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This thesis is the first half of my novel-in-progress, *The Insatiable Charlotte*. It is the work of my last few semesters at UNCG in the MFA creative writing program. It is the story of a young woman, Charlotte, who lives in San Antonio, Texas. After growing up with her father and sick mother in a conservative Christian community, in highschool she makes friends with a girl, Tory, and gets involved in drugs. Charlotte soon after falls pregnant and ends up, because of a heroin bust, in jail. The novel begins soon after Charlotte is released from prison and documents her struggles on the streets and attempts to get her three-year-old daughter, Kara, back. After she can not find a way to regain custody of her daughter, she soon falls into more trouble with her earlier crowd of friends. When her daughter is threatened, Charlotte decides to kidnap Kara, take her on the road and begin a new life. This thesis is the first half of the novel, and ends just after Kara is kidnapped.

THE INSATIABLE CHARLOTTE

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

At 8:56 a.m. Charlotte was released from prison. That filthy chamber, the molding cot, her roommates, Patty and Theresa now behind her. She walked two blocks then lay on the patch of grass that she'd been eyeing from the cafeteria window for more than two years now. The sun was only partially visible, but she'd take it; she absorbed every bit of warmth on the skin of her face and neck. She lay there, thinking about the possibilities: a steak, a milkshake, a bed with real sheets (maybe even satin), a cup of Columbian coffee, cream, sugar. A shadow moved and Charlotte opened her eyes and saw that it was a man. She jumped to her feet, stumbled backwards.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to make sure you were alright?" the man asked.

"I'm fine. Thanks. Just resting."

She hurried past him. She must not let this new freedom get the better of her. Step one--as she'd written line after line in the spiral bound notebook she now carried--was to find a job. To stay away from fucking Joey. The jeans she'd been given at discharge (that smelled of harsh chemical detergents) kept slipping down her hips, so she unlaced the shoestring from her black Converse and wove it through her belt loops, tying a knot around her bony waist. She took the route above ground past the Alamo with its whitewashed cobbled stones, past tourist shops and Cantinas that smelled of fried onions,

fresh salsa. At the Goodwill on Commerce street she bought fitted jeans and a light blue v-neck t-shirt. The black polyester dress (except for the yellow stains beneath the armpits) was her real find. She had less luck with the shoes and instead of sleek pumps, she had to settle on square-toed platforms, a size too large, straight out of the seventies. After buying the items she changed in the bathroom stall, parting her hair to the far left and rinsing her mouth and face in the sink. She decided on Denny's and walked eight blocks in the clunky shoes. Inside three women sat in the corner, none of whom she recognized.

"Take a seat wherever you like, honey," the older woman of the three called.

Charlotte chose a corner booth.

"What can I get for you?" The woman asked.

"Is Matty still the manager here?" Charlotte asked.

"No, Paul Greene is the manager."

"Oh. Does Maggie or Chandra still work here?"

"Who? Listen, honey, I don't know anyone by those names. Are you going to order?" She sagged into one hip, rested a palm on the table.

"Yes. Coffee please. With cream and sugar. What about Pauley or Thomas?"

"Oh, I heard of Pauley. She got fired awhile back for stealing."

"Right."

"You ready to order?"

"Scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese. Two sausage, two chocolate chip pancakes."

“I’ll have it right out.”

Charlotte tore off the top of a packet of sugar and dumped it into the back of her mouth, grinding the granules between her back teeth. This was supposed to be her best bet: asking for her old job back. She’d figured on having to do some explaining, but hadn’t imagined that everyone’d disappeared. By the time she left, she’d drunk four cups of coffee and was buzzing, turning her head left to right through the morning street bustle, attempting to catch any familiar face. She walked into three restaurants, and though none of them said they were hiring, she filled out an application anyways. At the question *do you have any felonies* she hesitated and lied on all three. In front of the fourth restaurant, *Rio Rio*, where her father used to take her on her birthdays, Charlotte decided it was enough for today. She had just been released, by god, and she needed to see somebody she knew.

Charlotte walked to what they all called *La Mansion*, which took her nearly an hour. The street was even more desolate than when she’d left: broken glass, cigarettes, bits of soaked and shredded paper lay scattered across the dirt yards. The house was now missing not one but three windows and a pale blue plastic tarp was duct taped to the frames. The weathered wood, which had probably begun shedding its white paint sometime in the early 1900’s, now had various graffiti signatures--*PJ-54*, *MarttyMania*, *Fuck You*--across its pillared front. The chain linked house which separated the lone mansion from the surrounding trailers was collapsing on one side. Charlotte punched the brass knocker on the enormous wooden door three times. She tried the knob: locked. She walked around to the back, knocked a few times, then pried the loose door open. “Hello?”

Charlotte called out. The kitchen had a high roof, like the rest of the house, and from it hung a copper rack that would have, in the 1800s when it was built, held the pots and kettles of cooks and servants; now it hung from two chains, ready to topple onto the dented butcher block counter. Behind the six burner gas stove there was a black streak of charcoal, like an artist's stroke, where something had caught fire. "Hello?" Charlotte called as she stepped into the hallway. The living room still had the rotting sectional against the wall and beside it piles of trash and dirty clothes contributed to the musty smell. In the second room were two blow-up air mattresses, half-deflated, with piles of blankets that made her think there were bodies beneath.

She padded up the double-wide staircase. *Just like from Gone with the Wind* Charlotte had whispered to Tory the first time she'd toured Joey's house. Charlotte leaned over the banister and it groaned beneath her weight. Joey's mother, who had owned the house (inherited it from her great-grandfather) had hung herself from the chandelier above the stairs. The dusty crystals shimmered like so many shards of ice and the same chill that had caused her on so many of those nights to lean over the railing with Kara in her arms, to think how easy it would be to fall or to drop Kara and for both of them to break their necks and bleed until they passed away, made her now sit on the balcony floor.

"Hello," she called out, this time in a whisper. She tried Joey's bedroom first, knocking three times, hoping that he wasn't here and yet feeling disappointed when she'd stuck her head inside and saw that he was not. He still lived here, no doubt--those were his combat boots in the corner, that was his hair gel on the dresser--but his bed was made,

which only happened when he was away on long trips. She tried her old bedroom next, three doors down. The room was dark, the sole window covered with a flannel sheet; it was seconds before she saw the white bars of the crib in the far corner. The mattress was gone and in its place were a pile of soiled men's clothes. Charlotte leaned on the rail, just as she'd bent over on those nights, milk leaking through her shirt, to pick up Kara. A pressure built in her chest; she only had a few moments. She scanned the room and noticed the mobile of crescents and five-pointed stars Charlotte had once cut from gold paper and strung to a hanger with dental floss. She lifted the mobile from the tac and folded it into her backpack. She leaned out the window just like she'd used to lean with Kara in one arm, the night breeze on their skins, humming hymns of her devotion, of how she was the kind of mother who would climb mountains tall and wander through valleys of death and fight every dragon and serpent for her only truly love, her daughter, her dearest. Stupid. She'd been high on Oxys. But the irony: that it had been one of these moments, lost in the ecstasy of her own love, that they'd come for them. It was the sort of thing that now seemed so obvious that she should've seen it coming. Charlotte pried up the floorboard beside the crib. She'd expected for it to be empty and smiled--for the first time that day--when she saw the stash: the stuffed elephant that had been hers as a baby, the hairbrush that she'd carried and smelled for days after her mother had died, pictures of her father, bearded, laughing, a jade locket with her mother's portrait (a bad print cut awkwardly from a 5x7). Each item went into her backpack. Lastly, the four letters from Micah, still in the envelopes addressed to Charlotte, with no street address, for they'd been hand delivered via the oak tree between their houses where they grew up. She

opened the first one, allowed herself a glimpse of his elegant script, a reading of the first lines:

February, 1996.

Dearest Charlotte,

Tonight I lay reading the Foxe's Book of Martyrs and find myself thinking of you; I always picture you in a white dress, you know, atop some mountain, fighting a holy fight; in many ways, that's what you've been doing these past months: you, with your mother, your father. Tomorrow, will you meet me in the fort in the woods? I need to see you. There are some things I would like to talk to you about, that would be better spoken of in person...

She would allow herself no more. Maybe at a later day, but the pressure had moved from her chest to her throat and she stuffed the letters into her pack and walked to the hallway, calling out, yet again, "Hello?" this time loud enough to be heard.

"Hello?" A raspy man's voice, from four or five rooms down. Charlotte knocked twice then opened it.

"Who is it?" the voice said, lifting a limp tattooed arm off his forehead, his dreads on his pillow like horse hair.

"Charlotte."

"Who the fuck is Charlotte?"

“Is Tory still living here?”

“What the fuck are you sneaking around this house for?”

“Do you know where I could find her? Tory, Tory Marquez.”

“I don’t fucking know. Did you try checking *her* room?”

Charlotte left. She tried three rooms, knocking once then opening the doors a crack, not finding anyone until the fourth room where she saw, on the bed, Tory’s hair, those long black curls reaching to the middle of her bare waist. Beside her, a guy’s back. Charlotte leaned against the open door frame and folded her arms over her chest. “Tory,” Charlotte whispered then walked towards the bed, careful not to trip over the thongs, thin t-shirts, mismatched socks and trash. Charlotte placed her hand flat on the tail of the dragon curling over Tory’s shoulder blade, shook her gently. “Tory,” Charlotte whispered again, leaning towards her ear. The old smells: the lavender shampoo, sweat, but also something new: patchouli? Tory turned her head towards Charlotte, cracked one gothic makeup caked eye, shut it, then opened it wide, sitting up on her elbows, her hair falling forward over her chest. Her eyes blinked slowly: she was on something.

“Charlotte?” the word was muffled, her look that of one coming out of a dream, unsure which reality is truer.

“Yeah.” Charlotte tilted her head to one side and had an urge to kiss that sleep creased cheek. “It’s me.”

Tory pulled herself up, her large breasts buoying, the green eye of the dragon just above her nipple glaring. Tory wrapped her arms around Charlotte’s neck and immediately, at the feel of that course hair on Charlotte’s cheek, tears rose.

“God. I can’t believe it’s you.” Tory’s voice, muffled in Charlotte’s hoodie. “I thought you had a few years left still.”

“If you would’ve visited or called I would’ve told you when I was getting out.”

“Oh, shut up,” Tory said, giving Charlotte’s neck a hard kiss. Charlotte could feel Tory’s tears wet near her hairline and Charlotte pulled back and looked her in the face. They stared at each other then started laughing, covering their mouths, huddling together.

The guy beside them rolled over and Charlotte unlatched her arm and nodded towards him. His forehead was creased, disturbed. “Let’s get out of here before he wakes up,” Tory whispered. Tory tried to rise from the bed, her long torso straightening, revealing bony hips and a set of ribs that never used to be visible. The insides of her arms were now visible too: red dots and purpling scars that made Charlotte's breath crumble. When Tory peeled off the blanket, the man opened his eyes.

“What’s going on?” he asked, sitting up on his elbows.

Tory rolled her eyes at Charlotte. “Nothing. I’m heading out.”

He was bones and loose skin, his eyes dark as the circles beneath them. A junkie for sure. “Where? Who’s this?” he asked, staring at some point near Charlotte's mouth.

“A friend.”

“I’ve not seen her.”

“She’s my sister... Of sorts,” Tory said and reached for a fuzz-balled knit sweater and pulled it over her head.

His eyes had moved from Charlotte's mouth to her forehead. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“This is Marco. Boyfriend of nearly two years. This is Charlotte. Happy?”

Tory pulled on a pair of leggings then tried to slip into a pair of boots, but stumbled sideways and gripped the edge of the desk, shutting her eyes long enough that Charlotte reached to steady her.

“You got any money on you we could borrow?” Marco asked.

Charlotte turned to Tory, unsure who he was addressing, then flushed when she understood.

“She just got out of prison, dumbass. Does she look like she’s got any money on her?”

Charlotte turned towards the window.

“Where you planning on going then?” he asked.

Tory sat down on the metal chair like the question had stooped her. “I don’t know.”

“Actually, I need to get going.” Charlotte smelled it now, wondered that she hadn’t before: the vinegar smell, sterile and burnt, and in a second she’d located the syringe and spoon on the desk. Charlotte walked to the door and Tory followed her, grabbed her arm. “What? Why? We don’t have to hang around him. He’s being an asshole.”

“You’re a junkie, Tory,” Charlotte said, her voice unpredictably enraged.

Tory dropped her arm. “I’m not. I just use every once and awhile. It’s Marco, mainly.”

Charlotte walked down the stairs. "Charlotte wait!" Tory said, stumbling after her. She stopped Charlotte in the entryway and gripped both of her arms then pushed her into the wall, the rancid, familiar smell of Tory's morning breath (something almost wonderful) coming in quick gasps. "Please, don't go." She kissed Charlotte's forehead, then her nose. "I've missed you."

"I can't stay here."

"Alright, sure, you don't need to move back in, but you can at least stay for a few hours."

Charlotte pulled away. "I can't. I've got to get Kara back."

"Kara? What does she have to do with it?"

Charlotte laughed, looked Tory dead in the eye. "Everything." She felt a slow-- and what she could only think of as vile--smile cross her face and she walked out the door, not bothering to shut it.

