes, would you just abandon him?’

“Oh Rob, I don’t know. Maybe—”

“Shhh, don’t say anything. Just rest.”

“I don’t want ‘us’ to get in the way of rescuing Robyn,” I say, in protest.

October 9, 2002

When I wake up next it is to the ring of the telephone. I hear the click of the answering machine, but the volume is too low for me to hear who is leaving a message. Sunlight carves ardent swathes through the opened curtains. I consult my watch: nearly ten o’clock in the morning. Friday morning. Rob is gone. On the coffee table is a cryptic note: I’ll be back. All my love, Rob.

My mouth is brackish from the night before. I wince in pain as I push myself from the comfort of the couch. The ice pack that Freddie made for me is now a sack of water on the floor. I pick it up, and walk gingerly, to the kitchen. A stack of mail looms next to the telephone, brought in presumably by Rob this morning before he left. I sift through the envelopes; the water bill, the PG&E bill, and three offers for credit cards. I punch the recall button on the answering machine. One message:

“Hi Sugar shorts. Just givin’ you a shout. Haven’t heard anything in a couple of days and wanna make sure everything there is hunky-dory fine. Got my test results back too.”

I play the message back a second time trying to get a handle on Gladys’ tone of voice. I sigh. I’m tired of lying to my mother; tired of dancing this tango of fiction, hiding behind this wall of illusion I have created about Robyn.

I move to the counter and make some coffee hoping the caffeine will clear my head. As I wait for the coffee maker to finish its distillation I pop a Rolaids, aware of an inner gnash of pain from deep in my gut. From the junk drawer I extract a small spiral notepad of paper and a pen. I sit down at the kitchen table and try to begin writing:

Dear Mama,
I haven’t been exactly truthful. There are some things that I need to...

I rip the page out of the notebook and wad it up into a ball, tossing it to the far side of the table. I try again.

Dear Mama,
I have some things that I need to tell you. Very important things. I had hoped to get back to New Mexico to see you, but so much has happened here, that I...

I rip that page out of the notebook as well, mashing it into another misshapen ball and roll it next to its neighbor. ‘So much has happened’ being a euphemism for my daughter running away to walk the streets, and our entire family being terrorized by her pimp, and beginning its slow, agonizing disintegration.

I pour myself half a cup of coffee, in deep thought about what my next move to get Robyn back home will be. I drink the hot, black brew and burn my tongue.

“Ah!” I plunk the cup down.

There is only one place that I want to be; one place that holds my soul hostage; it is the place where I might find my beloved daughter. I pick up the phone.

“Sister Margaret?” I ask the voice that answers at the Sisters of the Presentation convent telephone.

“One moment, please.”

Half a beat later I hear Sister Margaret’s voice, her faint Scottish brogue still evident.

“It’s Margot,” I say. “Are you going to go feed the girls?”

I feel I can almost hear Sister Margaret smile in the quick silence that is between us.

“God willing and the creek don’t rise,” she says and then laughs.

“I’ll meet you at the convent,” I say.

It is just after four in the afternoon when I turn the corner onto my street from my adventures in the City with Sister Margaret. She gave my face with its gash over my right eye a long look but said nothing. I alluded to a confrontation with a closet door but she only pursed her lips and told me to help her with the cooler full of bottled waters. Girls came and went, most of whom I’d never seen before. One or two looked vaguely familiar. But of course no one had seen Robyn, though I showed her picture to everyone whether they showed interest or not. Before dropping me back off at my car, Sister Margaret and I sat together in the beat up old truck as she led me in one
decade of the Rosary. The calming, nearly hypnotic force of our voices praying the Rosary inside the cab against the
juxtaposition of madness outside the pickup created a palisade against the dross of the city.

As I edge the old Corsica towards the house, I see Freddie’s large blue van parked on the street. He is standing
on the curb, leaning against the passenger side door of the van reading a newspaper. I park in the driveway and get
out of the car.

“Hi,” I say, unsure why he is here.
I glance at the windows of the house; Rob must still be gone.
He nods once acknowledging me.
“You ready?” he asks.
“Ready?”
“Grab the Colt; told you I’d teach you how to use it. Sooner the better.”
“Oh.” It is then I catch sight of Mrs. Cotillo staring out at us, arms crossed against her chest.
“Unless now isn’t good.”
I look down at my watch. My body yearns for a long nap, but it’s good to see Freddie again. I can talk to him in
a way that I can’t with Rob.

“So what’s next?” he asks.
“Next?”
“Next with Robyn,” he says.
I let out a sigh and gaze out the front window. Immense grey cotton ball clouds obscure the sky.
“I’m not sure, other than to keep going back to the city to keep looking for her.”
“Last night,” he begins. “when Peña got to you.” He looks at me and then looks back to the freeway. “I didn’t
get a chance to tell you, but I caught up with that guy I recognized. His name is Breed Love. He’s a CI for San
Francisco PD. Used to be a big time dealer. He got clean and now helps the cops try to get the kids off the streets.
He knows who Peña is, says everybody does. Has girls all over the City and in Stockton and Sacramento too.”

“My God,” I say below my breath. “Why can’t the police just shut this monster down?”
“I know,” Freddie says, “but it’s not as easy as you might think. They have to actually catch him breaking the
law since every hooker that the cops arrest and try to pump for information refuses to divulge any details on Peña.”
He pauses, and then adds, “And if it wasn’t Peña it would be somebody else. It’s the way of the world.”

“Well it sure shouldn’t be.”
Freddie wheels the van into the parking lot of the Martinez Gun Club.

“I gave Breed the picture of your daughter and your telephone number. He promises to keep an eye out for her
and says he’ll call if he sees her.”
Freddie opens the door for me.

“Do you think we should try looking in Stockton or Sacramento?” I ask.
“No reason to yet,” He closes my door and leads me by the elbow into the main building of the gun club. “But
you might want to think about investing in a cell phone.”

Inside the main building is a large snack bar with a tufted leather armrest running the circumference of the bar.
Arranged in precise order around the snack bar are bright red stools with the word ‘Winchester’ running around the side of the leather seats in large white letters.

Freddie exchanges pleasantries with a portly woman behind the counter and gives her some money. Above her, on the wall are mounted various animal heads, nearly all with large, pointed antlers. She hands him two paper targets the general shape of a human torso with various lines and numbers on them. Next she gives him two large things that look like plastic ear muffs and two pairs of safety goggles.

We exit through the back door of the building onto the general shooting range. Since it’s a Saturday, the range is fairly packed with people. Mostly men sporting long shotguns, but I do see a couple of women amongst the groups, all in various stages of either shooting or consulting targets containing clean round holes.

Inside the handgun range, Freddie sets up a paper target and then shows me how to load my gun.

“Pop the bullets in like so,” he says showing me the chamber. Once full, he snaps it closed. He puts on his red ear protectors and eye gear and instructs me to do the same.

He hands me the gun.

“Now imagine that target out there is BLU BOY.”

I draw in a deep breath and focus on the shape that is yards away. If only the flat two dimensional figure before me was Antonio Peña. If only, by one small bullet that weighs less than an ounce, I could eliminate my most pressing problem and bring Robyn back home to me; would I do it? Maybe more importantly, could I?

Afterwards, Freddie drives me home. Dusk is rapidly being swallowed up the approaching night, lights from homes on my street wink out at us. I am thinking of a hot bubble bath to ease my aching body, and hopefully Rob will be home and amenable to going to get something to eat so I won’t have to cook. I close my eyes, allowing myself to sink deep into my thoughts.

“Is that cops at your house?” Freddie says, suddenly.

I lurch in my seat, my eyes pop open to see a Pittsburg Police Department black and white parked in my driveway behind the old Corsica. From the large living room window, I can see lights on and figures standing, talking, one of whom looks to be Rob.

“Let me off here,” I say, three houses ahead of mine.

I open the door and fly out of the van scarcely before Freddie has even come to a complete stop. My heart thuds in my chest as I fly across neighbors’ lawns and driveway bounding up the steps of my front porch. Mrs. Cotillo stands on her porch, clasping her jacket tightly to her body, peering intently at me. Her beady eyes remind me of a rat.

The front door hangs open, the wood at the top and bottom hinges splintered. Two policemen stand with Rob, their voices low, telling him something. As I walk into the room all eyes turn to me.

“Where have you been?” Rob asks, doing his best not to sound accusatory.

I look around. The living room is a shambles. Furniture upturned. The couch, lying on its side, sports a long knife-edged gash along the entire length of the backrest. The TV is gone. Mail from the kitchen along with various other papers lies ripped and strewn across the floor.


Rob shakes his head no. “Someone broke in,” he says.

*     *     *

I scoop the lamp up off the floor and deposit it to the easy chair. Then I right the coffee table, snatching up the remote control and TV Guide as well.

The police promised to interview neighbors to see if they saw anything suspicious, but all I can think about is Mrs. Cotillo’s accusing stare. I’m certain that this break-in was instigated by BLU-BOY or maybe his associates. I said nothing to Pittsburg’s finest out of fear of further recrimination, and more importantly, not wanting to put Robyn’s life in any greater danger than it was already.

“Where were you?” Rob asks.

The afternoon with Freddie at the gun range seems a million miles away at the moment. Rob’s question snaps me back into reality.
When I woke up you weren’t here,” I answer. “I met Sister Margaret in the City.”

I move to the kitchen and grab the broom and then return to the living room and begin sweeping the shards of broken glass of the light bulb from the lamp. I choose to omit my outing to the Martinez Gun Club.

