

# With Best Intentions



**Tim Chapman**

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by Tim Chapman

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“This is a work of fiction. Descriptions and portrayals of real people, events, organizations, or establishments are intended to provide background for the story and are used fictitiously. Other characters and situations are drawn from the author’s imagination and are not intended to be real.

“Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”

— Jean-Paul Sartre

## Chapter 1 Hades

There are car alarms screaming. I sit up quickly, bumping my head on the undercarriage of the Hummer. Confused, I look around for Dana. Then I remember. I wipe the grime off my face with my free hand and look out from under the car at the rubble filling the parking garage. It's dark. Hazy dark. I can't see much past the car next to me, my Honda, crushed by a slab of concrete. I work my other hand out from under a pile of debris and waggle my fingers. Nothing feels broken.

I slide out from under the Hummer and stand, leaning on its passenger door for support. My head hurts. Looking past my car, I can see a wall. In the other direction a few lights glow, faintly. Under the noise of the car alarms, I hear moaning. I work my way across some jagged chunks of concrete and around the front of the Hummer to the driver's side. I touch my forehead, and when I bring my hand away there's blood on it. Shit. I might be in trouble here.

I hear the moaning again and sense something moving through the haze. The air is choked with dust. It's hard to breathe. I can't really see much, so I take it slow. I can just make out a moving shape, a man crawling through the rubble. I inch over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. He starts and pulls away.

"It's okay. I say. "Are you hurt? Do you need help?" Blood runs into my eye, and I wipe it with my shirtsleeve. "I guess we've had an earthquake."

"Earthquake my ass. It was probably some goddamn terrorists. Blew the fucking building and brought the whole thing down on our heads." He turns and sits, his back against a ruined Porsche.

He's perspiring heavily, and his thinning brown hair is slicked back flat against his head. His suit looks expensive. He's out of shape. His face is jowly, and he has a noticeable paunch. I get the impression of size. If he had been standing he would have been enormous. I don't see any visible injuries, but he's flushed, and his breathing is labored.

"Are you all right?" I ask again.

"Just shut up a minute."

I sit on the concrete floor and try to assess my own condition. My head isn't bleeding heavily, just sort of oozing, but there's a lump coming up. I take the bottom of my shirt between my teeth, tear off a strip of material, and press the cloth against my forehead. My pulse throbs under my fingers. I sit there, putting pressure on the wound and listening to the guy's breathing for a while.

Finally, he speaks up. "I just got here when the roof fell in. Look. There's my car." He points to a silver Mercedes. "Hardly a scratch on it. If it wasn't surrounded by rubble I could drive it out. My office is here in Trachis Tower. Sixth floor. Real estate. I don't know who those bastards were targeting. Most of the other tenants are lawyers, entertainment attorneys, and whatever."

As he speaks, another shockwave hits. With a horrible grinding noise, a concrete slab drops from the ceiling onto the Mercedes. A cloud of dust rolls over us. I clench my eyes shut and cover my head with my arms. The car's alarm bleats uselessly for a minute, then switches off. The other car alarms have quit, too. In their place is the creaking of steel beams and the grinding sound of moving concrete. I look up at the ceiling,

expecting a slab to fall on me, expecting to be crushed. Adrenaline and fear combine. I shiver.

The guy spits out a mouthful of dust. "Son of a bitch! I loved that car." He rubs his eyes with both hands. "I'm not gonna die in a fucking parking garage. Let's get out of here."

The ground shakes again. My heart's pounding in my chest. My tongue is thick in my mouth, but I manage to say, "Find a truck. Something with a strong frame and big wheels."

Bits of concrete and streamers of dust fall around me as I crawl to the Hummer. The big man is trying to wedge himself under the car, too. Something crashes down behind us, and we're enveloped by a cloud of dust.

#

My chest is tight, and it's hard to catch my breath. I try to relax. Try to breathe. Instead of thinking about dying, I think about Dana. Is she alive? Is she hurt? Was she at home when the quake hit? Home. Home implies a dwelling, but it's never really that, is it? Dana is my home. And now I'm homeless. I fucked up. I fucked up bad.