"Really?" Tory called after her, "Really? You want to be like that, huh? You know I had nothing to do with it. You know Joey hid it in your room. Joey's the one who screwed you, not me--"

Charlotte turned left down the sidewalk and heard Tory call after her: *it doesn't need to be like this, you know.*

CHAPTER II

She spent the next three days wandering the streets of San Antonio, filling out applications at restaurants, eating fast food. She was down to twenty-eight dollars. Each night she climbed the fire escape to the apartment building where she stashed her backpack and blanket behind the air-conditioning unit. She'd been lucky so far: no rain. She would watch the gray night absorb the city lights until she could no longer push away the reality that soon if she couldn't get a job, she'd have to return to living at Tory's house and begin begging up and down the river again. The problem was that she'd tried asking for money a few times these past days and it was exactly like she'd assumed: the only reason she'd survived before was because of the fleece-wrapped newborn on her arm, because of the stories that had come so easily: *we're from out of town and I've lost my wallet* or *please, I locked my keys in the car, could I borrow money enough for a cab?* She'd been one of *them* then: a good, educated girl who'd come on a hard time; but the years in prison seemed to have imprinted some warning smell that others could sense from paces away (and they'd cross the street, feign busyness on the phone).

For now, each morning she would walk to Walgreens where she'd brush her teeth, wash her body in the sink and change into the same black dress. She'd washed the black dress in the bathroom sink then dried it underneath the hand dryer, ignoring the women who passed through, staring at her standing in her underwear.

She'd buy a 99 cent coffee from the gas station then descend yet another level, away from the streets down the shadowed steps to her favorite part of the river where she'd sit beneath the arched bridges with especially lush fauna. Women in dresses with structured purses would walk by. She would nod to them, imagine herself in a corporate job, walking along marble floors in one of the buildings above her. She'd now applied to over twenty restaurants and had had no luck. A few more days of this and she'd be out of cash.

She needed something to make her feel alive again.

She decided, on the fourth night, to take her dress to the dry cleaners and buy herself a new lipstick. She walked among the crowds of tourists towards the nicer restaurants (many of which, by now, had flatly refused her a job.) The women she passed stood on the sidewalks beside patio tables, their lips the color of the wine in their hands, their earrings sparking like their teeth. They clutched at their bare arms, braced against the cooling breeze, the coming of night. The men hung close beside in their suit jackets and loafers; or the others, in their filigree belt buckles and cowboy boots. On one of the narrower streets, when a man hurried by, Charlotte was bumped into one of these groups and lingered there on the fringe catching words like: *impossible, hilarious...* and though understanding nothing of the conversation, she laughed along, made eye contact with one or two of them. If she followed them in, would they notice she wasn't part of their group?

Back down the street she stepped into a jazz bar, the one she'd always make her parents stop in front of when they were giving a tour to one of the out of town missionaries they sometimes hosted. On the deck was a piano and through the windows

brass instruments, golden beneath the candlelight, waited to be played. It was at least ten degrees warmer inside and nearly silent, the few couples hushed as if sharing secrets around their tables. Charlotte slid onto one of the stools and folded her arms across the mahogany bar.

Behind the counter a woman mixed jewel toned liquids, her slick black ponytail whipping about. Charlotte picked up a menu from the counter and glanced at the specials. A martini (what else in a place like this?) was only six dollars.

"What'll you be having?" the bartender asked Charlotte.

"A martini, please."

Charlotte stared out the window--which made up the entire front wall--at the last bit of sun. A man in a fitted James Bond looking suit stopped in front of the window and pushed his hands into his pockets. Charlotte leaned forward, trying to make out his face and as he stared through the window, their eyes met. She smiled and nodded and he turned and walked past.

"Here you have it," the bartender said, setting the drink in front of her.

The bones of the woman's face were structured, the skin smooth.

"How's your night going?" Charlotte asked.

"It's fine. It's been dead."

"Is there a band playing later?"

"Yeah. At eight."

Charlotte took a sip. Then another. "This is delicious." She tilted her head back, downed the rest, then held the delicate stem in her hand like a glass ornament.

"Another?"

Well, after all, what was the point of one drink?

The woman poured another into the silver canister and smiled at Charlotte- a bit mischievously. Behind the row of liquor bottles, Charlotte stared at herself in the mirror. Not half-bad, really: a little pale, her hair a little ratty, but if she adjusted her posture (which she now did) the sinews on her neck and arms looked less like malnutrition and more like a kind of elegance. Outside, the wind shook the trees and caught the hair of a lady passing by.

The woman set the drink before her.

"How long have you been working here?" Charlotte asked.

"About three years."

"Do you know if they're hiring?"

"No. It's just me and one other girl and she's been here twice as long as I have."

Charlotte nodded and took a small sip. "I'm looking for a waitressing job."

"I know Lone Star is looking to hire."

"Yeah. I applied there." She'd go back tomorrow though and check yet again. "It's gorgeous out tonight, isn't it? Feels like fall."

"Feels bloody hot to me."

"Yeah. Well, you know, a Texas fall. "

A couple walked through the door and the bartender took their orders then poured two glasses of white wine. When she returned Charlotte leaned over the bar and outstretched her hand. "My name's Charlotte."

The woman did not take her hand but nodded and said, "Name's Jen."

"I'm new to town. Just moved here. Didn't mean to frighten you." Charlotte laughed, in what she hoped was a natural sounding way.

"You're good. Where'd you move here from?"

"Boston." If only. If only she was sitting there now, drinking with Micah.

"Oh. Cool. I've been to Boston."

"What part?"

The woman handed Charlotte another glass, a little fuller than it had been last time (even though her current glass wasn't entirely empty yet). Charlotte thought of sending the drink back (her tab would be nearly \$20.00 by now) but she was beginning to feel the buzz, was nearly at her sweet spot, and, anyways, the first member of the band--a stooped man with a long gray beard who reminded her of the father--was now taking the stage. She shut her eyes, took a slow sip, felt the room tilt under her. Just call Micah. Call him now, at the payphone down the street, tell him you'll buy a bus ticket, tell him you're *coming*. Charlotte lay her head on the counter. She wanted a bed of her own: silk sheets, a down comforter. When she lifted her head, the bartender was looking down at her.

"You alright?"

"Just tired."

"You want another?"

"No."

The second and third band members walked in, looking much like the first, wearing pinstripe suits and bowties, carrying briefcases or black instrument cases.

Charlotte turned to them, placed her glass in her lap. A tune up, a low saxophone note, a drawn out note on the bass, a drum roll. On the first verse her eyes fell shut. God she'd missed this: music. She'd not realized how desperate life had been without her ipod, nevermind *this*, the raw power of a live band, echoing off a metal ceiling and wooden floors. Now she was in another era, puffing on a six-inch long cigarette, balancing it in one hand and the martini stem in the other; she wore an emerald floor length dress, drop diamonds in her ears; her hair was long and loose, pieces falling out of the top-knot on her head. She wished she had enough money to order a dark wine that would stain her lips and teeth, help to warm her, help rock her away to the saxophone's mounting chorus. When she opened her eyes again, there was someone in the chair beside her. Thick black hair, a square face, dark scruff speckled gray. A slow smile. That suit: he was the man she'd seen outside the window. Charlotte shifted towards him and spilled some of her drink on her lap. He reached for a napkin and patted at her knee.

"Didn't mean to frighten you there."

"You didn't. I'm a clutz." She bent towards him, laughed, wondering even as she did so what she was doing.

"No, that was all me. Let me order you a new one."

He rapped his knuckles on the counter and Jen turned around.

"Sam." Jen smiled at him. "What can I get for you?"

"Another martini for the lady. Unless... you want to switch to whiskey with me?"

Charlotte nodded consent.

"Two whiskeys on the rocks. Make them doubles." Jen looked at Charlotte, smiled generously.

"Sam." He turned to Charlotte and offered his hand. The hand was calloused and dotted with sun-spots. He might be closer to 50 than 40, but with his build it was hard to tell.

"Charlotte," she said.

The bartender set down their drinks.

"This one here is from Boston," Jen said, tilting her head at Charlotte. "Just moved here."

"This one?" Charlotte asked, mimicking Sam's slant smile.

He laughed. "Yeah. Jesus, Jen. You're giving her the wrong impression."

Jen cocked her eyebrow, walked away.

"She's fun, isn't she?" Sam asked.

Charlotte nodded her agreement. The drink went down easy. The music, laughing people, the lights, they were beginning to blend.

"So. You're from Boston? Whereabouts?"

Charlotte looked up, mystified, then recovered herself. "Downtown."

"Where? I travel there for business sometimes."

"Oh? What business?"

"I'm a lawyer."

"Of course you are."

He shifted so that he was facing her, his legs apart, her knees between his.

"You liking San Antonio so far?"

"Yes. What I've seen of it."

He looked down at her shoes, and for a second, she saw the doubt in his face: his suspicions at their outdated shape, their grubby condition, of her, and she tucked them beneath the chair.

"I plan to see more. Any suggestions while I'm here?" She wore her practiced smile now and leaned towards him. When he sighed she could smell spearmint and whiskey. His teeth were perfect--almost too perfect--white, straight, and she envied him this, was reminded of how she'd let hers go these past years.

"How long are you in town for?" he asked.

"A couple of days or so. I haven't decided yet."

"Work or holiday?"

"I wanted to see the Alamo."

He laughed. "And? What did you think?"

"Well, it's... the Alamo."

"Exactly. There are better things to see." She hadn't noticed until now that cowboy accent, something straight out of a movie.

"Such as?" Charlotte leaned forward to rest her elbow on the counter but missed, sloshing more of her drink onto her lap. "I think I'm a bit tipsy."

"How many is that?"

"Well, my fourth. Actually."

He waved his hand at her. "Not even close. Especially considering half of it is on your lap." They laughed at their joke and she decided she'd let him take her home.

Charlotte turned to the musicians and he turned also. They watched the hands moving over instruments, the veins on the vocalist's neck, the beads of sweat forming on the receding hairlines. The band was good. Really good. She swayed, sipped, sucked a piece of ice into her mouth and rolled it over her tongue, ever aware of his glances. When the band took a break he turned to her and swallowed the last of his drink.

"So," Charlotte said.

"So," he replied, and pulled his jacket on, standing. "Jen? Check please." Jen nodded.

"Me too," Charlotte said.

He gestured at Jen, shook his head no. What relief.

"You don't have to..." Charlotte said.

He signed the bill. "See you, Jen." He smiled at Charlotte, jerked his head towards the door then walked out.

Charlotte had to run a few steps to catch up with him. Outside, she grabbed his sleeve. "Hey, thanks for the drinks."

"You're coming, aren't you?"

He seemed too sure, the words too audacious.

"Coming where?"

"Back to my place."

"I don't think so."

"Alright then. Your place."

"No." Charlotte turned and he followed her down the street. She looked up,
"Alright. Your place. But that doesn't mean we're... you know..."

He bent down and kissed her forehead, the way a father would a child, and she leaned into his chest, the luxurious fabric of his suit, shut her eyes and felt her dizziness. God she hoped he had satin burgundy sheets.

"Nothing unless you want to." He tilted her chin up and kissed her open lips.

He hailed a cab and she leaned on his arm in the back seat. The cab made her nauseated and for a few horrified minutes, she thought she would puke. They stopped at a condo that had a doorman and marble floors in the entryway and he ushered her onto an elevator to the ninth floor. The floor was a plush white berber and she removed her shoes immediately and dug her toes into the texture. He walked into the kitchen, flipped on one of the suspended lights, then the spotlights, fiddling with the dimmer until a caramel color was cast on the leather couches. The furniture looked Swedish. There was a vintage record player in one corner, a high glass table with a bouquet of flowers on another, large mirrors and expensive artwork on the walls. The bachelor pad of the cultured. She walked to the ten foot window that overlooked the orange rotating light of the Tower Americas, blinking above the city. He stepped behind her, handed over her shoulder a glass of whiskey and she took it without turning her head. The cut facets of the glass shimmered in her hand. She turned to look up at him and the sudden movement made her tip backwards, lose her footing. He was quick to balance her, his hand strong and sure on her lower back. She hadn't eaten since the egg McMuffin at breakfast, and the last thing she

should do is have another glass. He'd removed his suit jacket and his button up silver/blue shirt and now stood in a white v-neck that stretched tight across his chest and arms. When he grabbed and kissed her, there was something in the grip that made her jerk away.

"Wait. Stop," Charlotte said.

"What?" He stepped back: almost a look of hurt.

"Do you have a restroom?"

"Right over there." He pointed into the bedroom.

In the immaculate bathroom she locked the door. "Okay if I use some mouthwash?" Charlotte called, opening the medicine cabinet and looking through the array of razors, deodorants, medicine bottles. She picked up the orange bottles and read the labels: Lexapro, acetaminophen, Percocet. Percocet. She opened the bottle. Over fifty pills. God. Gold. She took two in her hand, turned on the faucet and tilted her head back beneath the spigot. She swallowed then mouth washed and rinsed her armpits and between her legs.

"Sorry," Charlotte said, stepping out a minute later. "You know how it is when you travel. I wanted to freshen up."

He sat on the edge of the bed, staring into his glass of whiskey. He hadn't turned on the light in the bedroom, and except for the dim light coming through the doorway, it was dark. Charlotte sat on the bed beside him and pulled the chain of the table lamp that had a painted swan on the shade: this had definitely once been a woman's home. She took the cup of whiskey from his hand and sipped.