“Where have you been?” I ask.

“Meetings.”

“Meetings? What kind of meetings?” I ask.

“AA meetings.” He makes a step towards me. “Margot, there’s so much I have to tell you.” He reaches for my arm, drawing me to him. “Stop for a minute. Look, everything is exactly the way it’s supposed to be,” he says. The look of earnestness in his face defies logic.

I step away from him, spreading my hands over the air in the living room.

“That’s what you call all of this?” I ask incredulous.

“I know, I know. But we have to accept things as they happen. Acceptance, Baby, that’s the key to everything.”

I move away.

“Help me with the couch,” I say. All I can think about is that if I can just get the house in order my mind will follow. The physical act of doing something mollifies the nearly palpable feeling of violation that is surging through my body. A part of me even sniffs the air to see if I can detect any odor of the persons responsible for the destruction.

Rob just stands there like a mute.

“Have you seen Pickles?” I ask.

He shrugs no. After I get this mess cleaned up I will have to look for the cat. If she got out, she could be hiding out somewhere afraid.

“Are you going to help me?” I ask.

“Nothing happens by accident,” he says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“I mean that everything happens for a reason,” he says.

I struggle with the armrest of the couch, trying to yank it upright, but stabs of pain at my surgery site prevent me from exerting any more energy. Rob makes another move towards me.

He grabs my arm. “Everything,” he says, his eyes shining with intensity.

I huff out a sigh of exasperation.

“Now that I’m sober, I see things so much more clearly.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean us, here. Robyn.”

“What about Robyn?”

“We keep looking and looking for her. But maybe she doesn’t want to be found.”

A sheet of red flashes before my eyes. I slap his face.

“She is a fifteen year old little girl,” I growl. “A child.”

“She hasn’t been a child since we moved to California,” he says. “Have you been blind to the fact that she’s been out of control ever since we’ve been here? The friends she hangs out with, the kind of clothes she wears? The way she talks to us, like we were lower than pond scum? Criminy, Margot, can’t you see what’s been happening around here?” Rob’s face is animated. An untenable mixture of anger and enthusiasm.

“How dare you!” I shout. “You have nothing to say, do you hear me?” I am screaming now, and I don’t want to stop. “I haven’t been the one staying out till all hours, coming home drunk, or not even coming home at all!” My hands are in fists at my side. “I’m not the one who can’t be bothered to do one single thing to lift a finger around here; and that includes being a parent to our child. And I’m not the one who can’t even keep a job!”

This last chastisement wipes the smug, holier-than-thou look off his face. But I can’t stop now, even if I wanted
to. My thoughts of rage spew out into every crack and crevice of the room.

“And now you come waltzing in here with a whole week of sobriety, telling me that everything is as it should be? That I have to accept the fact that Robyn is out there somewhere, selling her body to the lowest form of dirt and filth?” “Don’t you even go there,” I menace. I hold my hands in the air defensively.

“In fact,” I add just for good measure, “I think I liked you better when you were drunk.”

The end of this tirade produces the look of hurt I so vehemently intended.

Rob crosses his arms in front of him and glares at me.

“Yeah? Well at least I’m not screwing some guy in our home.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mustache man, that’s what I’m talking about!”

“You mean Freddie?” I ask.

“Are there more?” Rob says sarcastically, shoulders shrugged, palms in the air, animating his question.

And on it goes; the fighting and evisceration of each other’s hearts, carving away every last vestige of care and affection that ever had hoped to exist within the gossamer mantle of our marriage. The rubble and draff that I had so hoped to leave behind us in New Mexico has caught up with us and is here now; a firestorm of fury and discontent that threatens to burn up both of us, leaving nothing but cinders.

“If you were ever around, you would know that Freddie was recommended by the private eye, Bart Strong,” I spit back at Rob.

“I told you to let the police handle it,” Rob retorts. “But noooo; you’re on a freakin’ crusade. You’re gonna save every hooker in San Francisco with your buddy, Sister Mary of the Bleeding Heart Liberals!”

“Stop it!” I shout. “Just stop. Fighting isn’t helping anything. And it certainly isn’t going to bring Robyn back home.”

Rob wipes the sweat from his forehead, chuffs out a sigh of exasperation.

“I’m tryin’ here Margot, I really am. I just wish you wouldn’t make it so freakin’ hard.”

He bear hugs the end of the couch and flips it upright in one motion.

When the doorbell rings, I wonder momentarily if I imagined the sound. But as Rob turns his head in the direction of the front door, scarcely dangling from its hinges, I also look and see the shadowy figure of a young girl. My heart spills out of me.

It is Robyn.

“Hello Mama.”
October 10, 2002

The scent of pancakes fills the kitchen. Though I am exhausted to the point of breaking, my heart sings so loud I wonder that even nosy old Mrs. Cotillo next door cannot hear its joyous strains.

I flip the next batch of pancakes from the electric skillet, and pour out four more quarter cups of batter. As I pour myself another in a series of strapping cups of coffee the microwave croons that the bacon inside it is cooked to perfection. I survey the kitchen and living room, making sure that everything looks right. An old sheet tucked into the corners of the couch obscures the knife gashes, and as long as the eye stays away from the gaping hole where the television used to be, everything looks almost normal.

The happy homecoming that I’d imagined wasn’t to be. Robyn, who looked as if she’d been dragged to hell and back, had said she was tired and just wanted to clean herself up and go to bed. She promised that we would talk this morning. Rob and I stayed up another two and a half hours cleaning up, in addition to Rob jerry-rigging the front door until today when he promised to make a trip to Home Depot to replace it.

I return my attention to the pancakes which are ready to be flipped. Behind me I hear the pad of slippers. Robyn traipses into the kitchen. Without saying a word, she heads for the cabinet to retrieve a coffee cup and pours herself some coffee.

“Good morning, Sweetheart,” I say.

Her eyes roll up from the coffee pot and skip briefly to my face, glancing momentarily on the wound beneath my right eye, but she says nothing.

“I bet you’re starving,” I say.

I toss a stack of pancakes onto a plate and add three pieces of crispy bacon to the plate and bring it to the table.

“Here, come and eat ’em up while they’re hot,” I say.

“I’m not hungry,” Robyn says.

I suck in a deep breath and replace the chair. My stomach contracts in pain from my recent encounter with BLU BOY, but I swallow down the distress.

“That’s okay. You can eat later,” I say. “I’m just so very glad you’re home,” I say. I approach, holding my arms out to embrace her.

“Mom, please!” Robyn says. Her voice is all irritation and angst.

In the back of my mind I am thinking about the day ahead. Since so much of our mail, including bank and credit card statements had been rifled through with the break-in, I will need to close all of our accounts and open up new ones. I also want to address the issue of school with Robyn. She will have to be enrolled today. I can only imagine the amount of catch up work that she’ll need to do in order to get back on track.

“Anyone gonna eat this?” Rob says of the plate of food growing cold on the table.

“Go ahead. I’m going to get cleaned up,” Robyn says.

I frown as Rob sits down and begins devouring Robyn’s breakfast.

“Good,” I say to Robyn. “You can come with me then.”
This time it is Robyn who frowns. “With you? Where?”
“I have some errands to run and we have to get you registered for school. You’re already a month behind.”
“School?!” Robyn looks as if I’ve just slapped her across the face. “I am so not going back to school.”
“That’s ridiculous,” I counter. “Of course you are.”
“The hell I am!” Robyn says, her voice is pinched with anger.
“Criminy!” Rob shouts. “Can we just have a little peace and quiet around here?”
“You have to go to school!” I say again to Robyn and then turn to Rob, as if giving directions. “She has to go to school!”
“Why in the hell does everything need to be decided at eight o’clock in the freakin’ morning?” Rob growls back.
“Robert Skinner!” I complain. “Don’t you dare tell me that you’re considering that our daughter will not go back to school?”
“Relax, will ya?” Rob yells back. “All I’m saying is that Robyn hasn’t even been back home twenty-four hours and already you’re planning her whole life out before breakfast.”
I stump balled fists on my hips. “I’m not planning her entire life! But I do expect her to get her high school diploma.”
“Well, why don’t you at least talk to the girl, and see what’s goin’ on in her head?”
“Rob, a high school diploma is non-negotiable. You of all people should realize that.”
“What the hell does that mean?”
“It means that if you’d gotten yours and gone on to college or some vocational school we wouldn’t be scraping by just to make ends meet,” I declare with more bitterness in my voice than I intend.
Rob nods slowly, his eyes screwed in umbrage.
“Oh, I get it. It’s time to play the ‘blame game’, huh?”
“I’m not blaming you, Rob. I’m just trying to point out that Robyn can do better. Better than both of us. But she needs the chance to succeed.”
“Oh, and you’re livin’ in some dream world where you like to think you’re a CPA; you’re an accounts payable clerk, for cripe’s sake!”
“Well at least I’m trying to get back to school and better myself Unlike you!” I shout back.
“Rub my nose in it, why don’t you? Tell me again what a complete failure I am again. I don’t think I heard you the first thirty thousand times,” Rob shoots back.
I huff out an anguished breath.
“This is not about you, Rob. It’s about Robyn.”
“Well then. Why don’t we ask Robyn what Robyn would like to do with her life?” Rob asks.
We both turn to Robyn, but she has long since left the room.
It is then I hear the screak of the shower faucet.
October 28, 2002

I stare at the cursor on my computer screen. It is only three o’clock and I’ve yet to complete the report that Carmelita said she must have for the board meeting tomorrow. Thoughts like a school of minnows dart pell-mell inside my head, cluttering any meaningful contemplation I try to achieve. I’ve become accustomed to staying until at least six in order to catch up, but I doubt I can even make it to five, much less six.