I peer out from under the Hummer for the second time that afternoon. The bleeding over my eye has stopped, but there's a lump on my head the size of a peanut. It hurts to touch it. The garage is an apocalyptic nightmare. Slabs of concrete are scattered around, some standing on end or leaning against cars. Some of the cars are crushed or damaged while others stand untouched. The smell of gasoline mixes with the sting of the dusty air. The big guy is standing in the middle of a small open space, his face illuminated by a light radiating from his hand. It takes me a second to recognize it as the

light from a cell phone. Mine is on the back seat of my car. I phoned Dana as I was driving to Trachis Tower, but she didn't pick up, so I tossed the phone over my shoulder.

I came here to see our marriage counselor, Dr. Weiss. Dana and I went through six weeks of counseling sessions. It didn't help. Dana was too angry, felt too betrayed. She kicked me out. Showering at the gym is okay, but sleeping in my car sucks. I thought maybe Dr. Weiss could talk to her. Get her to give me another chance. I made a mistake, a one-night stand, and this is how I'll pay for it, crushed under our counselor's office building.

How bad is the rest of the LA? Hopefully, Dana was at work when the quake hit. Her office is out in the valley. Maybe the quake missed her. Or was she at our apartment in Hollywood? What if she needs help? We don't know our neighbors very well. Mostly we just listen to the couple next-door scream at one another.

The light in the guy's hand goes out, and he sighs.

"What's up?" I ask.

"We're trapped. I checked out the rest of the garage. Every exit is blocked. We're surrounded by concrete and steel beams."

"Did you call someone? Let them know we're here?"

"I can't get a signal. No call. No text. No email. Nothing."

"Did you try moving around? Maybe closer to a wall."

"Of course I tried. I'm not a fucking idiot."

I climb out from under the Hummer and survey the garage. It's dark, but there are a few fluorescent lights glowing off in the distance. Some are hanging down by their wires. The whole garage is shrouded in gloom.

"My name's Hercule," I say.

"Ajax." He holds out his hand. It's enormous. "Hercule, eh? That's a first."

I shake his hand. "My parents named me after the fictional detective, Hercule Poirot."

"Lucky you. Almost as bad as Ajax. Call me Jax."

Most of the damage to my Honda is on the front end. I can see my phone through the shattered rear window, so I peel away the glass and reach in to get it. It still works, though the battery life is low.

Jax has turned on the headlights of several cars. I do the same. Taking the tire iron from my trunk, I move from car to car, breaking out driver's side windows and switching on headlights. I hold my phone up for him to see. "No bars."

"No shit," he says. "Hey, why don't you wander around and see if you get a signal?"

I don't want to waste battery power, but I do want to look for a way out. Maybe one of the stairwells is clear. We're in a pocket between pillars. On either side of the pillars are piles of broken concrete. I take my tire iron and go exploring. Behind me there's a solid wall, so I step across the rubble, past the open space in front, to check out the other side. The few fluorescents that are still working light some of the garage, but this area is pretty dark and stretches far enough that I can't see the far wall. I spend a little battery power and turn on my phone, holding the glowing screen out in front of me. There are rows of cars, some undamaged but most crumpled under blocks of concrete and steel beams. I look inside a few of them, breaking out windows to turn on headlights, and look for cell phones or anything of use. Surrounding the cars are piles of debris, toppled



pillars and mounds of stone. One of the mounds might be covering up a stairway or an elevator. I check my phone again. Still no bars, so I turn around and work my way back to the Hummer. Jax is in the driver's seat. He's tilted it back and is reclining, one big foot up on the dash.

“Yeah, all the exits are blocked,” I say. “The building must have collapsed around us. I guess we got lucky.”

Jax snorts. “Lucky? We’re trapped under the ruins of a twelve-story building. We’re either going to starve or suffocate or be crushed when the rest of the building caves in on us.”

“Or a search team could rescue us. Maybe we need to make some noise. Let them know we’re here.”

“If you start honking car horns, I’ll knock you the fuck out. I’m tired.” He yawns and closes his eyes. “I’m going to take a nap.”