"Will you take off your dress," he said, looking at his hands while he said it.

"What?"

"Will you take off your dress?"

Charlotte looked at him, wondered if it would be alright; there was something in the way he folded hands, in his look, that said it would. She stood in front of him and pulled the dress over her head. The bra and underwear were both black, but neither of them fit quite right. He waited until the dress was at his feet to look up. Then he stared at her, stared her over, and something in the intentionality reminded her of Micah. There was no look of judgement. She stood as long as she could then pulled the blanket back and covered herself.

"You have children," he said, his voice gruff.

"What?" Charlotte whispered. "What?" Louder, this time, almost infuriated.

"How many?"

"One." She picked up the glass from the bedside table.

"I do also. Girl or boy?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk about it." She turned onto her side, her back to him and stared into the dark part of the room.

"It's your stretch marks. That's how I knew." As if that wasn't obvious. He lay down behind her, one arm under his head, his elbow touching her hair. "You're beautiful, Charlotte." She thought how this would've been much easier if she'd used the name Amy. He leaned over and she thought he was getting out of bed, so she rolled to look at him. He picked up a picture from the bedside table drawer and handed it to her. A woman and two boys.

"What *is* this?" Charlotte asked.

"Thought you might want to see a picture of my kids."

"For God's sakes." Charlotte draped her hand over her forehead.

"Alright." He put it back in the drawer. Then he chuckled, the easiness and charm from the bar back in his voice. "Not a turn on. I get it... Thought you might like to talk about your kid. Some women like that."

"Are you being for real?"

"Alright, alright, I get it. Just trying to be friendly, is all. Not trying to be weird."

"I don't want to talk about my kid."

"Alright, I said I get it. It was a bad move." He rolled onto his side and pulled her body against his. She felt lithe and limp and when she breathed her breasts were soft against his chest. Everything was smoothing out under the Percocet, her heart rate, breathing, muscles, confusion. "Hey. Let's forget that. Let's forget everything," he whispered. He slipped his other arm beneath her head and she rested on his muscle like on a pillow. She closed her eyes, rolled her hips closer and felt his hardness against her thigh. He left her so satisfied that she fell asleep on his chest, his arm wrapped round her body; and when she woke an hour or two later high as hell on the Percocets, she woke as if from a dream, thinking it Micah's chest, squeezing her eyes shut so as not to see the man's face. But now she was swimming too deep in too much drink and she pulled herself away and went into his drawers and pulled out a pair of boxers and a white t-shirt and put them on. She touched his shoulder but he was deep in the sleep of good sex and

whiskey. She pulled the letters from her purse which she kept with her in case the backpack was stolen, and carried them to the couch.

She sat on the cold leather and it stuck to her bare skin. The lights had gone out-- they must have been on some sort of timer- and it was only the orange streetlights through the window now. She opened one of the letters he'd sent her in prison (not yet willing to open the ones she'd rescued from the floorboards today) and reread the letter, the texture worn see-through where her thumbs had long touched.

Dearest Charlotte,

*I am writing to you because I miss you. No other reason. Your dad has told me that you've had a baby, are in prison, are no longer talking to him; I cannot imagine what you must've been through this past year. Nor can I imagine how hard it must have been, and how it must have changed you (such influences do not leave one untouched). And yet, I cannot help but think of you as my Charlotte: that same girl who danced through fields and raced me through the sunlit forest (always winning, of course). I think of you curled by a fire, reading *Wuthering Heights* or *Call of the Wild*. No matter what I do here, or who I meet, these images haunt me. I want you to know that I will always see you this way: to me, you can never be anything but, well... there are things I wish I could tell you. But they will have to wait until we meet again. When you are*

ready, I hope you will write to me. I know that when you get your daughter back (Kara is it? how gorgeous a name: wasn't it the name of the gypsy girl in our wood games?) you will be the best of mothers. She is lucky to have you. I miss you.

Yours truly, ever,

Micah

She tucked the purse beneath her damp back and stared at the steel swinging blades of the ceiling fan, circling round and round, cutting through the stale air-conditioned air like some sea-creature. She promised herself that come morning she would talk to a lawyer (maybe even to this guy, snoring in the room beside her, who knew?). Something must be done.

CHAPTER III

The next morning Charlotte walked the hour and a half to the office of Anna Thompson, the lawyer who'd managed her case. Anna was a public attorney, and her office was dingy. The secretary was not at all pleased to be disturbed and Charlotte had to repeat her name three times and state that she wouldn't leave until she would be seen before she'd take a message. It was more than an hour before Anna came out to greet her, her pinskirt wrinkled, her white blouse coffee-stained. Anna seemed to recognize Charlotte--in a vague way--and Charlotte marched towards her and shook her hand, reminding Anna of the heroin case with the newborn she'd handled two years ago.

"Yes, of course, Charlotte, come in." Anna ushered her to an office no bigger than a bathroom, paperwork piled into towers along the floor and desk. "What can I do for you? I see you've been released." She offered Charlotte a smile.

"Yes, thanks to you." They both knew this wasn't exactly true: a better lawyer might've gotten her less time. "I'll get straight to the point. I want to get my daughter, Kara, back."

Anna leaned back in her chair. "Your daughter."

"Yes, my daughter. I believe she's been living with her foster mother."

"Believe?"

"I'm not sure. No one has given me information. Actually, that's why I'm here. To see what information you have. To see who I should talk to next."

"Have you talked to your social worker yet?"

"No. I don't know if I have one."

"Of course you have one. Hold on," she stood up, pushing on her knees like a person weary with age, though she couldn't be more than thirty. She looked through a few stacks of files, then walked into the hall. When she returned she opened a manilla file and began turning through the pages. Charlotte read all she could from upside down. "Here you go," she said, tapping on the file. "Stacy MCintosh, that's who you need to see."

Charlotte nodded. She saw Kara's name on the file, made out an address 996 Huntington Drive and set it immediately to memory.

"What do I have to do to get her back. Hire a lawyer?"

"Well, it depends. Did you keep in contact with her while you were in prison?"

"Contact? She was a newborn. I signed away those rights the week I was admitted."

"You signed away your rights? Your parental rights?"

"Yes, I believe so. Temporarily. They said the woman who wanted to keep her required it."

Anna blinked at Charlotte like she was an idiot. "You shouldn't have done that."

"What choice did I have?"

Anna leaned forward in her chair. "I'm afraid if you signed away your rights-- even temporarily--there isn't a lot to be done. A judge isn't going to take a kid out of a

stable loving home--especially when the child is so young and that's all they've ever known--and move her into an unstable environment."

"I know that. But I'm gonna have a job and a house soon. I was just released this week, but I'm working on becoming stable. I'm gonna give her a really good home."

"Well, honestly, I don't think it'll make much of a difference. It will be next to impossible to convince a judge to put her in your custody."

Charlotte stood up, leaned over the desk. "But I'm her mother."

"Yes, but I'm afraid you gave up those rights."

"But it was just a mistake... I was a mess then. There has to be something I can do. I need to get her back."

Anna stood up and began shuffling papers then looked at her wrist watch. "Listen, Charlotte, I would like to help you, but I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

"But I need her," Charlotte said, staring down at her hands. "She's my daughter."

Charlotte drifted out of the office and along street after street at sea, feeling capable of almost anything. She stepped into the public bathroom, all concrete, no windows, metal stalls and sat on the toilet seat and covered her ears with her hands. She rubbed at the warm vein on the inside of her arm and reached into the pocket of her jeans for the Percocets she'd pocketed at Sam's house this morning. She swallowed two and coughed. What a fucking idiot to think she could get Kara back, to think she could just go back to before. She kicked the door of the stall and the clash absorbed into the concrete

room. Fuck Joey. Fuck it all. All she wanted was to see her, to hold her she was her mother, by god. 996 Huntington Drive. 996 Huntington Drive. She knew Huntington, a street not far from *La Mansion*, actually. She folded her head in her lap and rocked herself in the wretched stall until the pills kicked in.

Then she walked in the old direction, the familiar route.

It wasn't hard to find the house, not a twenty minute walk from *La Mansion*. She'd always imagined Kara had been taken in by a couple in a high ceilinged, plush carpeted house where she'd have a room of her own, a pink chiffon canopy, all the toys and affection the rich and barren could offer. There'd been a foster mother, Mrs. Sheehan, from Charlotte's church when she was younger who had adopted two boys from Sudan; the woman was always smiling, doting, bestowing hugs and brownies, and when Charlotte thought of Kara, she imagined her to be in a place like that. Of course, part of her understood this might be a fantasy. But never, not for a second, had she pictured *this*.

Charlotte hunched behind a white Camaro and stared at 996 across the street. It was nothing more than a trailer on bricks, the panels painted pink, one of the many Easter egg colored houses of identical size and shape. A green sign toppling sideways had announced *La Villas: The Houses* at the neighborhood entrance. If you could even call it a neighborhood. On the forty-five minute walk here she'd passed nothing but McDonalds, liquor stores, pawn shops, and discount tire companies. A few feet from her now, on the pot holed pavement, was a dead cat, his head fractured open, surrounded by flies, cigarette butts and broken beer bottles. From where she stood, Charlotte could make out,

through the bent yellowing blinds, the blue haze of a television screen. In the front yard a deflated pink bouncy ball and a headless doll sunk into the dirt as if taking cover.

Charlotte crossed the street and stood a house away beside a green mini van. From her new vantage point, she could see a plastic pool with brown water and a Little Tikes slide, the red faded pink by the sun. She ran to the side of the house and peered through the window that looked into a tiny kitchen. There was a double-burner stove and a sink and counter, not more than three feet long, piled with dishes. Past the kitchen she could see a couch.

There. The top of a brown head of hair.

Spongebob Squarepants played on the television. The brown head moved, bounced, and Charlotte saw that the hair was curly. A Hispanic woman, who must've been three hundred pounds (god), walked out of the bedroom in sweatpants and a Race for Cancer t-shirt that showed her stretched out nipples through the thin cloth. Charlotte ducked away from the window. Shut her eyes. Steadied her breathing. When she turned back the woman had the girl on her hip, and the small bare legs dangled. The girl wrapped her arm around the woman's neck. If the girl would only turn her face in this direction. They walked into the side room and Charlotte watched through the window for nearly an hour, but they did not return. Even though she hadn't seen her face, Charlotte knew. It was Kara. She would recognize her own daughter, flesh of thy flesh, spirit of thy spirit, anywhere.

Charlotte staggered away from the house in more of a dream than reality. She swallowed the last Percocet in her pocket and thought of walking to a bar. Or to Tory's.

But the sight of Kara had stirred in her something like hope: for such deep longings-- which seemed bigger than, even outside of herself--made it seem that the impossible, if wanted desperately enough, must, in time, come to fruition. With such desperation, such need, how could they not? If she could only keep wanting and not shut it out or let it fade; if she could but seek some higher help, then perhaps... she concentrated on her desire, her pain, all the way to the little church of *La Vallita* where she knew she might find a measure of holiness, or the feeling of it, anyways.

The church was made of white stones the same as the Alamo and it smelled of rain caught in the porous mortar. There were two bare trees on either side of the steps. The plaque beside it read: "In 1879, the Methodist's erected this Gothic revival church." When she opened the iron handle she felt before she saw the window at the end of the cozy room, catching and refracting the light. The floors were carpeted red and the pews were rubbed amber by age, and they invited her to come in, sit awhile, take a load off. Lights hung from the ceiling and candles were lit across the altar. Charlotte knelt in the silence. A woman had stood up from behind a pew, startling her.

The woman laughed. "I didn't hear you enter."

"And I didn't know anyone was here."

The woman stepped forward and Charlotte saw that it was Janey, a girl she'd gone to church with who had been homeschooled in highschool, like Charlotte, but had been several grades above her.

"Charlotte?"

"Janey!" Charlotte said, the note of enthusiasm a pitch too high.

"My word." Janey reached for a hug and Charlotte turned her head, hoping she wouldn't smell her breath or her unwashed body. "How are you? It's been years since anyone's seen you! How is your daughter?" The way she said it: sincerely, simply. She was one of the few people from her old life (as she was now coming to think of it) who had met Kara. Charlotte sat down beside Janey. Maybe Charlotte had been wrong. Maybe she could return home, to her church, to her father.

"Where have you been? How have you been? I've missed you," Janey said and put her hand on Charlotte's shoulder. There was such warmth of feeling that Charlotte wanted to cry and tell all.

"A lot," Charlotte said, "How about with you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm getting married here tomorrow! Can you believe it? To Brad Peterson. He's a missionary. It's a long story. We're moving to Nicaragua together. I'm supposed to meet the flower woman here any minute." As if on cue, the back doors opened and a woman in a pink skirt walked in with an enormous bouquet of white lilies that obscured her face.

"Georgeana, hi!" Janey said, grabbing Charlotte's hand so she wouldn't leave. "Be over in a second. Listen," Janey rubbed Charlotte's back with her palm, "We need to catch up. Why don't you come to the wedding tomorrow? Lots of our friends will be there. They'd love to see you."

"Oh, no, that's alright, you're very sweet but-"

"Please." Janey looked at her urgently. "Please come. Really. We'd love to have you. We really would love to have you. It would mean a lot if you did." Charlotte could

not imagine this was true, that the invitation was anything more than a charitable request, but there was an earnestness in her face.