Robyn hasn’t been back a month yet and the mood at home is fraught with ominous clouds of discontent. She informed me that she will not go back to school, but that she wants to get a job. Never mind trying to reason with her about the types of jobs she is qualified to do; my helpful comments are kindling for the fiery arguments that inevitably end up with Robyn storming out of the room, raging against me.

A large flat screen TV appeared last week; which she claims was given to her by a “friend”. Adding insult to my injury is that after work I come home to find Robyn lounging around the house; sometimes with girls she says are friends but who look more like professional exotic dancers rather than high school aged teenagers. Invariably, the television is blasting out nearly obscene lyrics to a beat that sounds like something out of a ghetto. Never mind about the soft porn of the music videos that plays out on the screen. I order the volume to be lowered. After a period of time, I am met with the sudden fall of silence, like a great, black, velvet curtain, followed by the slam of the front door. And then I am alone.

Rob is no help. His newfound sobriety means that he is absent; attending AA meetings even more than when he was submerged in beer at the bars. When he is home, he lobs clever platitudes my way; little gems such as “Let go and let God,” or “Live and let live”, which only make me want to flatten his head with a baseball bat.

And the pain is back. Inside my gut, like a worm, creeping through my stomach, dragging behind it, boughs of thorny pine needles of misery. I refuse to let my mind explore the worry that my beating by BLU BOY may have done any significant damage to my recent surgery.

I close my eyes and realize that I’m so tired I could lay my head down on my desk and easily plummet into an unconscious sleep. Biting my lip, my eyes travel to my purse under my desk. I reach down and dig through the side pocket until I find a small note of paper. On it is only one word: Freddie. His name followed by his phone number. I know I shouldn’t. I can almost see Sister Margaret’s stern look of disapproval. But I dial the number anyway and before I am ready for it, the soft cadence of his voice greets me.

“Hello?”

My voice catches in my throat. I stare at the cradle of the phone where I am trying to will my hand to replace the receiver, but I remain frozen.

“Hello?” Freddie says again.

“It’s me,” I say timidly.

“Margot.” If a voice can smile, I am certain Freddie’s is doing so at this very moment.

I called him the day after Robyn came home to let him know that all my prayers had been answered and I supposed I thought we would never speak again.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

I tell him of my frustrations with my beloved daughter.

“You’re both trying to adjust,” he says. “Give it some time.”

“I don’t know that I have that much patience,” I say, only half joking.

“Your daughter isn’t the same person she was. She’s seen and done a lot of things that most people don’t even know exist in this world.”

“I know, but—”

“She came back, Margot. That’s the only thing that matters.”

I nod but say nothing. I wipe away a tear that escapes down my cheek.

“Thanks Freddie.”

“No sweat.”

“I gotta go,” I say.
“Take care,” he says.

And then he is gone. I hang up the phone and sigh.

Although it is late October, summer clings to Pittsbug like a heavy wool sweater. My window is down as I coast along Power Avenue. I avert my gaze from the worn cyclone fence and the dying stumps of brown weeds in the front yard, keeping my eye on the front window, as if to glean any advance information of what Robyn and her friends might be up to. There appear to be more cars on the street than usual, and I peer at neighboring houses to see if anyone nearby might be having a party. But everything looks like it does every other day of the week. Neighbors shielded from one another by brick and mortar; doors and walls and locks, bulwarks against hospitality.

Above the tired groan of the Corsica engine I catch the rhythmic thump of rap music and realize that the closer I get to the house, the louder the music becomes. The repaired front door hangs open and a clot of young people occupy the front porch. Profanity flies from my mouth like a flock of startled birds. I flatten the accelerator, wheeling into the driveway with such force the shrieking tires testify to my rage. I yank the car into park, and stalk from the driveway towards the house. Already the kids on the front porch dart away, one even leaping over the porch railing that makes him look like he’s trying out for the summer Olympics.

I stand at the front door, shocked by what I see. In the living room, another array of teenagers loom, standing in groups of twos or threes. On the couch at one end is a young man and girl necking, his hand down her pants. Several of the kids are holding Budweiser beer bottles. On the television I see a man and woman, both naked, having sex on top of an office desk. The woman is moaning and writhing in apparent ecstasy. My stomach lurches. Two kids catch a glimpse of me from the corner of their eye.

“Oh shit!” one of them says.

At that moment, Robyn herself emerges from the kitchen. As she walks, she twists off the lid of bottle of beer.

“What in the hell is going on here?” I shout at no one in particular.

“Mom!” Robyn says.

Everyone’s eyes are suddenly fastened onto me. Kids begin to leave quickly. The couple on the couch stand up, the girl smoothing her hair and edge towards the door. I realize that I know her. It is my daughter’s friend Jenny. She shoots a look of daggers towards me.

“What is that?!” I bellow, my finger pointed towards the television.

Robyn casually glances at the screen and then shrugs. “It’s a movie,” she replies.

“It’s a pornographic movie!” I yell.

“Porno’s mainstream now, Mom.”

“Not in this house, it’s not,” I menace. I stomp towards the TV, but Robyn beats me there, quickly popping out the DVD. The TV now makes a low, hissing noise, as if it too, is angry.

“Fine. Whatever,” she says.

“I suppose drinking beer is also mainstream?” I say, yanking the bottle out of her hand. Cold beer sloshes out of the bottle, all over my hand and onto the carpet.

“We were gonna have all this cleaned up before you came home,” Robyn says, as if this explains everything.

I am so angry, I feel as if I have tunnel vision, and all I can see is my disobedient, intractable daughter. I look around and realize that we are alone.

The pungent stink of beer brings me front and center with countless past fights and arguments with Rob.

“This is unacceptable, young lady!” I am screaming again. “You won’t go to school. You say you want to work, but I seriously doubt that you’ve even applied for a job. And now I come home to this! I won’t have it!”

“I have too!” she shouts back. “I’ve been to every clothing store at the mall, but no one’s called me yet.”

“And so you think it’s okay to hang around the house drinking beer and watching porn movies?!” My voice is incredulous.

“Everyone does it,” she replies, rolling her eyes at my prudishness.

“Not everyone. Not this family.”

“Oh my God, Mom; don’t start up with ‘this family’ crap,” Robyn says, quoting the air with her fingers.
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Mean we’re not this incredibly happy family all sitting around the dinner table talking about how happy we all are like some stupid TV commercial.”

The late afternoon sun streaks into the room, into my daughter’s eyes. The sunlight makes her blue-brown eyes look like two perfectly round harlequin opals.
“I didn’t mean that. What I meant was—”
“You’re so frickin’ rigid,” she spits out in disgust.
“Rigid?” Needles of hatred slash through my body. “Is it rigid for me to have expectations for you? Is it rigid for me to expect you to go onto college, have a career? Have a decent life? Something better than what your father and I have?”

She shudders out a heavy sigh. “You’re just proving my point,” she says. “Look at Dad. He works, but he also knows how to have a good time.”

“Your father is a drunk!” I shout, immediately regretting my outburst.

Robyn’s eyes well with tears. “Stop it!” she shouts. “Can’t you ever just stop! You didn’t want to have me in the first place! Why can’t you just admit it?”

I blanch. “Oh Robyn, that’s not true.”

“Don’t talk to me about truth!” she shrieks. “It is true. I’ve been an obstacle for you since the day I was born! You couldn’t finish college because you got pregnant and you haven’t let me forget it for a single day; always blabbing on and on about LMC and getting your accounting degree until I just want to puke!”

“Oh baby, I never meant it like that.” I set the beer on top of the coffee table and make a move towards her. But now it is Robyn who is in a rage.

“No! I’m so sick of you! I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you!”

She stomps towards the front door.

“Robyn, please,” I cry. “Please stay. We can work things out. Please.”

Through my own tears the front door seemingly quavers as it slams closed.

I sit on the coffee table, dropping my face into my hands and sob. The telephone rings but I let it go. I gaze out the living room window. The street is bleak and destitute. Tree limbs stretch to the sky like desiccated roots. I realize that I am drenched in sweat. Nausea churns deep in the pit of my stomach. I press my hand to my forehead and feel laminated with sweat. I rummage through recent memory trying to figure out exactly where my pack of Rolaids might be. I think I recall seeing them in the kitchen drawer next to the silverware.

I stand up, but must steady myself by holding onto the TV to maintain my balance. I close my eyes and inhale several deep breaths, calling to mind the words of my doctor. Discussions of persistent stomach pain or bloody vomit that might indicate a return problem stemming from surgery. Never mind about several strategic placed body blows by a vengeful pimp. I swallow down pearls of worry and open my eyes, certain that one or two Rolaids will relieve my symptoms.
October 29, 2002

I pull a slick wad of hair from the trap in the bathtub, grimacing in repugnance as I deposit it into the trash. Flicking on the tub faucet, I rinse my gloved hand with water. Sloshing water over the porcelain, I next sprinkle Comet all over, avoiding the caustic acid vapors that hang in the air. I run water over my sponge and begin scouring the ringed walls of the bathtub.

I hear the familiar tinks and knocks as Rob helps himself to his usual Saturday morning coffee; the opening and closing of the front door as he retrieves the morning newspaper.

The ordinariness of our lives should be a comfort, but this day it is not. Worries over Robyn’s whereabouts is a fever in my mind. I endlessly rehearse what I will say to her upon her return. And last night was sleepless. Pickles has been missing since the break in. I know it’s just a cat, but the loss is compounded by apprehension of Robyn’s safety. I dandled thoughts of my daughter in my head until nearly two thirty this morning, until finally drifting off into troubled dreams.

Though the bathtub is now clean, I continue to scrub, as if they physical act will also be beneficial on less temporal matters.

“What in the hell?”

Rob’s voice bellows from the kitchen. The feet of his chair excoriates the linoleum of the floor, punctuating his explosion.

I slip out of my rubber gloves and stand up.

“I cannot freakin’ believe this!” Rob growls.

Alarm blows through my chest as I hurry into the kitchen to see what he is so upset about. The newspaper lies open on the kitchen table. Rob is standing over the paper, his face a choleric red.

“Did you know about this?” he says accusingly.

“Know about what?”

“This!” He stabs his finger in the direction of the newspaper.

I approach and peer at the offending story, my mind racing with distressing possibilities.

In bold, black Courier font the title reads: The Trouble with Truancy. It begins innocuously enough.

It’s noon; do you know where your teenager is? The honest answer is that most working parents, however well intentioned, don’t. Truancy in America has reached epidemic proportions, causing public schools to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in state and federal money; all because junior decides to play hooky.

But truancy hurts more than just our kids or our public schools. In many cases, the truant child becomes a public nuisance.

For example, a local Pittsburg woman, we’ll call her Mrs. C. (and who, incidentally was the impetus for this story) lives on a quiet street, Mildred Avenue, which is typical of many streets in the area. She states that her next door neighbor’s child is out of control.

In an exclusive interview, Mrs. C complains that the daughter rarely, if ever, attends school. “Every day that those parents leave for work, watch out. Oh my land, the music is ungodly stuff and pounds so loud all day long, I get a headache.” And that’s not all. Mrs. C says it is a perpetual party at the house with people coming and going all day long. Says Mrs. C, “The girls look more like prostitutes than young ladies. The clothes they wear are scandalous! Lord only knows what goes on inside.”

The article continues, with several more choice quotes from the “anonymous” Mrs. C. The article ends with the reporter claiming that the ‘out of control teenager’s’ parents’ could not be reached for comment.

My stomach reels with nausea. I swallow hard.

“I’m gonna go give that bitch next door a piece of my mind,” Rob says.

“Rob, no. We don’t know for sure who ‘Mrs. C’ is. What if it isn’t Mrs. Cotillo?”

Rob snorts. “Screw that!” He bats the air with his hand, banishing my concern. “Mrs. C? On Mildred Avenue? How many Mrs. C’s do you think live on Mildred Avenue, next door to a teenage girl?”

Rob stomps towards the front door.

“Rob, no. Please,” I say following behind him. “What possible good will this do?”

But he ignores me, slamming the door as he leaves the house.
The telephone rings. I traipse back to the kitchen soughing out a disgusted breath. I lift the receiver.

“Hello?”

“She came back to me, bitch.”

It is BLU BOY. I bristle against the rasp of his voice.

“What?” I say, incredulous.

“She es mine, now.” He laughs a menacing growl.

My heart tumbles in my chest, my palms are instantly sticky with sweat. Inside my head I am screaming at this evil man, but nothing comes out of my mouth.

“Jou hear me? She es mine!” He laughs again, this time a hearty, bellicose guffaw.

And suddenly, rage born from the beginning of time explodes inside of me. I feel capable of reaching through the telephone and killing this beast.

“No!” I shout. “Do you hear me? No!”

BLU BOY only laughs again in response.

“Now jou listen to me, bitch.”

In the background I hear the forlorn wail of a cat. Pickles. Her cry is interrupted by firing of a gun. Then, silence.

I sit in shock a moment, trying to comprehend what this monster has just done. My eyes flood with tears and a white hot rage explodes in my heart. If he can be that calloused with a cat what on earth is he capable of with a fifteen year old little girl.

“I will kill you.” It is out of my mouth before I realize it.

“Jou can’ kill me. Jou don’ even know me. Jou don’—”

I hang up the phone. I hear my words echo: I will kill you. They repose in my heart like a talisman.
November 1, 2002

“I still think you look lousy.”
“I feel fine,” I say.

Holding the printed flyer against the lamppost with one hand, I yank off a stretch of wide blue painter’s tape from a roll, tearing it free with my teeth. I adhere the top of the flyer to the lamppost and then repeat the process with the bottom of the flyer. I stand back a moment to admire my handiwork. The flyer features a 5 X 7 photograph of Antonio Peña’s mug shot the last time he was arrested a little less than a year ago. In it, he is not the pseudo-handsome, swarthy young man in a smart three piece suit sitting in his aqua BMW, the way I first saw him just three short months ago. The photograph reveals bloodshot eyes and disarranged hair, which gives him a faintly clownish look. Below the photo is information linking Peña with Robyn and offering a reward for anyone who can provide me with a bonafide tip leading me to my daughter, along with a telephone number: my newly acquired cell phone.

From the doorway of the Maryland Market the clerk tosses me a doubtful look. I ignore her and cross Turk Street. Sister Margaret dutifully follows behind me with an armful of flyers. Another corner market, another lamppost.

“If you feel so fine, why are you still popping Rolaids like they were candy?” Sister Margaret inquires.
I give her a pointed look. “Nerves,” I reply.

“Think a visit to the doctor surely wouldn’t hurt,” she says. “From the standpoint of . . .” her voice trails off.
I stretch out my palm in her direction as I swallow down the smoldering burn in my stomach. “Flyer,” is all I say.

She peels a copy from her stack and hands it over saying, “Speaking of, how on earth did you manage to get BLU BOY’s mug shot?” she asks.

“Bart Strong, the P.I. I hired back in August.”

Sister Margaret raises her eyebrows but says nothing.

“Technically, mug shots are public domain, but they can be hard to get. Bart has friends in high places,” I say and smile.

Sister Margaret’s face is pensive.

“You should be careful,” she says.

“He killed our cat, Pickles,” I say.

“All the more reason to be careful,” she counters.

“But you should have heard him on the phone,” I counter. “His voice was smug with satisfaction. I could have strangled him right then and there.”

“Vigilante justice is no justice,” Sister Margaret says.

“Believe me, I am no vigilante,” I say, relieved that the little nun knows nothing about the .22 Colt nestled in my purse. I pause a moment and turn, greeting those fierce gray eyes. “But I am going to get my daughter back. No matter what.”

We continue our campaign, down Turk Street, up Leavenworth, crossing Geary, then turning right down Hyde, until all the lampposts or telephone poles on all major streets throughout the Tenderloin have been plastered with BLY BOY’s mug shot.

As we make our way back to my car, I am arrested by the shouting riot of oranges and reds of the leaves of the trees, swelling hugely against San Francisco’s ash colored sky. The beauty of nature, a dichotomy against the ugliness of the drug addiction and prostitution of this neighborhood. I inhale involuntarily, thinking of past autumns from childhood; the smell of the falling leaves giving way to images of Petra and I laughing and kicking our way through piles of leaves that our Father had diligently raked. But instead of the lusty and potent earthy aroma of autumn here in the Tenderloin, I am met with the pervading stink of rotting garbage braided with the stench of old vomit.

I drive Sister Margaret back to the convent, easing the old Corsica to the curb.

Her fingers are on the door handle, but she doesn’t open the door.
“You know you’re invited,” she says.

“Invited?” I ask.

“It’s All Saint’s Day. There will be a Mass. Tonight at seven. The choir is going to sing the full Litany of the Saints; it’s very beautiful.”

“We’ll see,” I say.

“That means no,” she says, giving me a frown.

“It’s a long way to drive.”

“I could pick you up,” she offers. “In that deathtrap of yours?” I say with a laugh. “No thanks.”

“You’d really love it,” she persists.

“I promise, Sister, I’ll think about it,” I say, a little exasperated.

“I’m picking up Chevy. She says she’s even thinking of converting.”

“Is she doing well?” I ask.

“God willing and the creek don’t rise; she’s determined to get off the streets. She’s starting to see that prostituting for food and shelter and clothing ends up being nothing more than survival sex. She is starting to see that there is more out there to life.”

I smile. I am genuinely glad for Chevy. She is such a sweet girl and the only one who ever bothered to help me when I first began this crusade for Robyn. I only wish my daughter had the same vision.

*     *     *

As Sister Margaret promised, the choir singing the Litany of the Saints was truly inspiring. The Catholic Mass is so much more than the modest little services held by my mother Gladys’ little church in Aztec. Sister Margaret, Chevy and I are standing together in front of the church after the Mass. Chevy’s face glows with happiness.

“That was nice,” she says to us both.

Sister Margaret smiles. Someone taps her on the shoulder and she turns, engaging in conversation with a young mother and her two children.

“Sister says you’re thinking of converting?” I ask Chevy.

Chevy nods. “I’m thinking about it.” She angles her head in the direction of the nun who is pulling out two small pieces of candy for the children from the mysterious pouch in her habit. “She can be awfully persuasive,” she adds.

We both laugh. Chevy gives me an earnest look.

“Sister Margaret said that you wouldn’t mind sometime, maybe taking me down to City College to register.”

This of course is news to me. But I can’t ignore the yearning in this girl’s young eyes.