"I'll think about it."

"No," Janey said, putting both of her hands on Charlotte's shoulders, "You must promise me you'll come. You must promise. 7:00 tomorrow night."

"I promise," Charlotte said, so seriously that they both laughed.

"Alright," Janey said, standing. "I'll see you then," she leaned over and kissed Charlotte's head. On her way out, as Charlotte braced herself to walk into the black night, she picked up one the fallen white lilies and rubbed it between her fingers until the waxy petals crumbled to the floor.

The next evening, Charlotte arrived ten minutes early in a purple strapless dress she'd bought at Goodwill. The dress was too tight around her waist and chest and it was outdated, probably someone's prom dress. The last row was empty and Charlotte sat on the edge of the hard wooden bench. The clouds had thinned and the sun came through the windows, brightened by the rain, long stripes on the carpeted floor. A few people stopped beside her. None of them she knew. She was a friend of the bride, she said. Yes, well... Lovely day. Beautiful. She was greeted by the elegant women who smiled at her, the men who nodded gravely.

Then Miss Munroe walked in the door and saw Charlotte. "Charlotte! Darling! How are you?"

"Oh, I'm well. Thank you. How's the family?"

“They’re wonderful! George is heading up East, got into Princeton, can you believe it? I saw your father last week...”

“Oh? Yes?”

“Where’s that daughter of yours.... We would all like to meet her.”

“Oh, well, she’s not here today. She-” Charlotte sat down. “I think they’re about to start.”

Margaret and Sarah walked through the doors in matching pink bridesmaids dresses. There was still fifteen minutes until the wedding, and when they spotted her, Charlotte waved, but they didn't wave back or stop to say hello. They walked to the front, bent towards each other, whispering, looked back at Charlotte, whispered some more. Charlotte shifted, folding her arms over her chest. She should leave.

But then the groom walked through the doors. Handsome... handsome enough even for Janey. If only Janey could be back in her life; she was just the kind of friend Charlotte needed. If she'd made close friends with someone like Janey instead of Tory, who's to say? Charlotte had half made up her mind that if the groom turned out to be some ogre, she would stand up mid-ceremony and object. But the groom stood with his hair slicked back, hands folded in front of him, fingers tapping each other nervously, staring fixedly at the door. Just the sort of expression every bride hoped to see.

Two women in the row in front of Charlotte whispered: how lovely the flowers were, and this church, gorgeous, but the bridesmaids' dresses were horrid. Charlotte couldn't agree more. A woman in a crocheted white dress was helped up the stairs to the piano and played a quiet prelude. The people (there must have been nearly two hundred)

filed into their seats, the room growing louder then quieting. She recognized a few of them now: Miss Burton, Miss Thomas, Doctor Richard and his son. Charlotte scooted to the edge of the row, making room for a man with a grey patch of hair beside her.

Pachelbel's Canon. The bridesmaids had left and now they walked back through the double doors first. Then the flower girl walked down the aisle. Brown Curls. Like her daughter's: curls really were the best. If only she had Kara with her. Eventually, the congregation would've gotten over the fact that she had Kara out of wedlock; eventually, she could've been raised Kara among them. The crowd stood, their heels clacking, skirts rustling. Both doors of the small chapel opened. And the light filtered through the filmy clouds. Janey's dress, simple, chiffon, layer upon layer, something a Grecian goddess might run through a field in. If Charlotte ever had the occasion, her dress would be just so. No taffeta, no flounces, just chiffon, rippling around her like water her hair braided down her back, woven with small white flowers. Drop earrings, rhinestones, not pearls, that shimmered like little stars. How little makeup the bride wore. And how little did she need. Her smile, white, her cheeks flushed, glowing, unashamed; her father proudly walking beside her, patting her hand, staring into her face. And the man at the front what tremulous and tender... what joy, to have someone look at you like that, without hesitation, ready to spend eternities with you. Why, a look like that... What she wouldn't give to have Micah.... Who gives this woman to be. The father's voice, deep, sure: I do. A soft kiss on her cheek. The lovers' clasped hands, the preacher, smiling. Silence in the room. The crowd sat. Any objections? None. Who could object to such a picture. Heads bowed. Hands clasped in prayer. A baby in the middle of the audience let out a scream.

The woman stood and fumbled down the aisle. Charlotte covered her mouth, stood also. The preacher tried to continue, but the baby was crying too loudly. The woman pushed out the door, into the blinding light, and Charlotte followed her out the door, her bare shoulders and her pimpled back to the crowd. She ran red-faced and barefoot down the street- straight to Tory's house.

CHAPTER IV

Charlotte slipped through the back kitchen door past a cluster of tattooed men and women bent over a phallus-shaped bong. She grabbed the bottle of open whiskey on the counter and looked at the label. They'd never had more than Pabst back in her day- must be some sort of celebration. She picked up a red cup and poured it a $\frac{1}{3}$ full then took several gulps. *Hey* some guy from the corner said, *what are you doing?* Charlotte ignored him, walked out of the kitchen and into the bathroom. The porcelain sink, shaped like a conch shell, was covered in all layers of grime. The room reeked of piss and puke and god knows what else. She squatted over the toilet, peed, took another few gulps of her drink. In the living room they'd moved the couch and there were two speakers blasting some rap music (she was so out of touch with this sort of thing). Charlotte leaned against the wall at the far end of the room and watched a throng of girls partnered with men or each other, dancing beneath the chandelier and gold-gilded ceiling. There was Tory. In the center, inches taller than the other girls, an arm wrapped backwards around that guy's (was it Martin or Marco?) neck. Despite the trashy polyester dress and snake-skin stilettos, Tory was still all grace. It wasn't just her black hair among the platinum blondes, her pale skin among the orangey tanned, her gauges among the gaudy fake diamond studs, it was that she danced like she felt the music and was ignorant of all others. Charlotte slid down the floral wallpaper, arms folded over her chest, and took

last sip from her cup then dropped it, watching it bounce twice on the ground. Tory was dancing alone now, gyrating her hips, stuffing her fingers deep into her wild hair; she'd painted her lips black and kept pressing them together then chewing on her cheek. When she finally saw Charlotte, who was now sitting on the floor, Tory walked towards her, that confident gait that had once impressed her from across the church building, and that she'd tried to mimick.

Tory slipped her arm around Charlotte's waist. "I knew you'd be back."

"Sorry about the other day."

"Come on." Tory pulled Charlotte by the wrist and once upstairs locked the door of her room. "What are you wearing?"

Charlotte looked down at the hoodie. "I got it at Goodwill. Fifty cents."

"Looks like it. Here," Tory walked into the closet and pulled out a blue jersey dress that was sleeveless on one side and long-sleeved on the other. "Put this on."

Charlotte changed in the closet, leaving her bra and underwear off so the lines wouldn't show beneath the skin-tight material. "I don't know," Charlotte said, stepping out, shifting uncomfortably.

"You look hot. Leave it on."

"Where's Joey?"

"Out of town. In Austin or something."

"I can't run into him. I swear, I don't know what I'll do."

Charlotte sat on the edge of the mattress, her skirt rising dangerously high. Tory sat on the chair and packed a fresh bowl. She let Charlotte take the first hit.

“You need to do something with your hair,” Tory said.

Charlotte touched the base of her neck where her hair (before she’d shaved it in prison) had reached her waist. It was now a few inches long, tight curls, all frizz. Tory gelled her hair to one side and tucked it behind her ears then painted Cleopatra strokes across Charlotte’s eyelids.

“I look like the maffia,” Charlotte laughed.

“It’ll work for now.”

They each took another hit then lay on the bed.

“Put on that Tool album, will you?” Charlotte asked.

Tory rummaged until she found a black CD binder and skipped to the fourth track.

Charlotte shut her eyes and listened to the high pitched wail of the guitar solo and was carried back to the time when they sat in Charlotte’s driveway after youth, their seats all the way down, staring at the farmhouse or barn against the navy sky, windows cracked, breeze coming over the river, carrying Maynard Keenan’s voice back into the otherwise silent night. Both of them dreaded going home, Tory to her father and Charlotte to her mother, who would be in the living room chair, hooked to oxygen tanks, wanting to know all about tonight’s message. Charlotte reached for Tory’s hand and squeezed it.

“I miss her,” Charlotte whispered.

“Your mother?”

“Kara.”

Tory rolled to her side, put her hand on Charlotte's cheek and Charlotte did the same. When Charlotte shut her eyes, the room rolled once beneath her. Tory kissed her. Charlotte kissed her back, pulling Tory's waist against her body. Tory slid her hand along Charlotte's leg then up her dress and stroked forward with her finger. Charlotte rolled onto her back, the song had ended and a fiercer track had begun; Tory leaned over her, pinned Charlotte flat and clutched at her chest.

Charlotte pulled away and stood.

"I can't right now. My head's fucked." Charlotte paced across the room and Tory stood up. "I saw her today."

"Who?"

"Kara."

Tory nodded.

"Fuck." Charlotte rubbed her hands through her hair, shaking out its stiff shape, sending flakes of gel floating to the floor.

"How about we go dance, huh? Get out of this room. Unless you want to shoot up with me." Charlotte turned to her and Tory shrugged. "It'd help get your mind off things."

In the kitchen Charlotte took another two shots of whiskey then held down the puke. She took Tory's hand and led her into the living where Charlotte danced until she was dizzy and lost in the bodies and sweat.

There, in the corner, a blonde girl on either arm, (who from this distance looked to be twins) Joey sat on the table. He was staring at Charlotte and she turned to him, met his

eyes, finished out the song in exaggerated sensual moves, her eyes locked on his. Tory was touching Charlotte's shoulder, saying *I didn't know he'd be here, Charlotte*, but Charlotte was already walking towards him. The girls on either side had walked away, sensing trouble. Charlotte stopped a few inches from his face, a head taller than he.

"Charlotte," Joey said. There was surrender in the word, maybe even repentance. Charlotte waited. Waited for him to say something more. "You get out this week?"

That's all he had?

"Yes. No thanks to you."

"Oh, come off it," he said, "It's not like I set you up on purpose. Don't be a sorry sport about it. The crib just happened to be the place to stash at the time and don't look at me like that, god."

He made to stand.

Charlotte stepped back and folded her arms. "I hate you. I hate your sorry fucking face." She could tell how pathetic it sounded and trembled.

"I get you're pissed, but you'll get over it. You're free now."

"So? My life is ruined."

He reached for his waist and she slapped him in the face. He didn't flinch. The room grew quieter or maybe it was just this pressure in her ears and in her head; it wasn't good enough she needed to draw blood and she punched him again and she could tell he wasn't expecting it and she watched his face turn from shock to rage and then she turned and realized that all eyes were on them and she remembered who this was, that he was their dealer, that he commanded respect and that what she'd just done was not okay. This

was not going to be okay. Already two men blocked the doorway. Charlotte ran up the stairs, hesitated at the top, saw five or six people run after her then ran into Joey's room because that's where the deadbolt locks were.

“Charlotte,” Joey's voice. “Charlotte open up.”

Charlotte looked around then ran to the closet thinking: I need to find something, some weapon, or a phone to call the police, something to blackmail him with and that's when, standing in the closet, she remembered the loose board in her room, where she'd gotten the idea to stash her things from... that night when she'd seen Joey through a crack in the door after Kara had woken her up and she was pacing around the halls; she'd seen him hiding something in a floorboard. She was tapping on the floorboards hoping to God there'd be a gun. One of the floorboards budged and she pried it open. The banging on the door continued. She lifted it and saw the corner of a Ziploc bag. He wouldn't tolerate what had just happened: she'd be beaten. Or maybe the cops would get involved again and she'd lose her probation rights. When she lifted the bag she fell back on her heels. Jesus fuck. Had to be ten thousand dollars worth of heroin. She grabbed the bag and ran to the bathroom window, tucking it beneath her arm like her life raft. She was thinking: I'll use this against him, I'll tell him I'll flush it down the toilet, or throw it out the window. She opened the window and knocked out the screen and saw that it wasn't too far to jump and that no one was in the dark backyard and she thought if she held onto the downspout on her way down it might help to break the fall.

“Charlotte!” It was Tory's voice through the door now. “Open up. It'll be alright. I'll make sure it's alright.”

Charlotte sat in the open windowsill and looked down. The hard part was gonna be turning around to face the other way. They were banging at the door and soon they'd break it down. She tucked the bag into the shoulder of her single sleeve then grabbed for the downspout, missed it, and fell flat on her back. The wind was knocked out of her and when she tried to sit up, she couldn't.

“Charlotte, come on!” It was Tory's voice, and Charlotte could hear the panic in it. The door was kicked down and Charlotte made herself get up and stumble through the yard and she heard Joey swearing, “You fucking bitch, fucking-” he'd seen that she'd taken it. What was she thinking, God, what had she done... no time, she made it over the fence, snagging her dress, then took off for the woods. They were at the window now, Tory screaming for her to run. She was in the woods now and so grateful for the trees. She clutched with one hand the bag, ducked into a neighborhood, climbed a fence, got as deeply entangled into suburbia as she could. She was grateful for the lack of streetlights and the many houses and for twenty minutes she didn't stop and then only to catch her breath before running again, running long after she knew she'd lost them.