“I’d love to,” I say. “When does registration start?”

“Not until after the winter break.” She looks down. “After the holidays.”

I reach out with one hand and rearrange strands of her bangs that the evening breeze has blown out of place.

“You call me whenever you’re ready,” I say with a smile.
November 3, 2002

After a long day at the office, I wheel the car into a tight spot at the Food For Less parking lot on Railroad Avenue, reviewing my mental list: something for dinner, creamer, bread, and eggs. I push back the guilty thought that I should probably pick up a vegetable or two. I steer the cart through the aisles on autopilot, wishing only for home and the oblivion of a bath.

Suddenly, the trill of my cell phone drowns the Muzak version of ‘Muskrat Love’ reverberating through the supermarket. It’s been two days since I posted the flyers. On average, the cell rings two to three times an hour and each time it is a crank call. I sigh, as I flatten the answer button.

“Hello?”

I hear a click. Another hang up. Immediately the phone rings again and I switch the phone to vibrate. Let them leave a message.

Heading home, the tired engine of the old Corsica chunks along. Between the spasmodic growls smoke has begun to bellow from the exhaust pipe. I have asked Rob twice to take a look at it, but as yet he hasn’t made time. All of his energy is directed towards his recovery, his program. It’s as if I have ceased to exist in his life.

Nearly home now, the normally quiet street, nearly always devoid of cars is crawling with activity. Directly across the street from the house is a large white news van, its towering antennae, a spire in the sky. On my front lawn, a bank of strangers, some with large, black cameras hoisted over their shoulders. It is only as I draw nearer that I realize all of these people are reporters. Fear skydives down my chest followed quickly by a dark cloud of foreboding.

I pull into the driveway and as I turn off the engine, the phalanx surrounds me. I open the car door and immediately half a dozen microphones are shoved into my face.

“Mrs. Skinner, is there any truth to the rumor that the dead body of a young girl found off of Beach Street, near Pier 39 is that of your daughter, Robyn?”

“What?” The air feels as if it’s been sucked from my lungs.

“Mrs. Skinner, is it true that your daughter was a teenage prostitute?”

“Ma’am, would you like to make a statement on whether or not your daughter brought her johns home to do business?”

“Mrs. Skinner, we have unconfirmed reports that you and your husband have an open marriage; any comment on that?”

The jostle each other like hungry lions surrounding a zebra carcass.

“Mike, get a close-up headshot,” somebody murmurs off to my left.

I am assailed as if by bullets.

Instinctively, I hold up my purse to my face, forgetting for the moment, about the groceries sitting in the backseat of the car. I hurriedly make my way into the house, slamming the door against their assault. All I can think about is Robyn.

Leaning against the front door I close my eyes, trying to regain my breath, trying to think clearly, but tears are already running down my face. I feel light headed and realize that though it is cool in the house, I am covered with sweat. Nausea rolls through my body and I clamp my hand to my stomach. I barely make it to the kitchen sink in time, retching so hard I feel as if I might have an aneurysm.

I yank the kitchen towel from its hook and wipe traces of vomit from my mouth. I glance at the answering machine. The number five flashes dimly in the dusky light of evening. Unsteady, I stumble to the machine, depressing the ‘play’ button. Desire and dread are tightly knotted, the only thing holding me together.

The first two messages are local reporters requesting information and/or interviews. The third is a hang-up. The fourth is a message from Rob saying that he’ll be home late; he was asked to make something called a twelfth step call. The fifth and final message is the arrow that pierces my heart.

“Mr. and Mrs. Skinner, this is homicide detective Roscoe with the San Francisco police department. Please give us a call as soon as you get this message.”

He leaves his cell number.
Nothing can prepare a person for this. Not resolve, not character, not brute physical strength, not even rage has any power over the visceral terror that has enveloped my body. Irrationally, I feel that as long as I don’t return Detective Roscoe’s phone call there is a chance that Robyn is still alive. The absurd thought that I will be able to keep Robyn from death if only I can keep from talking to the police invades my brain.

I pick up the phone and dial. After just two rings I hear the familiar ‘hello’.

I swallow hard and respond.

“Hello, Mama?”

“Margot?” she sounds breathless, as if she might faint.

I pour my heart out. My mom listens.

“I’m sorry I lied, Mama. I’m sorry. It’s just been—”

“Sweetie. Don’t worry about it. Do you want me to fly there? I will. I will in a heartbeat. You know I will.”

“No. It’s okay. I’ll call you as soon as I have any news.”

“I shore do love you sugar pot. And I’ll say a prayer for you. And Robyn.”

“Thank you Mama. I love you too.”
November 4, 2002

Dawn breaks cold and bleak across the sky in Pittsburg. Although my body physically droops with fatigue, my mind is riddled with a grim and crushing apprehension. My pillow is still damp with tears. I sit up in bed and bring my palms to my eyes, rubbing away the exhaustion. Next to me, Rob quietly snores.

Last night, after the phone call with my mother, I screwed up the courage to phone Detective Roscoe. He told me that SFPD had found the body of a girl believed to be between the ages of fourteen to eighteen dumped near Pier 39. She had been bludgeoned to death. Her face had been beaten so badly it was unrecognizable. He requested the name and telephone number of our dentist, saying it would be much faster than DNA. He apologized for the trouble and said he ‘hoped like hell it wasn’t Robyn’. I rifled through my address book until I found the last dentist that Robyn had been to, a Dr. Rarebit in Aztec and gave the detective the phone number. Detective Roscoe said that assuming the dentist could fax over the dental records the following day that they would know within twenty-four hours and to stay close to the phone. I said that I would and also gave him my cell phone number.

I thanked him for his time and concern and then hung up the phone and sobbed like a baby for an hour and a half. Rob must have come home after I fell asleep from exhaustion because I never even heard him come to bed. We need to talk, but I can’t will myself to rouse him. I’ll wait until he wakes on his own.

I fight down an unusual feeling of dizziness, wiping away the clammy sheen that seems to have developed on my forehead and rise, heading to the kitchen. My brain is numb. I peel a coffee filter from the stack and measure out the grounds, willing myself not to think. After pouring water in the coffee maker, I drag a chair over to the counter and stare blankly at the pot as the water hisses and coughs through the machine.

I suddenly realize the sunrise has been replaced by a beryl-blue sky. I physically shake my head, willing myself to action. I shuffle into the living room and surreptitiously peek out the front window. I expect to see tents pitched next to smoldering campfires. But no reporters are hovering on the lawn, although the big white news van across the street is still there and has been joined by another one from a different station. Great.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and dig through my purse, looking for the cell phone. My hands briefly stumble over the .22 Colt while I’m searching for the cell. The metal of the gun is cold to the touch and sends a shiver through my arm. I quickly shove it aside, jerking out the phone. I had forgotten to switch the cell from vibrate back to ring when I got home last night.

I have six messages. I follow the prompts to retrieve them and find that nearly all are hang ups or crank calls. One is from Freddie. I smile as I listen to the satin-deep timber of his voice:

“This is Freddie. Saw the news tonight. Let me know if I can help.”

He leaves his cell number, a phone number that I have by now, memorized.

I glance at the hallway, listening, though I know Rob is still asleep; I can hear him snoring. I dial Freddie’s number with my thumb and steal a sip of coffee as I wait for him to answer. After only one ring I hear his voice:

“Yeah. This is Freddie.”

“It’s me,” I say.

He sighs before answering.

“You holdin’ up okay?”

“Not really.”

“You want me to come over?”

I laugh.

“I don’t think that would be such a good idea. Rob’s here.”

“He won’t bother me.” he says sincerely.

I laugh again, in spite of my heavy heart.

“Seriously,” he continues, “just tell me what you need. You know I’ve already been down this road.”

I nod but can, for the moment, say nothing. I swallow hard.

“We’ll hopefully know something today,” is all I can manage.
“You shouldn’t be alone.”
“Rob’s here.”
“Like I said, you shouldn’t be alone.”

We leave that alone for now. I turn my head to look out the kitchen window and catch sight of the rosary that Sister Margaret gave me, sitting on the kitchen counter nearby.

“I’ll call Sister Margaret later,” I say.
“Ah, the venerable nun.”
“She’s the most amazing person I think I’ve ever met,” I say.

I walk over to the rosary, snatch it from the counter and clutch it to my breast.

“Some people find comfort in religion in times of crisis,” he says.

I realize that the only thing I really know about Freddie is that he lost a daughter to the streets.

“Do you believe in God?” I ask.

He pauses.

“I want to,” he replies. “Do you?”


“Whoa. You thinking of joining the convent?” he says with a grin in his voice.

“Not exactly,” I say, smiling involuntarily.

“Anyway,” he begins, his voice again deadly serious.

“Who are you talking to?” Rob’s voice suddenly barks from the hallway.

I shift ramrod straight in my chair; a feeling of guilt scuttles through me as the rest of Freddie’s sentence dissolves in the air.

I quietly flick the phone closed.

I stand up and refill my coffee.

“No one,” I lie, responding to Rob. What we absolutely do not need to be doing now is fighting.

I pull a mug from the cupboard. “Coffee?” I ask, pouring a cup for him. He doesn’t respond.

I walk the cup of coffee over to him and can see by the look on his face that he is in a foul mood.

“We have to talk,” I begin.

“I heard,” he says, his voice flat. “I don’t know if you noticed or not, but the house is surrounded by vultures.”

The sarcasm in his voice is unmistakable.