She found a neighborhood outside of town, one of the new prefab developments and she climbed up the ladder of the bare-boned house to the second floor where there was a roof but no walls and she tucked herself into a ball and stared out at the clear night, using the bag of heroin as her pillow. It wasn't until the middle of the night when she woke, shivering, that she remembered she'd left her purse and that by now some blonde bystander had probably taken the cash, torn open her letters, read and tossed them away.

CHAPTER V

When she woke the next morning the left side of her face was sunburnt and her head was pounding so hard she almost couldn't open her eyes. She tucked the bag of heroin, creased from where her head had lain, into the top of her dress and crawled to the edge of the wooden platform. The cul-de-sac was empty. Probably one of those abandoned construction projects by a too eager entrepreneur. She climbed down the ladder and hesitated when her raw feet touched the scalding tar pavement. In the woods she found a memorable tree and dug up clumps of earth, using first a stick, then a rock, then her hands, the moist red clay ramming beneath her fingernails. When she decided the hole was deep enough, she buried the bag of heroin and covered it with dirt, rocks and leaves. As she walked back towards downtown, she tugged the hem of her blue dress, wishing she'd left her underwear on. She asked several people for money, all of whom refused, and as the morning wore on she worried that one of Joey's guys would see her.

Past the jail was a homeless shelter and she walked through the cracked glass door, clutching her one bare arm. The linoleum floor was scuffed, the single light a dim energy-saving bulb. The entrance smelled of bodies, weeks unwashed. Charlotte covered her mouth so as not to gag: the smell of prison, perhaps worse. On the sitting chair in the corner, beside three other women, a man with leathery skin and a single tooth smiled at

Charlotte. He spoke to someone behind her, and Charlotte turned to look. No one was there. *Henrietta, Henrietta*, he said, *you gotta watch out for that tree, the old Willow, he'll swallow you up, he'll eat your child*. Charlotte stared into his blue eyes, so light, and his pupils so small, they looked bleached, like he'd stared too long into the sun.

"Can I help you?"

Charlotte turned around and saw a tall black woman with dreads, her hands heavy by her sides.

"I need help," Charlotte said, "I need somewhere to stay."

The woman looked her over, a quick practiced glance, and Charlotte crossed her bare legs.

"Alright. I'll need you to fill out some paperwork. We're on a waitlist right now. Shelter is full for tonight. It's first come first serve, so you've got to get here real early in the morning. But I can get your information and put you in the system." She gestured towards the entryway.

There were no empty chairs, and there was no way she could sit down in this short dress, even though she felt faint, so she leaned against the corner and folded her arms. The woman beside the muttering man had white hair and clutched her cloth purse between her spread legs while resting her head against the back wall. When she caught Charlotte staring, she nodded a short resigned nod, and Charlotte nodded back. From the hallway, a Hispanic woman, with long brown hair and a tattooed kiss on her neck walked out holding the hands of a boy and a toddler girl. The woman had one black eye and the little girl, who wore a purple cotton dress, had a bruise the size of an apple around her

arm. The boy was whining something in Spanish, and the woman let go of his hand and gripped the back of his neck, "Silencio, Para. Romero, *Para. Dios Mio.*" Now the boy cried silently, slobber trickling down his jaw with each gasp.

"Where'd that woman go?" the mother said, "I can't be staying in that room, I tell you. The guy's a perv. Keeps looking at my girl here, and there ain't no sheets neither. Mi Dios. *Mi Dios.*" The little girl kept tugging at her mother's shirt, and after batting her daughter's hand away twice, the woman picked her up in one deft move and swung her onto her hip. "I can't take this no more. I'm telling you," the woman said, looking around the room. When she saw Charlotte she stared at her legs and turned up her black-lined lips in disgust. "Mi Dios," the woman said, turning to look out the window, "what is it all coming to."

Henrietta, I'm telling you... You, gotta hold on to her or he'll eat her, starting with the arms first he will. I'm telling you.

Charlotte pushed her way out the heavy door and walked back towards downtown, covering her nipples, hard with the cold with her folded arms. A woman with a gray bun walked by and Charlotte grabbed the woman's arm. "Please," Charlotte said, "Please, I need a couple of dollars." She was crying now, her voice shaking. "Please, my husband... I need to get away. I ran. I just need money to get to a bus to get to my mom and to get some shoes." They were real tears.

The woman took out her wallet and handed her a folded ten. "Here, dear." The woman touched Charlotte's cheek, and Charlotte laughed at her own relief, at the pleasure the gesture brought her.

"Thank you, thank you," Charlotte took the woman's hand in her own and squeezed it. Charlotte walked to Walgreens and bought a toothbrush and toothpaste, lipstick and a pair of stockings, and washed herself in the sink. She bought herself a banana and water, and with the last few quarters took a bus back to the condo outside of town.

Charlotte walked across the marble floor of the atrium to the uniformed man behind the desk. Alonzo, his name tag read.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Sam, is he in?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you that information, ma'am."

"Can you let me up so I can try knocking?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that either, miss."

"Alright, well, can you try giving him a call? I can't leave until I see him."

He glanced at Charlotte, then picked up the phone, dialed, waited. "There's no answer, miss. Why don't you leave your name and number and I'll let him know when you stopped by."

"No. I'll wait," Charlotte said.

"But it might be hours."

"Yes, well, I'll wait anyways. It's urgent."

He frowned, nodded and gestured towards the lobby chair, "Suit yourself then."

Charlotte sat in the easy chair and turned through magazines of elegant, tanned, diamond clad woman in eccentric silks and colors. She drifted into sleep, woke when the

magazine hit the floor, replaced it and fell asleep again. When she again stirred, her mouth was wide open, and there was a kink in the right side of her neck. It was now four o'clock and Charlotte asked the man for a restroom. He pointed to a stall down the hall. She used the toilet, then drank from the faucet. She reapplied the new lipstick to her lips and cheeks, then went back to the chair and tried reading some articles in *The New Yorker*. For the next few hours, men and woman traipsed through the door in their business suits and pinstripe skirts and Charlotte nodded to them, spinning her stockinged foot. It was after seven when Sam finally walked through the door. He walked directly to the elevator and when the lobbyist gestured for him to stop, he didn't see him. Charlotte ran after him and grabbed his elbow from behind. He turned around and looked at her top down.

"Charlotte!" he said, smiling.

He remembered her name. Charlotte stepped back and relaxed. "Hi Sam."

The lobbyist returned to his desk. He'd been ready to kick her out at any signal.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing you again," he said.

"Neither did I." Charlotte grabbed his forearm, stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "It's good to see you again." She looked down at her feet humbly, but didn't let go of his arm.

"You coming up?" he asked, tucking her hand into his arm and turning to the elevator.

On the elevator he said, "Not even a goodbye."

"Well, I was supposed to fly back to Boston that morning."

"But you didn't?"

"No. I decided I wanted to stay a little longer," she looked up from the floor and into his face, "I wanted to see you again." He looked flattered.

Inside the condo he poured two glasses from a bottle of opened white wine in the fridge. He leaned over the counter. "Will you stay awhile then?"

"I'm not sure yet." She slid her body between the black granite and his own. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Yes," he said, his breath quickening.

Charlotte hoisted herself on the counter with her palms. She spread her knees apart and pulled him by the neck towards her. "Well, I'll stay tonight at least. But we'll see. I really ought to get back." She examined her nails, as if she'd just had them painted. "To be honest, I'm out of money. I got to get back to my serving job in Boston soon."

He slipped his arm around her back.

"I sent my suitcase on," she continued. Then she looked at him and laughed, "I didn't decide until I was about to board the plane that I wanted to stay." She shook her head. "It was a crazy thing, really," she wrapped her hand around the strap of his belt. "I kept thinking about you."

He kissed her. "I want you to stay as long as you'd like. Don't think twice about the money." She nodded slow ascent and he carried her into the bedroom.

The next morning on the counter there was coffee, a Danish scone, a hundred dollar bill, and a house key tucked underneath a note:

Go buy yourself some clothes. Or anything else you might need. I let Alonzo know you'll be staying. See you tonight after work. - S

She took the bus to Target and bought herself black lace underwear, a matching bra, a plum cotton dress, a black shift from the clearance rack and a pair of nude ballet slippers. She chose mascara, orange hibiscus shower gel, cabernet nailpolish and a set of dominoes. With her remaining money she bought a Starbucks coffee, ham and cheese breakfast sandwich and a bus ride back. For an hour she soaked in a hot bubble bath, shaved her entire body with his razor and took a long nap. When she woke she made herself a can of chicken noodle soup, showered, put on her new under garments, dress and makeup, painted her fingers and toes, took two Percocets and sat on the couch drinking his Jameson over ice.

When he walked in, she crossed her legs and swirled the melting ice in her cup.

"Don't you look lovely," he said. He kissed her on the forehead and she poured him a drink, and they clinked each other's glasses.

"Cheers," Charlotte said. She raised her glass to her mouth, "to the loveliest day I've had in awhile. Thanks to you."

"Well then," he said, sliding onto the couch beside her, "We'll see if we can make it even better."

Charlotte tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

"You want to do dinner downtown?" he asked.

"You know, I'd kill for a good steak."

He laughed at her then cupped her cheek. "Then a steak it is."

"You sure?"

"Sure." He tilted her chin up and kissed her.

The next morning there was another hundred dollar bill on the counter. Charlotte folded it into her bra then sat at the mahogany desk. There was an engraved wooden desk organizer with envelopes, stamps, a letter opener and seal, and Charlotte took out a piece of heavyweight stationery and composed a letter:

Tory,

I need to see you. Meet me where we first met. February 21st. 1:00 p.m.

She looked the letter over and decided to rewrite it, this time in all caps with her hand slanting backwards, just in case Joey recognized her handwriting. She return addressed it:

Tod Sherman
1924 Hampton Way
Nashville, TN.

She mailed the letter then took the bus to REI outdoors store. She bought a pocket-sized travel notebook then walked through the aisles taking notes and talking to employees. She sat in the sleeping bag aisle and skimmed through *The Backpacker's Beginning Guide* and *Everything You Need to Know About Survival*. She took careful notes, made lists and revised them, then decided, after consulting three employees, on a mid-sized backpack that cost \$89.00. Around four o'clock she took the notebook and backpack home, pulled out the underbed storage and pushed the backpack far beneath the bed. She washed the purple dress beneath the faucet and hung it on the balcony outside to

dry then showered and put on the black shift. She used the tip of the mascara wand to paint cat-eye streaks, a more exotic look than the night before, then made two drinks and waited on the couch. When Sam walked in he nodded at her, set the briefcase down and walked straight to the bedroom.

Charlotte followed him into the doorway and crossed her arms. "You doing alright?" she asked.

He unbuttoned his dress shirt. "Long day at work."

"Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes, please."

When she came back he was in his boxers and t-shirt and she handed him the glass then sat beside him on the edge of the bed.

"Want me to run you a bath?" she asked.

"No thanks."

"A massage?"

"No. I think I'll just go watch the game in the living room." He walked out.

"Alright," Charlotte said, much to herself. Charlotte tucked her legs under her in the bed, and tried to read one of the paperback biographies from his shelf. It was about some man who'd spent twenty-five years in prison and then spent the next ten years becoming a lawyer. She kept looking through the doorway at the back of his head. She was hungry and there were no groceries and she kept hoping he'd say they should go to dinner, or at least order Chinese take-out, and once she went to him, thinking she'd suggest it, but decided against it and refilled her whiskey glass.

In the bathroom she took another two Percocets then turned off the lamp and fell into the hazy, drug-induced sleep she had so enjoyed last night. It was sometime in the dark night when Sam slid into bed beside her. She'd been deep in the woods behind her house on the wooden swing she and Micah had made, and Micah had appeared from behind their cabin and ran towards her and she'd taken off, knowing he'd follow. She was faster than he was, weightless even, the late evening light catching between the trees until she broke into the open field where the sky was navy and purple fringed and there she'd let him catch her, had fallen with him to the ground, both of them in hysterics, laughing, breathless. She'd kept her eyes closed when Sam slipped his arm around her waist, pulled up her dress, touched her in coiling motions. He entered her from behind and she focused on his breath on her neck. In the dreams, Micah never kissed her. He was always pulling away before she could press herself close enough. And now she pressed herself as close and hard as she could, reaching, struggling, afraid it would all slip away before... Now she was wide awake and Sam was asleep and she was staring at the plaster ceiling instead of the night sky.

CHAPTER VI

The next days were much the same. She'd take the morning's hundred dollar bill to REI, sit, read, plan and buy supplies. Along with her backpack, she'd now purchased a sleeping bag, cooking pan, rain pants and jacket, waterproof matches, flashlight and a wide-brimmed sunhat. At nights Sam would arrive home, set his briefcase on the floor, take off his dress shirt and sit in front of the television watching a game or episode on Showtime. Charlotte was never sure if she should join him or remain in the bedroom, but since he never invited her to his side, she'd taken to flipping through book after book on the bed, resisting urges to take a second or third Percocet, since she was now down to less than twenty, by drinking glass after glass of whisky.

When February 21st arrived, Charlotte took the bus to Boerne. Nearly four years had passed since she'd been back to her small hometown, not an hour from San Antonio. She got off at the stop beside the gas station and walked down what had once been dirt but was now a gravel road. The white church, with its pointed steeple and colored windowpanes, looked exactly as she remembered it. After trying both the front and back doors, she walked to the swings, the only object across the grass plain taller than a foot. Brown as ever, but more dirt than grass now. Charlotte sat on the black rubber and the heat seared her legs so she stood and pulled her dress further down, just as she had when she was little. She'd loved those white and blue frocks her mother had sewn and sent her

to church in as a girl. It was the stockings she'd hated, and the moment the service ended, Charlotte would walk down the center pews, past the wooden stage, remove her stockings and shoes and walk into the blast of outside heat. So delicious after sitting in that over air-conditioned building. In those days she'd ignored the adults, and after a while, her friends--and their many questions--as well. She would walk into the field until the church was the size of her carved wooden dollhouse, and there she'd lay, arms outstretched, staring into the clouds as her goosebumps sunk back into her skin. When an ant or fly would land on an exposed limb, she'd edge it towards her finger then hold it in front of her face. After an hour or so, when most of the families had left, Charlotte would walk back towards the yard and sit on the swings. Sometimes, if Micah hadn't left with his mother, he would ask to swing beside her. On certain occasions she'd tell him yes, then they'd pump their legs as hard as they could, racing their imaginary horses. Calypso. Charlotte named hers, just as she named her real horse her dad bought her several years later.

Solomon, Charlotte's father, was always the last to leave, ensuring every hymnal and gum wrapper was off the floor before locking the doors. "Dad," Charlotte had said one day, as he'd set his leather bible in the dirt and bent to push her on the swing. "Pastor Thomas said today that you can fall from grace... How can you fall from His grace but not His love?"

Solomon pushed her higher, and Charlotte turned back to see him staring out at the field.

"Dad?" Charlotte said.

"Charlotte. Stop. Not today. Ok?"

Charlotte jumped off the swing and sat in a patch of dirt.

"We need to get home. I told your mother I'd pick up lunch," he said.

"Can we get Bill Millers?"

"Sure." He picked up his Bible and grabbed Charlotte's hand. When they reached the car, he grabbed her other hand and looked her in the face. "Charlotte, she's getting sicker. They're going to have to take her to the hospital for a few weeks. I'm going to need you to start... I want you to know the truth. It's better not to hide things-

"Charlotte?"

Charlotte turned around. It was Tory. In cut off jean shorts and knee high Doc Martens. Charlotte hugged Tory's neck. They walked to the swings, their arms around each other's shoulders.

"Oh my God," Tory said "I'm so glad you're alright."

"I know. Things got crazy."

"What were you thinking, Charlotte?" Tory put her hands on Charlotte's shoulders. "You need to give it back. Immediately."

Charlotte nodded then sat on the swing. "Did you, by chance, find my hand purse?"

"Your hand purse? No... Haven't seen it."

"Well can you look for it? I've got my mom's necklace in there. I need it back."

And the letters.

"Yeah, I'll look around, but I'm pretty sure it'll be gone by now, Cat."

Charlotte kicked her toes in the dirt. "So he's pissed, huh?"

"Yeah, you could say that... He has everyone out looking for you. He's asked me like a bazillion times where you are. He even threatened me."

"He thinks I'm going to the cops on him or what?"

"No. I don't think he's worried about that. You'd have no way to prove it. He thinks you're gonna take it and run."

"That's stupid. I can't leave town. I'm on probation."

Tory dragged her boots across the ground stirring up grey dirt around her white calves. "Do you have it on you now?"

Charlotte turned to Tory, "Are you being followed?" she stood up, looked around. "Is he here with you now?"

"Charlotte, shit, no ways. You can trust me, you know that. I was just wondering."

"Well I'm not carrying it on me. And no: I'm not giving you any of it."

"Shit, Charlotte, don't be such an ass. You gotta have at least twenty thousand dollars worth... you could share a couple of bags."

"Twenty thousand dollars worth? You think there's that much?"

"Sure. The way Joey's talking, anyways."

"I figured there wasn't more than ten. But what do I know? You think I can sell it?"

"No ways. Joey knows everyone around here. He'd know in a moment who you sold it to and would come after the both of you."

"But you gotta know someone who would buy a little of it. I'm not talking the full amount, just enough to get me by for awhile."

"Well, I could buy a hundred's worth next week, maybe, if you gave me a good price-" Charlotte shook her head. "No. I'm not doing it. Don't you know anyone else? Someone desperate who would consider it?"

Tory shrugged, then leaned back so the tips of her hair dragged in the dirt.

"Anyone?" Charlotte asked again.

"Well, there's this one guy I know. He might push a little for you. He used to work with Joey, but they had a fall out. I don't really know the details. But he might have a few connections."

"Who? Could you put me in touch?"

"Slow down, Charlotte. I don't know, really I don't. I think you'd do better if you just handed it back to Joey and apologized. See if he might let you off easy."

"Apologize to that fucker? After everything? Tory, come on. That's bullshit. I know he's in love with you but-"

"He's not in love with me, Charlotte. But he's really not that bad. If you just apologized, just went to him and explained that you panicked and freaked out and are really sorry... I think he still feels bad about your kid and all anyways, so he might forgive you for it."

"Maybe you could talk to him for me. But I don't know... I got no money or job and that's mostly his fault. No one will hire me now. How am I supposed to get by?"

Tory shrugged. "You'll get something. If you try hard enough, you will eventually."

"Can you just connect me with the guy? I wanna see what comes of that first."

Charlotte stood up and pushed Tory on the swing from behind. "Please, Tory, I'm desperate here."

"His name is Manny. You might remember him from when you were living with us. Mexican, curly brown hair, kid with a big gut."

Charlotte nodded. She couldn't remember, but there was a lot from those days that was a blur.

"He lives over in Glendale apartments, you know the ones kinda near the Mansion? Apartment 902, if I remember correct. Sometimes Marco buys off of him when Joey won't cut me a deal. But really, Charlotte, I think you oughtta turn it over to Joey... Or maybe go to the police. I don't want you getting in more trouble when you finally got out."

"Yeah, because the police have been real good to me so far."

Tory leaned back and looked at Charlotte upside down. "I think you're way in over your head here."

Charlotte laughed and took the seat again. She pumped until she could see nothing but her feet against the pale sky. "Remember when we used to swing out here for hours, Tory, talking about the places we'd go explore?"

"Couldn't wait to get out of here," Tory said.

"I know. Now I'd do anything to get back."

Tory looked at Charlotte. "Not me. I'd never go back."

"Really?" Charlotte asked, still looking at the sky. "I miss it."

"You've just forgotten, Charlotte. You were more restless than I was. You'd never be able to go back."

Charlotte shrugged. "I like to think I would."

"I should head back soon. You gonna be alright?"

"Yeah. I'll be in touch."

They hugged each other, and Tory kissed her.

Charlotte grabbed the inside of Tory's elbow and held it up towards the sun. "You gotta watch out for this, promise me?"

Tory laughed. "You're the one with enough heroin to kill an elephant."

"Yeah, well... I'll be out of it soon. Rid of all this. I got a plan."

"You and your plans, Charlotte."

When Sam came home that night, Charlotte was sitting on the couch with a giftwrapped box. He set his briefcase down as always, but didn't loosen his shirt or tie.

"What's this?" he asked.

Charlotte brought him the box. "Nothing big, just a little something."

He untied the ribbon and looked in the box. "Dominoes?"

"Yeah, I thought we could play."

He sat on the edge of the coffee table and looked at her.

"I thought we could play and maybe order Chinese food," Charlotte repeated.

"Dominoes?"

"Yeah," Charlotte said, unwilling to give into his look of scrutiny. "You know how to play?"

"I guess so. It's been a while..."

"Well, I'll teach you. I'm the best of the best."

He put the box down and stood up. "I'm sorry I've been so busy and stressed out lately."

"Oh, that's alright," Charlotte said, shifting out of his grip. "I was beginning to think I should leave."

"No. You shouldn't." He brought her back against him. "I want you to stay."

"Do you really?"

"Of course." He kissed her. "Just had a tough case this week is all." He sat on the couch and put his head in his hands.

"Oh? What was it about? Did you win?"

He shook his head. She sat beside him and took his hand in her own. She waited for him to say something, and when he didn't, she opened the box of dominoes. "Alright. Take out twelve and don't let me see them," Charlotte said.

"You know what? I'll take tomorrow off. How's that? We can spend the day together. We don't need this dominoes business."

CHAPTER VII

When Charlotte woke the next morning, Sam was not in the house.

She took the bus to 446 Huntersville road and knocked on the apartment door. A woman in purple scrubs, her hair pulled into a frizzy top-knot, answered.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Charlotte took a step back. "I, yes... I was looking for someone named Manny, but-"

"Manny!" the woman yelled over her shoulder. "Someone here for you!"

"Who is it?" a voice from a back bedroom called.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? Get off your ass and come see." The woman left the door open then walked to the counter and stuffed a phone, wallet, keys and gum into her satchel. "Sorry," the woman said, glancing at Charlotte, "don't mean to be so rude, but I'm late for work."

"Oh," said Charlotte, stepping into the entryway, "don't worry. I'm sorry to intrude."

"Who are *you*?" asked the man in the hall. He was probably younger than Charlotte, with no shirt and both nipples pierced. Charlotte walked towards him and stretched out her hand, "Hey, Manny, it's me, Charlotte. It's been awhile."

He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm a friend of Tory's," Charlotte said, lowering her voice.

He jerked his head and Charlotte followed him into a bedroom, blinds drawn shut, no light except for the television. He sat on the edge of his Superman bedspread, picked up the gaming controller and held it in his lap. On the screen three people battled in sand dunes, blood spraying in all directions.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Charlotte walked to the television and leaned her elbow on it. "Tory gave me your address. She said we might be able to help each other."

He looked her over, "Help you with what? Get off?" He snickered.

"I've got some heroin I need to sell."

His face went serious and he gave her a second lookover. "I don't do business with Joey. You tell him I say so."

"I don't work with Joey either. In fact, that's why I'm here. Because I hear he's screwed us both. I have a way to make you some money--good money--and some revenge, too, if you're after it."

"So you're taking some of his business?"

"It's more complicated than that. Let's just say... Well, he can't know anything about this. We'll have to leave him out of it."

"How much are we talking about here?"

"Twenty thousand dollars worth."

He looked at her. Laughed. "Well shit."

Charlotte nodded. "I'll split what you sell fifty-fifty. We just can't let Joey get wind of this."

"He's not the kind of fucker to mess around with you know."

"I know. But I got this worked out. You want in or not?"

"Where you get that kinda dope from anyhow?"

"That's my business."

"Well... Alright. I might know a few people I could sell to. But I won't be able to push that much at once. It'll be in increments."

"Fine by me."

"How about you bring me a hundred dollars worth to start, and I'll see what kind of stuff you got. See what I can get lined up."

"Alright, I can do that. Should I bring it back here? Tomorrow?"

"Hell no. Don't come back around this house again. My mom will freak. How about you meet me near that children's carnival. The Kiddie Park in downtown San Antonio, not far from the zoo. Do you know it?"

"Yes, I think, but it's not exactly private."

"Well, that's the point. Just don't come around here again. You got to promise me that. That woman's sharp. She'll sense I'm up to something and I'm on probation."

Me too Charlotte nearly blurted. "12:00 tomorrow then? By the baseball park?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

Charlotte let herself out and before she'd gotten to the living room, there was the static, cartoonish sound of a torrent bullets and the high-pitched screams of a woman.

On her way out Charlotte realized she wasn't twenty minutes from Kara's house. When she arrived at Kara's she hid behind one of the cars, then went to the bedroom window and looked in. No one was visible. She went to the second, third and fourth windows, surveying each room. There were only two bedrooms. The master, which had a twin sized bed, television, and a giant wooden armoire with clothes spilling out the drawers and towels, blankets, an old pizza box and McDonalds wrappers on the floor. Through the cracked window, she could smell that the woman was a smoker. So infested and stale. Kara's bedroom, the only other, was in equal disarray. There was a plastic Disney bed in the corner that looked too small for Kara. There were plastic blocks, barbies, stuffed animals, dresses and tiny underwear scattered on the floor. The emerald carpets badly needed vacuuming. Through the window, she could smell urine--likely a mix of human and dog. She thought of removing the screen and climbing through to rifle through the drawers. It was the sight of that pillow against the headboard. She just wanted to see if it still smelled of the tender top of her daughter's head, which had haunted her these last years. Well, she'd learn their routine. If she were going to break in like that, it would have to be at a time when she'd know they'd be gone for hours. After waiting an hour, she decided they wouldn't be back. The neighbor across the street, who'd come out a few times to smoke, looked at her peculiarly, and she nodded and walked home. Too tired to think of digging up the heroin just now she'd wait until the morning. By the time she'd reached the condo, her pinky and the side of her big toe were blistered and oozing into her ballet slippers. She was sweaty, hungry, wanted to take a

long nap. But when she stepped through the door, Sam was sitting on the couch. She quickly turned up her face in a smile.

"Where were you?" he asked, leaning forward.

"I thought you went to work. When I woke up you weren't here."

"I went to the gym. Thought I'd be back before you got up."

Charlotte sat on the couch arm.

"Why are you sitting so far away?" he asked.

"I'm sweaty. Had a long walk."

"Where'd you go?"