“It might help if you were ever here,” I say.

“I left you a message. You knew where I was. I was helping a guy. A wet drunk who rolled his car and is now facing charges because his wife was thrown from the vehicle and is still in the hospital. She’s paralyzed from the neck down. And all this guy wants to do is drink himself to death.”

My back is to him. I say nothing, biting my lip, trying not to lash out at him.

“He needed my help,” Rob says emphatically.

I whip around. “I need your help!” I shout. “Our daughter might be lying in some morgue and I’m here! All by myself! I need your help! Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“My help?” he spits out. He points a finger accusingly at the living room window. “Looks like you don’t need my help. You’ve got every bloodsucking reporter bearing down on us, just waiting for the cops to announce that it is Robyn they found. And I hope you’re happy, because those friggin’ posters did it, Margot.”

“We don’t know she’s,” I stop; I can’t say the word. “We don’t know anything at this point.”

“Don’t we?”

“Is this what you want to do?” I say, my eyes filling with tears. “Argue while the medical examiner is comparing Robyn’s dental records with that dead little girl? Is it?” I scream. “Don’t you get that our daughter needs
us? She out there, somewhere, lost!"

Rob shakes his head. “She was lost a long time ago. You just chose to ignore that fact. Just like you ignore anything that doesn’t suit you.”

My body shakes with rage.

“You bastard! Don’t you make me out to be the bad guy here. I’ve been the one who has kept this family together. I was the one who found you this job in California when you got laid off in Aztec. I was the one who made the phone calls, arranged for the interview. I got the Bay Area newspapers and found this house to rent, along with everything else!”

Rob stands, silent. His silence frightens me. Over the years I have become accustomed to his bellowing reactions in our very familiar fights. But today, now, he just stands there, his façade is calm. I wipe the tears roughly from my cheeks and shake my head.

“I’m sorry, Rob. It’s just the stress of all of this has both of us worn out. I don’t blame you. Honestly.”

Still he says nothing.

“I know we both felt that the move to California would be for the best. We’ve always been a team. Ever since we got married.” I give him an imploring look. But I cannot read his face.

I sniffle, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

“Let’s you and me start over,” I say. “Back to the time when we were in love.”

The tears are flowing freely again now. I blink them away and gaze at Rob. And it is then that I see it. Or, I should say rather, it is then that I don’t see it. There is no love in my husband’s eyes.

“Rob?” I say. “We were in love,” I say again. “You and me? And we got married?” I pause. “We’ve been through so much. But no matter what, we’ve still got us . . .” my voice trails off because deep in the pit of my gut, I know the truth. And maybe I’ve always known it, but as Rob said, all these years I’ve chosen to ignore it.

Rob shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and looks down at the floor. Then he meets my eyes.

“I’m gonna say this the kindest way I know how. We had us some good times back in high school. We really did.” He swallows. “But I married you because you were pregnant. Because I wanted to do the right thing. And that’s the God’s honest truth.

I’ve done the best I can over the years. I know I’ve screwed up. I know that. I’ve taken the easy way out so many times. I’ve turned myself into a drunk, plain and simple. But I’m sober now. And I intend to stay that way. No matter what. And being sober means being honest.”

My heart wrenches. I close my eyes and stifle a sob, but it comes out anyway. My hand jumps to my mouth because I know now what Rob has known for years: our marriage is over; if it ever really existed in the first place.

“I’m gonna get cleaned up and go to a meeting,” he says. “Here’s the phone number where the meeting’s at. Call me as soon as you hear something.” He opens his wallet, retrieving a slip of paper from an inner pocket and drops it on the kitchen table. Then he turns on his heels and heads for the bathroom.

I hear the faucet to the shower shriek on and I bury my face in my hands. But I’m not allowed the luxury of a good cry. Someone is rapping sharply on the front door.

My heart thumps in my chest as I shuffle through the living room. It could be a reporter or it could be the police. I take a deep breath and glance through the peephole. Then I hear the sound of the running faucet. The relief is almost too much to handle. I would rather be a victim of a crime than an honest wife.

Opening the door, I fall into Sister Margaret’s arms and collapse in grief.
November 15, 2002

“Look up for a sec,” the young man named Philip says to me. He speaks with a lisp and his fingernails are painted with clear gloss. “Hey Joanie, I think we’re gonna get too much kickback on her neck under the lights . . . get me some Derma Blend number three.”

A young woman with pencil thin legs wearing skinny jeans and a revealing deep-V-cut top nods and sprints away only to return seconds later with the makeup Philip requested.

“Hi, I’m Donnie,” another young man approaches me with a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other. His jeans are faded and have holes at the knees. Although he is behind me, we are looking at each other through the mirror that I’m sitting in front of, as Philip applies the finishing touches to my face with an air brush contraption that looks more like something that belongs in a hospital operating room.

“I’m Margot,” I say.

“So you’re going to be going on with Mr. McGowan in about three minutes, okay?” Donnie says.

“Okay,” I reply, inhaling deeply.


I swallow down a globe of terror. “A little,” I say.

“Don’t be nervous. Mr. McGowan is super nice.”

Behind us an older man with a graying beard sticks his head through the doorway and glances our way. “We’re going to commercial in ninety seconds,” he says.

“Right,” Donnie says, looking back over his shoulder. He then faces front and meets my eyes. “Come on,” he says. “Let’s get you on the set.”

My heart thuds in my chest, anvil heavy, as I follow Donnie through a long corridor to a set of closed double doors. A large red light above the doors flashes off and on. Chest high windows on the doors reveal a cavernous sized room. On the left side a large desk like piece of furniture sits, like an island. On the front of the island in bold print is the station logo: KTVU Fox 2. Behind it sit a man and a woman, both smartly dressed. The man is looking directly at a camera the size of a small car and talking. The woman is silent, but is wearing a concerned look. She too, is looking into the camera. There are actually several cameras in the room. Three situated in front of the man and woman. And two more to the far right are facing a small area set up to look like a living room. Overstuffed easy chairs face each other and are separated by a coffee table.

Several feet back behind the cameras and mikes and equipment, in the shadows, are a handful of director style chairs filled with various KTVU staff, except for one.

“Your friend’s over there,” Donnie says, inclining his head in the direction of Sister Margaret who is sitting near the employees. Her face is calm but resolute.

After learning that the young girl found beaten to death in San Francisco was not Robyn, but a local prostitute that was known to work the streets of the Tenderloin only served to spurn me on that much harder. Rob said it was a coincidence. Freddie said it was a warning. When I told Sister Margaret of my plan to go on television, offering a reward for information leading to the rescue of my daughter, she, like everyone else, laughed, thinking I was joking. When I told her that KTVU had agreed to have Ross McGowan sit down with me for an interview, her eyes flashed a look of apprehension. But as Sister herself said a long time ago, this is a war.

Suddenly, the young woman who has been kneeling below the camera in front of the news anchors holds her hand up in the air, her fingers swiping the air, three, two, one, and it’s as if a vacuum locked seal opens inside the studio. The two anchors sit back in their chairs. The woman slouches down, bending over to attend some apparent problem with her shoe. The light above the double doors in front of us shuts off. Donnie looks at me and smiles. 

“Commercial break,” he says. Opening the door, he leads me into the studio. “Let’s get on set,” he says.

I am instantly surrounded by interns and personnel, giving direction; sit this way, look that way, but above all, just be natural. In the middle of it all, the Ross McGowan comes onto the set and sits down opposite me. He is taller than he looks on TV. He smiles at me with that famous handsome grin, as one of the interns hands him a sheaf of papers, whispering quietly into his ear. Philip, the makeup artist is at Ross McGowan’s other side, dabbing his forehead with a cloth.
And then we’re on the air.

Ross McGowan looks into the camera, his face suddenly serious.

“Teenage prostitution,” he says. “Is it common? Rare?” He turns in his chair and faces me. “We’re here this morning with Margot Skinner. Her daughter, Robyn, at first classified as a teenage runaway by the police, is now officially listed as ‘endangered missing’ by the authorities. After learning that her daughter Robyn was, in fact, living on the streets in the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, living as a prostitute, Margot herself made frequent visits to the City searching for the whereabouts of her daughter. She also enlisted the aid of a private investigator. And although her daughter was returned home, just weeks later, she ran away again, back to her pimp. Now, Mrs. Skinner, before we begin talking specifically about Robyn, can you tell us, from your experience, isn’t teenage prostitution the exception rather than the rule?”

There is no time for fear or hesitation. I dive in.

“Actually, teenagers being sold for sex are becoming more and more common.”

“How so?” Ross asks.

“Back in the nineties, when the DEA began cracking down on the drug problem, cutting the flow of cocaine and heroin into the United States, traffickers began looking for another source of lucrative income. Drug dealers turned themselves into pimps, because unlike a drug that is bought and sold once, a teenage prostitute can be sold over and over again; she becomes an unending stream of revenue. And because the laws against prostitution are aimed at the prostitute herself, these teenage girls are targeted as criminals instead of the victims that they really are. The girls get arrested and their pimps go free.”

“In terms of numbers, are we talking about dozens of girls, hundreds, thousands?”

“Conservative estimates today are that there are a quarter of a million teenage girls are being prostituted in the United States alone. That doesn’t even begin to address the already huge issue of children being sexually exploited in places like Amsterdam and the Philippines.”

Ross looks momentarily sick to his stomach. “This is an epidemic,” he says.