"Around town."

"See anybody?"

"Are you accusing me of something?"

"Just wondering where you've been. For six hours. You knew I took the day off."

"I told you. I thought you went into work after all," Charlotte said, walking to the bedroom. In the doorway she crossed her arms, "You know. I don't need this."

He walked to the door and rested his palms on the frame a few feet above her head. "You're from San Antonio, aren't you? You're not from Boston."

Charlotte shrank back a step. "You've been doing research on me or what?"

"Are you married?"

Charlotte sat on the bed. "No."

"No what? No you're not seeing him? Or no you're not married?"

"Listen," Charlotte said, pulling her hair away from her face and brushing her fingers through it. "I don't ask you questions about your private life. Don't pry into mine."

He wasn't wearing a belt and with his arms raised, his jeans sunk low on his hips and she could see the bright blue elastic underwear band against his tanned skin. He pulled out an orange bottle from his back pocket then shook the (only six) remaining Percocets.

She pushed past him in the doorway into the living room.

She paced, then narrowed her eyes at him. "What then? What?"

"You tell me *what*. You a druggie?"

"A *druggie*?" Charlotte laughed. "What are you, from the sixties or something?"

Oh wait-" then she laughed again. "You are."

"You going to explain any of this?"

Charlotte stopped pacing and folded her arms. "I ain't explaining nothing."

"Who's Micah?"

Charlotte dropped her arms, whispered, "What?"

"I said who's Micah?"

"How the fuck do you know that name."

"You say it in your sleep," his voice lowering.

Charlotte brushed through her hair again. "You know what, I don't need this. I don't need to answer to you."

"Is he your other lover? You visit him during the days?"

She laughed at him. "You've got a lot of ideas about things, don't you?"

He grabbed her elbow, and when she tried to pull away, he dug his fingers deeper into her arm. "Listen, you give me some answers or you get out now and you don't come back. I'm not gonna have some cheating addict whore living in my house."

Charlotte smiled slowly. "Ah. So your wife cheated on you, is that it?"

He raised his hand up and she flinched for the hit, but it didn't come.

"You're one sorry fucker, you know that?" Charlotte said, jerking her arm away then slamming the bedroom door. She waited for him to come after her, feeling the blood run from the back of her neck to her arms. Then the television turned on. The sports channel, again. That same nasally newscaster she'd become so familiar with these last few days. For fuck's sake. She clenched her tingling fingers, laid down on the bed, covered her eyes with her forearm. It was Kara's pillow, printed on her eyelids. That yellowing pillow, no pillowcase, folded in half on the plastic bed, a few loose strands of her black curly hair. Oh she swore if she had her girl back again she'd cuddle her each night, tuck back that long hair, whisper *you know who loves you the most?* into her ear just like her mother used to, hot breath tickling the side of her neck. Even after her mother had stopped walking, she'd call Charlotte in, ask her the same question each night before bed. She'd treat Kara right this time, she would. She needed those Percocets. Needed three. How could she have been so stupid as to leave them out? She paced, shook her hands. That tree was less than an hour walk from here. The old ritual would be so easy. A quick trip to Walgreens: a Bic pen, syringe, eyedropper, all that was needed to make a binkie like Sandra had taught her in prison. No. Stop. If only she hadn't seen Kara. If she could've held onto the fantasy that her daughter was better off without her...

But she knew people from that part of town. Had met four or five of them in prison. She knew how it went. But how she wanted those pills. She remembered the two Vicodin she'd left in the bathroom, for when the Percocets ran out. She opened the cabinet, but they were gone. He was onto her alright. That damn newscaster still droning on about nothing. Rich white boy problems like this joker here in this gorgeous house. His cush job. Calling her a whore when he didn't know the half of it. That newscaster with his statistics and numbers... and that beer ad: that same old ad with the stupid line about how it's what a real man drinks. She stepped into the kitchen and waited for him to turn, but he kept staring at the screen. On the screen were the high round boobs of a blonde in a cut-off t-shirt, drinking from a sweaty bottle. She poured herself a glass half-full of whiskey, took three gulps and shuddered.

"That's how you cope then, huh?" Charlotte said, "You just tune out the world?"

He uncrossed his stretched out legs and planted them on the floor.

"You want answers, do you?" Charlotte said, hearing her voice crack. "I got answers for you."

He stood up but left the television blaring.

She took two more gulps. "Maybe I am fucking someone else."

He walked towards her, and she stepped towards the counter.

"And so what?" she continued, and took another sip. When he was close enough, she slapped him in the face. He grabbed her stinging hand by the wrist, then took the glass out of the other and shattered it against the refrigerator. Charlotte smiled, almost easily.

"That all you got? I think you can do better," Charlotte said.

He pulled her by the wrist towards the couch and she felt her doll-like looseness as he dragged her. He threw her towards the couch and she stumbled over the coffee table, hitting her shin. She gasped and nearly screamed. Then she squared her shoulders, stood on the couch and smiled down at him. He walked towards her, and she ran for the door but he grabbed her waist from behind and shoved her against the wooden foyer table, knocking the vase of white hyacinths to the floor and rocking the enormous mirror, balanced against the wall. He pulled down his jeans with one hand and gripped her waist with the other. Her dress was next. She couldn't see his face in the mirror because he was bent in concentration, his cock in his hand. Her own face was even, calm. She'd been here before; or she'd seen this played out before; or had done something like this before; she didn't know, but it was all familiar. The same slow, inevitable familiarity like when they'd barged into her room, lifted the mattress and bags beneath, pulled Kara out of Charlotte's arms... that social worker with the short brown hair carrying Kara away from Charlotte's screams. That woman carrying Kara down those long stairs, looking into *her* girl's face and turning back to look at Charlotte, not with pity, but something like disbelief. Yes, she knew, she knew, how could anyone let a daughter like that... how could anyone do something like that to such a girl? Such a gorgeous, perfect, innocent... Charlotte had stopped her screaming and squared her shoulders indignantly.

He was looking up now, into the mirror, into her own face. And Charlotte kept the half smile, one eyebrow raised and taunting, even as his his eyes rolled back and his eyebrows furrowed in near agony. She braced her palms on the table, elbows turned out,

the scarred tract marks staring at her like eyes. When he pushed the back of her head down so her hair fell over her face and her eyes fell shut, when the sharp nerve at the base of her neck jolted through her skull, feeling like it might snap, she thought: I'm safe now.

And, indeed, after he'd exited her and she'd cleaned up the broken glass and poured herself another drink, she was able to lay in bed, her knees curled and fall in a deep dreamless sleep. When he came to bed hours later and wrapped his arm around her waist, she held his hand in her own.

CHAPTER VIII

When Charlotte stirred that night the clock read 5:12, and she lifted his arm off her chest and walked to the living room. His jeans were on the floor by the couch and she took out the bottle of Percocets, swallowed two, and put the remaining four into her bra. She put on his white t-shirt, her jeans and Converse. The sky was dark grey and she stayed beneath the orange streetlights until she reached the bus stop. She hugged her knees on the perforated bench, wishing she'd brought a jacket. On the wall of the small shelter, a wilting poster of a black woman holding her huge stomach, eyes staring sadly into the camera read: *Pregnant? Need Help? Call 1-888-MYCHOICE*. Charlotte fingered the flakes of sleep out her eyes and used her palm to wipe away the oil on her forehead and around her nose. The five-thirty bus rolled up and the driver let a blast of cold air out the doors. Charlotte walked to the back, even though she was the only person on the bus, and lay across three seats, shifting from her side to her back when the metal chairs became too uncomfortable. When they got to the edge of town, after they'd collected a half-dozen other weary passengers, Charlotte got off and walked through one suburban neighborhood after another, worrying, at several points, that she'd lost her way. At last she arrived at the cul-de-sac, which looked as abandoned as when she'd left it. She lay in the brown field of grass in front of the woods. The sky had turned a lighter grey and was now misty, the earth below her cold.

The sun was a caramel haze behind thicker, rain-promising clouds. She wished she'd picked up a coffee and jacket, but lay as still as she could, letting the breeze and waves of the Percocet roll over the surface of her skin.

She dug up the heroin, which was intact and where she'd left it, and took out several small baggies- what she figured was about three-hundred dollars worth. Then she buried it back in the ground, covering it with fresh leaves. She decided to buy time in the park, and got lost several times on her way. She bought a coffee and a Honeybun and licked the inside of the plastic and her fingers when she'd finished. She thought about going to Goodwill and spending her last eight dollars on a jacket (since, anyways, she'd have plenty of more money coming soon) but she couldn't remember the exact direction and was weary of walking.

She stopped in the public restroom, an all concrete structure, to protect her from the wind. She kicked the stainless steel door open, the sound crashing then absorbing into the walls. She sat on the closed toilet lid and wrapped her arms around her knees. Maybe she'd take a nap. When she closed her eyes, she was sure she could smell the bag in her bra. Maybe she would just snort a little, save her last two Percocets for an emergency. Just enough to get her through the strain of this afternoon. She took out the packets and rubbed the white powder through the bags, feeling the smooth, putty texture. She thought of Tory, of the first time they'd shot up together, and put it back in her bra, walked out of the stall. She walked to steady her head and soon realized she was near Kara's, and thought of walking there. But her whole body drooped at the thought of it, and she was

sure she would start sobbing (was it this weather today? Last night with Sam? What was getting to her?).

She saw the top of the ferris wheel, the colors bright against the grey sky and followed it. Eventually, vaguely, she began to recognize other sights: a yellow psychic reading house across the street, a Mexican restaurant she'd eaten at as a child. And there: the iron wrought gate. An archway for an entrance. Beside the gate, a teal sign with flaking paint read: Kiddie Park Since 1925 America's Oldest Children's Carnival. As a girl, her father had taken her here. She'd almost forgotten about it until now. A woman in a long colorful skirt with no teeth and hoop earrings had sold them their tickets. Charlotte pushed the gate and it was unlocked, though she saw no one inside. She walked towards the green rollercoaster, the winding body of a dragon, and stopped at the fire-breathing head. She ran her fingers across the cool metal and flaking paint, which occasionally stabbed beneath the quick of her fingernails. It had seemed so much bigger when she'd been here with her father. She walked through brown crunching grass. In the center of the park was the carousel, the saddest and most beautiful structure of all. The manes and tails had long fallen out and the paint was worn down until you could see the wood beneath, some of it rotting, an occasional leg deteriorating to a stump. Only a few of the horse's eyes were visible and they looked off at a distance, at something Charlotte couldn't see. Perhaps, when their eyes were still rounded and polished, they'd looked into the faces of women with laughing stares in small black caps and the shift dresses of the twenties. Charlotte sat down on the umbrella covered table and rested her head on her hands. Music played from a speaker above, tinny, from another era.

"Hey," a man's voice. From behind her.

Charlotte jumped and turned around.

"Hey," she smiled at him.

"I didn't see you come in here. We're not open for..." he looked at his wristwatch.

"Twenty minutes still."

"The gate was open."

He shrugged.

"I won't bother no one. I just want to sit."

"You gotta pay to get in here."

Charlotte shrugged. "You aren't open yet." Charlotte patted the bench beside her.

"Take a seat."

He sat and looked out towards the scant trees. His arms were dark, years of weather and sun. There was a tattoo of a mermaid on his thick neck.

"You own this place?" Charlotte asked.

He took out a packet of Marlboros from his shirt pocket and lit one. Charlotte blinked at him. He reopened the pack. "Want one?" he asked, his own cigarette dangling from his fleshy lips.

Charlotte nodded and bent towards him so he could cup the flame against the wind.

"I just work here," he added.

"I haven't been here since I was a kid," Charlotte said.

"Yeah. That's the only reason people come here. Cause they came as kids. Never any newcomers."

"Yeah, well, the place is kinda going to shit."

He nodded, and tapped his cigarette against his propped up knee.

"Did you ever work for a traveling carnival?" Charlotte asked.

He chuckled. "Yeah, actually. Why do you ask?"

Charlotte shrugged. "When I came here before, everyone worked for a traveling carnival." She blew out a large cloud of smoke. "I wanted to join them."

"You wouldn't have lasted long out there."

Charlotte smiled. "Probably not."

She'd gotten into a fight with her dad about it, she now remembered. She'd told him how she wanted to join the gypsies: how beautiful these people who lived simply and freely. It was one of those thoughts she kept from everyone, a protected secret she normally absorbed herself in for weeks, nurturing the atmosphere with books or music or silence--anything which brought out a similar strain. Her dad had told her it wasn't like that at all, she had the wrong idea of it; the poor people would do anything to trade with her; he was sure of it. He felt pity! When all she could feel was awe.

"I was real innocent as a girl."

He looked at her. "You still look pretty innocent to me. As fresh and pure as they come."

"Well," Charlotte laughed, "not quite true, but I'll take it."

She outstretched her palm and he looked at it like he wasn't sure what to do with it, then he reached into his pocket and pulled out another cigarette.

"Hey thanks," she said, after he'd lit it. The oak tree beside the ferris wheel still had some of its leaves, mostly brown, but stubbornly holding on. She watched them tremble in the wind.

"My daughter would like it here," Charlotte said.

He crushed his cigarette beneath his foot then stood up, stretching his arms over his head.

"Maybe I'll bring her someday," Charlotte said.

"Til then you just gonna keep coming here by yourself?"