“Yes,” I reply. “With the advertising industry continuing its steady promotion of the sexualization of our children, and the media becoming more and more casual about pornography, teenage prostitution has become a twenty-first century plague.”

“Now, your daughter, Robyn you believe is under the control of a pimp?”

“Yes.”

Ross holds up a copy of the flyer of BLU BOY that I posted all over the Tenderloin district.

“This is the man that you allege has control of your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“And you posted these flyers in San Francisco?”

“Yes I did.”

“And what was the result?” Ross asks.

“Within forty-eight hours of my posting the flyer, I was notified by S.F.P.D. that a young woman, probably a teenager had been found beaten to death in the City.”

“But it was not Robyn?”

“Thank God, no.”

“And you wanted to come on television this morning and give Antonio Peña a message; is that right?”

My heart latches my chest. My mouth is dry as gypsum. The camera nearest me glides towards me with the stealth of a hungry panther. I face it head on.

“Antonio Peña, BLU BOY, whatever you call yourself, I want you to know that I will rescue my daughter away from you. No matter what it takes to do so. In conjunction with Crime Stoppers, I am now offering a fifty thousand dollar reward to anyone who can give me information leading to the safe rescue of my daughter, Robyn Skinner. Regardless of whether anyone comes forward or not, no matter if it takes me the rest of my life, I will rescue my daughter.”
Ross lets out a nervous laugh.

“I think it prudent to mention that we are not advocating vigilantism here, folks.”

He mumbles something about law enforcement and notifying the proper authorities. But I am not listening; instead I sit back and breathe out a sigh of release. It is of no concern to me what Ross McGowan says; the gauntlet has been thrown. I will hunt BLU BOY down like the dog that he is. And when I find him, I find Robyn.
November 20, 2002

“I’m really glad you called,” I say into my cell phone.

It is Freddie; he is about to board an airplane to visit his mother, who lives in Dallas, for the Thanksgiving holiday.

“You doing anything special?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “Rob’s still asleep but he told me that holidays are ground zero for relapses and that he’s got to spend all four days in meetings to protect his sobriety.” I sigh. I don’t get into the fact that I didn’t even bother to buy a turkey this year. There just didn’t seem to be any point.

“You sound lonely,” he says, sympathy in his voice.

“I miss Robyn,” I say. “I really thought that going on TV and offering a reward would lead to something.”

“You don’t know that it won’t,” he says. “Sometimes it takes people a while to work up their courage to do the right thing.”

“I guess,” I say, peering out the kitchen window at a pallid sky.

“They’re getting ready to board now; I have to go.”

“Have a great holiday,” I say, envious of his capability to hop on a plane and leave his real life behind.

“I’ll call you when I get back into town next week,” he says.

We say goodbye and then I toss the cell onto the kitchen counter. It skids across the surface, stopping under a week’s worth of mail that I still need to sort. Already it’s nearing noon and I haven’t gotten my shower. I sough out a breath of discontent, rubbing the sleep from my eyes and grab my cup of coffee, preparing to head to the bathroom when I hear pounding on the front door. I can’t imagine who on earth it could be. I set my coffee cup back down and walk to the living room.

Staring through the peephole I see a face that can only mean trouble. I open the front door.

“Jenny,” I say of Robyn’s troublemaking friend. A look of hysterical panic is in her eye.

“You’ve got to help her,” she says, her voice wild. Her eyes fill with tears.

Terror instantly invades my body.

“What’s wrong?” I say, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “Is Robyn okay?”

“He said something about you having to choose. He’s never been like this before,” she says.

“He always said he was our friend and that he would take care of us! But now—”

“Choose what? What are you talking about?”

Jenny is openly crying now.

I seize her by the forearms.

“Jenny!” I yell. “Get a hold of yourself! Now tell me what is going on!”

She wrenches free.

“It’s Peña! He says you got one hour and then he’s gonna kill her if you don’t choose. I don’t know what he’s talking about.” She digs into one of the front pockets in her jeans. “I wrote it down. This is where she is. He wants you to go there.” She hands me the note.

On a scrap of paper is an address in the City. From the street name I recognize the address: Robyn is in the Tenderloin.

“He says if you call the cops he’ll kill her.”

In my mind I’m already calculating how long it will take to drive to San Francisco. One hour is cutting it very close. Immediately I am thinking about whether or not to try to reach Rob at the Alano Club. There’s no time. I’ll leave him a note.

“I have to go,” I say, leaving Jenny standing at the front door.
In the bedroom I survey the floor for clothing. I bounce out of my pajamas and into the nearest pair of pants I can find. I jerk an old sweatshirt over my head and slip on a pair of nearby flip-flops.

I grab my purse and fly out the door.

The sky in the City is a cadaverous grey. The air, frigid.

I ease the Corsica onto Sacramento Street. I look at the map again. “Okay, Polk should be coming up after Franklin,” I say to myself.

Apartment buildings are sandwiched together one after the other with an occasional market or liquor store squeezed in between. Traffic is light because of the Thanksgiving holiday.

Sure enough, I see Polk Street and flip the turn indicator on just as I make the right turn. I reread the scrap of paper that Jenny gave me again. “It’s gotta be right here,” I say under my breath.

Across the street, on the corner of Sacramento and Polk stands a boarded up storefront covered in black soot. On the top is a dingy sign half obscured by carbon smudges; I can make out the name *Bob’s*. A recent fire has obviously nearly destroyed the building. From the looks of it, *Bob’s* was probably a corner grocery market. I can’t make out the address. But just past the burnt out hull of a building, I see it. The blue BMW, front license plate advertising its owner: BLU BOY.

I lurch the car to a stop and yank the gearshift into park. Cars are parked up and down both sides of the street. To hell with wasting time trying to find a parking space. People can drive around the Corsica.

I hop out of the car and sling my purse strap over my shoulder.

I look at my watch; fifty eight minutes have elapsed since Jenny delivered her message.

Although the storefront has been boarded up, near where the brick and what used to be a large glass window meet, about waist high, I catch sight of a small opening where one of the wood planks stops short. It looks barely big enough for a cat to get through. I’m not sure I can squeeze through, but I’m damn sure going to try. I stick one leg into the opening, bending nearly in half, as I wedge myself into the narrow fissure. I feel like a contortionist, jamming my body into the small gap. I have to stuff myself rear end first and then at last, the one foot on the inside finds solid ground. Turning sideways, I hop backwards inch by inch, as first one shoulder and then the other shoulder presses through the breach, wringing my flesh as I drive myself through to the inside of the burned out store.

Inside, I am immediately overcome by the acrid, sour stench of burnt plastics and wood; a miasma of toxic stink. It is pitch black inside, save only for narrow glimmers of light that bleed in between the planks of wood on the outside of the building. I know I don’t have a flashlight in my purse, but my hand drops inside anyway, my fingers searching for their prize: the Colt.

“Robyn?” I whisper. I listen for a moment, but don’t hear anything.

I take one tentative step forward. My foot lands on something already broken. The crunch of the glass muffled beneath my shoe. As my eyes begin to adjust to the darkness, I can now make out frameworks of shelving units that used to hold food. Nearly all of them have been destroyed by fire. The floor is littered with burnt boxes of cereals and crackers and dented, half burnt cans. Most of the structures look more like skeletons of shelves than actual shelving.

I cross the floor, careful to avoid as much debris as I can. I step over a half burned bottle of Heinz catsup as the odor of burnt wood and catsup and pickles invade my nostrils.

At the far end of the store, I catch sight of a long mass of twisted, melted steel, and realize those must have been shopping carts. Beyond me, ahead by about ten yards, I hear a sudden noise dart across the floor and realize that I’m not the only one making my way through the charred groceries. The hairs on the back of my neck shoot up and a shiver of repulsion flies across my skin as I try to dispel the image of rats scuttling around near me.

Towards the very back of the store, I see a faint outline of a doorway. As I approach, I glimpse a door, ajar, outlined by a diffuse light on the other side. My heart thuds wildly in my chest as I draw near to the door. My mouth is dry as ashes and the stench of the burnt and rotting food causes waves of nausea to roll through my body. I take another cautious step towards the door. I am near enough now that I can reach out and touch it. But before I can raise my hand I hear a sound. A whimper. I bolt through the door. What I see causes me to freeze in shock.

The room is small, perhaps what used to be an office or small break room for the employees of the store. On the left wall, a door leading outside a back alley stands open, letting in light. In the shadows I see a long table and
bench lie on their sides, charred and twisted from the fire. In the center of the room two chairs set back to back a foot apart from each other. Two girls tied and gagged are in the chairs; both looking at me, abject terror fills their eyes. Robyn sits in the chair on the right and Chevy is on the left.

“Oh my God,” I murmur. “It’s okay girls, it’s going to be okay.”

I make a move towards them, but from the darkness he emerges. BLU BOY saunters towards the girls, a gun in each of his hands. He gives me a malevolent grin.

“Jou think jou are so smart,” he says. “Jou go on TV, think you do something big.” He waves both guns around in the air. “But you see?” he says, aiming a gun at each girl’s head. “I am the one that do something big.”

“No! Please,” I beg; my eyes well with tears. “I’m sorry. Please!”

“Now is too late,” he says. “Jou habe to choose. One girl live, one girl die.”

Robyn and Chevy let out plaintive cries of panic.

“Whish one you want to live?” he asks.

“Look,” I begin. “If you want to kill somebody, kill me.”