"Long as you keep giving me free cigarettes."

He walked to the shack that served pretzels, hot dogs and slushies and flipped on the lights, then began powering up the rides. Charlotte joined him beside the swings.

"This was my favorite ride," she said, draping her arms over the railing.

He turned towards her, looked her over entirely. She imagined him younger, a gypsy, travelling across the plains of Nebraska, stopping in small towns, living in mobile trailers, seducing blonde townies, bringing them back to his tent, laughing the next day about it with his friends. His little one room RV would have a few books, empty liquor bottles, cut-off t-shirts scattered on the floor. His place would be darkly lit, smelling of patchouli and sweat, and she took a step towards him now, shuddering at that strange sensation that was both desire and repulsion.

"Where do you live around here?" Charlotte asked.

"A ways off."

"You think I could ride the swings?"

"Sure. You can take a ride." He opened the gate, bowed and gestured her in. She took off her shoes and dangled her legs, closing her eyes as she was lifted up and her stomach swelled with each go around. When she got off she stumbled towards her shoes, dizzy. He blocked the exit. She thought of stepping up onto his toes and wrapping her arms around his waist like she'd used to do with her dad when she was young.

"Thanks," Charlotte said.

"Sure thing."

She tried to step past him, but he stood where he was.

"Let me come home with you," she whispered, leaning towards his ear.

He looked at her like she was crazy, then shrugged. "You can if you want. Don't get off until five."

"Alright. I'll come back then."

"Sure you will." He shuffled his feet, and she saw that he genuinely liked her and wanted her to come home with him. She sighed. If only he'd be indifferent, forceful. None of this neediness. His capacity for goodness exhausted her.

"Can I go around one more time?" Charlotte asked.

"Sure."

She went around for another twenty minutes; he kept the ride going without stopping. She felt closer to what she remembered of herself than she had in a long time. She should just do it: hit the road, leave tonight, follow train tracks, follow sunsets and

sunrises, move with the changing seasons, eat what she could harvest from the earth or scavenge from other's maddening excess. There was no reason to stay in this godforfuckingsaken city anyways... except for... she couldn't get the picture out of her head: her daughter in the swing beside her, that black hair whipping around Kara's elusive face, mouth open, shrieking in joy; she would clutch Charlotte's hand in her own as they went round. That ghost of a girl who wouldn't let her be.

CHAPTER IX

It was another hour before Manny showed up at the Kiddie Park.

"Hey," he said, approaching her, looking nervously in each direction.

"Don't do that," Charlotte said, "I thought you've done this before? Keep your eyes on me. Let's walk."

"No. Let's stay here."

"Let's walk," Charlotte repeated. They walked to the bench, and she saw the carnival man watching them, then walk to the kids entering through the gate. "Did you bring the money?"

"Oh. Yeah," he said, looking over his shoulder.

"I said don't do that!" Charlotte looked at him, "Are we being followed?"

He shook his head feverishly. "I brought the cash. Here." He reached into his pocket and took out five folded twenties.

"Don't you need to check the stuff first? To see how much I brought?"

"I trust you."

Charlotte reached into her bra and took out two of the three baggies then slipped them into his hand like she was about to hold his. "Here."

"Thanks." He put them in his pocket without looking.

"You sure everything's good? You're making me nervous."

"Yeah. I just want to get out of here."

"Alright, well how long will it take you to sell this? When will you need more?"

"Do you have more on you now?" he said, turning to her. "Do you have it all on you?"

"No. Of course I don't have it all on me. What do you think I am, an idiot?"

He stood.

"So when do we meet again?" Charlotte asked.

"We'll see how this goes first."

"Should I come back by your house in a week or so?"

"No. I told you not to come around there. I'll be in touch with you, how's that?
Where do you live?"

"I don't give that information out," Charlotte crossed her arms. "I don't like this.
Any of this. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'm just nervous is all. Let's just say we'll meet back here, same time,
same day next week, OK? I got to go."

"Remember... you can't let Joey find about this. Alright?"

Manny walked out of the gate. Charlotte watched the carnival worker operating the green rollercoaster, two kids screaming, arms raised. She turned in the now familiar direction of Kara's house. Soon she was back among the pastel colored trailers, muted in the grey light. When she neared the house she heard the sound of a child's laugh and she stopped where she stood on the sidewalk and shut her eyes. She walked along the side of the house, keeping her hands and back flat against the panelling. She stopped at the chainlink fence and leaned around the corner. In the yard, beside the Little Tikes slide,

Kara sat in the dirt, her legs spread in a pink summer dress. A Pomeranian looking mutt, his white fur dirty, sat in the middle of Kara's legs, a barbie's head in its mouth. "Now, Pompeii, drop that. Drop it now," Kara said. Her voice was high and clear and accented. The dog ran across the yard and Kara got up and ran with it, her two black braids flapping against her shoulders. She was barefoot and her legs were dark and dirt caked. She caught up to the dog, bent to take the toy out of its mouth, but the dog ran in the opposite direction. Kara tripped over herself and giggled on the ground. Now Charlotte saw her face. Kara's eyes were round and dark green, set close together like Charlotte's; her skin was dark, so unlike Charlotte's pale own, but the same freckles dotted her nose and cheeks. Unlike Charlotte's pointed nose, Kara's was flat and small, but the round red lips were much the same. If Charlotte had doubted before (only for moments) she was sure now.

The girl's laugh, the large dimple in the left cheek, made Charlotte's body weaken.

"Pompeii stop!" Kara said, catching the dog at last and jerking the barbie's head free. She held the matted slobbery mane up like the triumph of a warrior. "There." Kara turned and saw Charlotte. They stared at each other, neither of them blinking. Kara dropped the head in her hand and Charlotte lifted her hand to wave. Charlotte smiled. Kara smiled back. Charlotte could feel her breath exiting her chest, returning slowly. Her vision blurred. She should go to Kara. Say something.

"Kara!" It was the woman's voice and the screen door banged open.

Charlotte ducked behind the wall, covered her face with her hands.

"Kara. Ven en el interior. Que necesita para terminar los platos."

Charlotte sunk to a squat, tried to catch her breath.

"Un momento madre!" Kara said.

"No, ahora," she said.

Charlotte walked around the side of the house and quickly crossed the street. God, she was beautiful. So unlike Charlotte had imagined her to look and yet... exactly as she should be. Charlotte pulled at the sides of her eyes then stopped at the corner to catch her breath.

Someone grabbed Charlotte's elbow from behind and she nearly let out a scream. She'd expected it to be the woman, but it was a man and she jerked her arm free.

"What do you want?" she said.

"So this where you been hiding, Charlotte?"

Charlotte searched his face then recognized him as one of Joey's guys, Robert--or something like that--from back in the day. "What do you want?" Charlotte said, looking over her shoulder to make sure there weren't more of them.

"You know what I want. Where are you hiding it? At that house?"

"I don't have it. It's gone. I sold it all."

How did he find her? Had he been following her? Manny. Fuck.

He grabbed the inside of her arm, and she flinched at the grasp.

"I don't have it on me," Charlotte corrected.

"But you're storing it here, aren't you? At that woman's house? She a friend of yours?"

"No. I don't know her."

"Sure you don't. You just stand creepily outside. Wait, is it in the yard?" He grabbed Charlotte by the back of her neck and forced her in the direction of the house.

"Let's go talk to your friend over there. See if she'll tell us where you're hiding it."

Charlotte turned around. "No, stop. They don't know anything about this. It's not here. It's across town."

"Is that so?" he folded his arms. "Why are you here then?"

Charlotte looked at him blankly.

A smile crept over his face. "Wait a minute. That's her, ain't it? Well fuck me. That's the little baby you had back at the house?"

Charlotte looked at the ground. "No she's not. She's just a friend."

"Oh shit, Charlotte. You've blown it this time. Wait until I tell Joey here's about this. You took me straight to her house you fucker."

Charlotte folded her arms over her hardening stomach. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Now you listen, Charlotte," his breath smelled of stale tobacco and onions, adding to her nausea. "You take me to the rest of the stash, or I can't guarantee what'll happen to her. I just don't know what Joey will do."

Charlotte now noticed he had a switchblade in his palm. "Alright, sure. I get it. I'll take you to it."

He put the knife in his pocket and she led him across the street towards downtown. She was sweating through her t-shirt now, even though it was still overcast. How stupid could she be to trust Manny. There was nothing for her to do now but turn it over; but who was to say he wouldn't kill her afterwards?

As they walked, Charlotte watched him. "It's Robert, isn't it?"

"Martin."

"Sorry, it was awhile back. Why are you doing this for him, anyways?"

He looked at her like she was an idiot and she continued forward.

"He's really pissed, isn't he? Did Manny set me up?"

He said nothing to her. They were a few blocks from downtown now.

He pulled out his cellphone, "Joey, it's me. I have her.... Yeah, I have her with me now. She's taking me to it. No... I got it handled. We're heading downtown. I know where her daughter is, too, if she don't cooperate-"

They turned the corner and Charlotte took off running across the street, two cars braking, horns blasting. She didn't look back but she heard another set of honks and knew he was following her. She ran down one alley, turned a corner, then jumped over a low fence, turned another corner. There was a taxi on the street and she opened the door, slammed and locked it. "Fifty bucks if you get me outta here as fast as you can. Now." She scooted down in the seat, "Now!"

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Listen, I don't want any trouble."

"You won't have any. Just go. Go please!"

As they drove away Charlotte lifted her head enough to see Martin running down the street, stop and look in both directions. The streetlight in front of them was yellow, "Drive through this, will you!" Charlotte said. They drove three more blocks before she sat up. "Sorry, trying to lose my ex-husband back there. Can you take me to the Regal condos? You know, those new ones down by all the office buildings outside of town?"

"Sure. Sure. You can pay?"

"I told you I got money."

He nodded and adjusted his mirror. Charlotte leaned back in her chair and shut her eyes. What if they really went after Kara? She went straight up to the bedroom and pulled the backpack and camping supplies out from under the bed. Then she went through all his drawers, taking what t-shirts and jeans and shorts might be useful. She searched for money, found a little over a hundred in cash, and took his Rolex and digital camera. She wore his baseball hat, sweatshirt and Ray Bans just in case. She sat at the desk and wrote a note:

Sam,

You know... this isn't really about yesterday. I'm sorry I have to do this.

It's a long story and maybe one day I'll be able to explain.

You just might be saving my life. Forgive me.

Gratefully yours, Charlotte

She took the spare set of keys and went to his spot in the parking garage and slung her backpack onto the creme leather seat of his Lexus. She gripped the steering wheel, then shut her eyes in the dim garage. There had to be another way. She needed to think this through. But she kept seeing those bare feet, those toenails in the dirt running through the grass, her little gypsy princess. She turned on the ignition and drove back downtown.

She turned down the street, looked in all directions, saw no one, but circled once more just in case. She parked in front of a house a couple doors down. She'd go in and talk to the woman... maybe, she didn't know... she'd go in and... But there she was: Kara in the backyard, playing with the dog. Charlotte walked directly to the side of the fence, hardly able to breathe.

The trick would be not to hesitate.

She opened the gate. "Kara," Charlotte said. Too soft. "Kara," Charlotte repeated. The dog bounded towards Charlotte, all licks, not a single bark. God bless the mutt. Charlotte rubbed the dog's ears and motioned Kara over. Kara stayed where she was in the yard. "Kara, come here, I have to tell you something... quick," she gestured and Kara walked over, but stood a few feet away. "Listen, I'm a friend of your mother's. Do you remember me?"

Kara shook her head.

"I have a surprise for you. A big surprise. Your mother and I have been planning it. I'm going to take you there now, but you're going to have to hurry." Charlotte walked towards the street and gestured for her to follow. "It's ok, Kara. I promise. I hear it's your birthday soon?"

Kara took a step forward. "Not for forty-three days more."

"Well, it's an early birthday surprise. But if you don't come right now, you'll miss it. If you don't come right now, you'll ruin it." Kara stopped just outside the gate and Charlotte turned to her. "Listen. Your mom's going to be upset if you ruin the surprise. You have to come now."

"She's my madre. Not my mom. Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you in the car," Charlotte grabbed Kara's hand. The texture was smooth and seemed impossibly small; she never wanted to let go. It emboldened her.

Charlotte pulled Kara across the street and tried to pick her up, but Kara resisted. The dog was yapping now and Charlotte took Kara by the wrist and removed the keys from her pocket. She opened the car doors.

"Where's the car seat?" Kara asked.

"The what?"

"My car seat. I can't go without a car seat."

"Kara!" It was the woman's voice from behind the house.

Charlotte froze then grabbed Kara by the waist.

"Si Madre! Aqui!" Kara called.

Charlotte tried to force Kara into the car, but Kara braced her arms on the doorframe.

"Madre!" Kara called again, "Aqui!"

Charlotte managed to get Kara in the car and child-safety locked the doors. She fumbled getting the keys in the ignition and dropped them on the floor. The woman was running across the street now, her chest bouncing beneath her blue muumuu dress, her fat hands waving wildly.

"Madre!" Kara screamed, banging on the glass.

Charlotte put the car into gear just as the woman reached her window. They looked into each other's faces; clearly, the woman didn't comprehend. Charlotte touched

the window once then sped off, watching through the rearview mirror as the woman ran and Kara banged on the glass.