As I plead my mind races with scenarios. My hand is still inside my purse and although my palm is drenched with sweat, I am still clutching the Colt. I flashback in my mind to the day that Freddie took me target practicing, trying desperately to recall what he taught me. But in my heart of hearts I realize there is no way I can pull my handgun from my purse, aim and fire before Peña would be able to get off at least one shot, maybe two. I lose, no matter how I play my cards. But I also realize that Peña gets off on fear. I can at least try to stall him while I try to figure a way out of this. Slowly, I pull the .22 from my purse, aiming directly at him.

Peña’s eyes register a jolt of surprise and then amusement. “Look at jou!” he lets out an arrogant laugh.

I grasp the Colt with both hands.

“If you kill either of them, I kill you,” I say, doing my best to inject strength into my voice. “Is that what you want?”

He laughs again, but the amusement in his eyes quickly turns to rage.

“No one fucks with me, jou hear me? No one!” he shouts. “Jou think jou turn my cholos against me? Make them rat me out for money? I run this fucking city!”

His outburst frightens me. Needles of fear shoot through my veins.

“Look, Peña,” I say, trying to reason with him. “You let the girls go, right here, right now, and everybody walks away. I swear to God, I won’t notify the police. Do you even see any cops here? No! Because I did exactly as you said. I haven’t called anyone.”

As if to make me a liar, a siren breaks through the gloom of space. My mind races back to the note I left at home for Rob. I should have realized that the first thing he’d do would be to call the San Francisco police department. I grit my teeth in angst. But San Francisco is a big city. Sirens go off all the time. I am hoping that is what Peña is thinking.

“I count to ten, and then I kill one girl. Jou choose.”

“Peña, don’t do this,” I say.

“One, two, three,” he starts counting.

He wants me to beg for my daughter’s life. But begging for Robyn’s life means consigning Chevy to death. It is an impossible option.

“If you shoot either of them, you die. Is that what you want?”

“Four, fibe, seex,” he continues his countdown.

The siren, which began far away, now wails louder and has been joined by others. They are so loud, in fact, that they sound as if they are just down the block. Could it be the police coming here? And if so, will they get here in time?

“Leave right now, while you still can,” I say. “Because so help me God, I will kill you,” I threaten.

“Seben, eight, nine,” Peña continues. He jabs the barrels of both guns sharply into each girl’s head. They both let out muted sobs of panic.
Just as Peña opens his mouth to say the word ‘ten’, a shadowy figure darkens the doorway to the left. Everything seems to happen simultaneously. A look of alarm jerks across Peña’s face as he looks to the left and sees a cop. The policeman’s gun is drawn. He is aiming directly at Peña’s head.

“Drop it!” the policeman shouts.

“Fuck you all,” Peña says. He raises the gun in his left hand, aims it at the policeman. Suddenly, the deafening cacophony of explosions shakes the room.

It is only after I fire the Colt that I realize I closed my eyes when I pulled the trigger. When I open my eyes, I see Peña, sprawled on the floor, lying in an expanding pool of blood.

“Drop your weapon!” the cop shouts at me.

I do as I am told and dare myself to look in the direction of the girls, holding my breath in desperation. Chevy sits quietly crying.

Peña was able to fire both guns simultaneously. His shot towards the policeman evidently missed. But the shot from the gun in his right hand, at point blank range, aimed directly at Robyn, hit home.
November 18, 2003

“Come on folks, let her through,” Freddie says. His arm is entwined in mine on my left side. Sister Margaret and Chevy are on my right as we climb the steps of the state capitol in Sacramento. We are flanked by scores of reporters who follow us like a swarm of sea snakes.

“Mrs. Skinner is it true that your husband blames you for your daughter’s death and has filed for divorce?” a voice from the pack of reporters shouts into the air.

“No comment,” Freddie says.

But yes, it is true. After the dust settled from the shooting a year ago, three things were clear: one, according to police, Antonio Peña was dead by a bullet from my gun and would never again victimize young girls. Two, Robyn paid the ultimate price in the dangerous and harrowing world of child prostitution. And three, Rob will probably always blame me for that fact.

After Robyn’s death, when I felt I too would die hemorrhaging tears, Rob refused to speak with me. Even weeks after the funeral we went about our daily lives in silence. Whenever I tried to talk to him, he would either leave the room or the house depending on his state of rage. When finally he did speak it was solely to inform me that he was leaving, filing for divorce, that he could no longer live under the same roof as the person responsible for the death of his daughter.

A month later, when served with the divorce papers, I could no longer clutch the illusion that my life would ever again be normal.

I tried reading self-help books, hypno-therapy, and guided meditation tapes to assuage my sense of guilt and defeat.

“Mrs. Skinner, are there any further pending charges against you for the death of Antonio Peña?” a reporter in front of us asks, shoving a microphone in my face.

“Move it,” Freddie says, swatting the mike out of our way as we ascend the capitol steps.

The district attorney in San Francisco refused to file charges against me, saying that the homicide was justified and that the death of my only daughter was punishment enough. I was told by more than one cop, off the record, that I had done them all a favor by killing Peña.

Dissolution was the term the judge used in our divorce case. That word reminds me of a letter falling into a stream; the words on the page being diluted into nothingness by the water.

After the divorce, when I thought the iron door of regret might actually kill me, I sought the counsel of a psychiatrist. We danced around the issue and played silly word games, but after the third appointment he said to me, “At the end of the day your daughter is still dead,” and I knew I need never go back to see him again.

One day, unannounced, I showed up on the steps of Sister Margaret’s convent in San Francisco. She opened the door and saw me and said, “I’ve been waiting for you.” I hadn’t seen her in nine months.

Freddie opens the door to the State Capitol. Inside it smells of expensive furniture polish and old books. A reporter, a young woman, probably fresh out of journalism school jostles her way through the crowd and asks me, “Mrs. Skinner, have you gotten over the death of your daughter, Robyn?”

And because she is young and ignorant, I do not launch invectives at her. Instead I recall the words that Sister Margaret used to counsel me; to bring me back to at least trying to want to live.

When I showed up on her doorstep, she invited me in and made me tea. We sat in a small room in the convent, filled with plants and beautifully upholstered furniture, the afternoon sun softly glinting through the sheer curtains. Above the fireplace hung a gorgeous oil painting of Mary.

“Did you know that your name comes from the word ‘margaritari’, which is Greek for ‘pearl’?”

I said nothing, only took a sip of the tea, which tasted of earth and flowers.

“Did you know there is such a thing as a Tahitian black pearl? It is the symbol of hope in man’s wounded heart.”

I began to cry. “Oh Sister, I have lost the only thing that ever mattered to me,” I sobbed.

She set her cup of tea on its saucer and moved in close, giving me a big hug that lasted for the longest time.
“Yes, that is true. But now that you’ve been emptied of everything important in your life, you have an opportunity to allow the grace and love of God to fill you. St. Paul discovered that only through weakness was he able to claim the strength of God’s grace and power.”

“But how can I ever forgive myself! It was my fault that—”

“Shhh,” Sister Margaret said, patting me softly. “There is no room for blame anywhere here. You did the very best that you knew how to do. You made the very best choices you could in order to save Robyn, yes?”

I nodded. But of course, if I had things to do over again, it wasn’t just one thing I would have done different, but a thousand. Bushels of choices different than what I actually did; crates of decisions piled one on top of the other, going back all the way to the very day she was born.

“Gandhi said, ‘be the change you want to see.’ You cannot give away what you do not possess.”

Sister Margaret made eye contact. Facing me, she grasped me by both shoulders.

“Chevy and all the young girls like her, like your daughter can be,” she paused, “an atonement. You must find a way.”

One by one, the four of us must pass through a metal detector. The reporters too, must pass, single file through the detector; this slows them down and gives us a temporary bit of peace. We are escorted by a man in a black suit who introduces himself as Mr. Roget.

The young reporter is with us once again, scampering up behind us, anxious to get something for her publication.

“Mrs. Skinner,” she says a little too loudly. The sound of my name echoes down the long hallway.

Freddie grimaces, turning to swat her back again, but I grab his arm, stopping him.

I contemplate the reporter.

“What is it that you want?” I ask her.

“Do you believe that Robyn’s Law, if passed, will really make a difference in the world of child prostitution?”

Robyn’s Law decriminalizes prostitution for girls under the age of eighteen and requires counseling and job training along with mandatory twenty-five years to life for the pimps who sell them, will be introduced into the state legislature today, after my testimony.

I level my gaze at her.

“Yes,” I say. “I believe that it really will make a difference.” I recall Sister Margaret’s words to me about the origin of my name. This is the black pearl I will carry inside my soul all the days of my life.

Mr. Roget leads us unto a cavernous room filled with scores of assembly members from the state. At the center of the room is a table with a single chair. On top of the desk is a microphone.

“That’s your seat,” Mr. Roget says.

“Can I have a minute?” I ask.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he replies and disappears.

“I admire you,” Chevy says, giving me a hug.

“I admire you,” I say, giving her a hug back.

“Go get ‘um” Freddie says, hugging me.

Sister Margaret hands me my papers and secrets her rosary into my palm.

“I will always pray for you,” she says, also giving me a hug.

And then, they too fade into the watercolor portrait of people.

I sit down at the table and adjust the microphone. A hush falls over the crowd. Someone introduces me and then gives me a nod to begin.

“My name is Margot Skinner, and this is my story.”
THE
WHORE OF BABYLON,
A MEMOIR
A Novel

Katrina Prado
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The Whore of Babylon, A Memoir
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