My hands and face feel gritty. I crawl into the Hummer's big back seat and wipe the dust off my face with my sleeve. I spit on my palms and wipe them on my pants.

I know there are probably worse people than Jax to be trapped with in a parking garage. As a mental exercise I try to think of someone who would be a bigger pain in the ass. No one comes to mind.

I sit there for a while, staring out into the gloom and listening, listening for anything—the sound of digging, a rescue team shouting to us through the fallen concrete, the rumble of another shockwave. Something’s moving out there. I can't identify the sound, so I sit up and strain to hear it. I hold my breath, not wanting to drown out the faint noise with the sound of my breathing, and then it's gone.

"Listen," Jax says, "We've got to come up with some way to get out of here."

"Sure. If we die, the terrorists win."

"I thought you said this was caused by an earthquake."

"It was caused by an earthquake. I was just making a joke."

"Funny guy. Ha ha. We're gonna die, and you're making jokes."

"We should probably start digging out," I say, "but I don't know the layout of the garage. We could spend hours digging and wind up running into a wall instead of a doorway."

"Or we could dislodge the wrong stone and bring the whole building down on our heads. No thanks. What else you got?"

"Our only other alternative is to contact people above us. Let them know there's someone trapped under the building."

"And that's why you wanted to start honking a car horn, eh? All right."

He picks up a chunk of broken concrete and shuffles off. I hear the thud of the concrete against glass and, a short time later, the blare of a car horn. I wander over. Jax is sitting in the front seat of a vintage Jaguar. He grins when he sees me and points at the wood steering wheel. "Pretty classy, huh?"

"If you keep up a rhythmic beep like that they might think it's just coming from a broken car alarm or something. Why don't you vary the honking pattern? Try using the Morris Code for help, S.O.S."

"Yeah. What is that, two longs and a short, right?"

"I think it's three shorts, three longs; then three more shorts."

He honks out an S.O.S., reaches across the seat, and pushes open the passenger-side door. "Climb in," he says.

I settle myself in the leather seat and notice the dash. It's wood, too. "Sweet ride."

"Yeah. The owner's gonna be pretty pissed about his busted window. So, what do you do, guy?"

"For a living? I'm a graphic designer. Mostly print, some web design. The last couple of years I've been working for a magazine publisher."

"What are you doing here?" He gestures to the surrounding garage.

"My wife wants a divorce. I had an appointment to talk to our marriage counselor."

"Been there, done that. Three times. I'm currently on wife number four. So who did the cheating, you or her?"

It's difficult for me to admit how stupid I've been. Like a teenager, I allowed myself to be controlled by hormones and hurt feelings. "Me. But it was just one time, an impulse thing. Alcohol. A coworker. I immediately regretted it."

"How'd the wife find out? You didn't get a case of the guilts did you?"

"No. She got a phone call. My coworker was upset that I wasn't interested in a relationship."

"That's women," he says. "Everything's about them. Hell. All my exes took me to the cleaners when we divorced. I should have taken Clint Eastwood's advice."

"What's that?"

"Cut out the middleman. Just find a woman you hate and buy her a house."

"That seems a little cynical,"

"Ahh, most women are selfish bitches. Look, my wife's okay. I liked wife number two better, but that's water under the bridge. This one, she's fun, but she's let herself go. From the back it looks like she's shoplifting a couple of Christmas hams."

I don't know what to say to that. The guy's a jerk, but I certainly can't claim the moral high ground.

"Maybe we should start honking out our S.O.S. again," I say. "I doubt we'll suffocate down here, but I'd like to get dug out before the rest of the building comes down on us."

Jax gets out of the Jaguar. "It's all yours. I'm through with this bullshit."

"We can take turns. I'll sit here honking for an hour. Then you take an hour. That way there's a better chance of someone hearing us."

"Ask me again in an hour," he says and stalks off toward the Hummer.

The guy is definitely unlikeable, but being trapped beneath a twelve-story building is enough to make anyone testy.

I honk the horn, trying to produce a clear SOS pattern. My head aches, but I keep honking. The Jaguar's wood dash and steering wheel are pretty nice. It would be a fun car to drive but not a good coffin.

## Chapter 2 Violet

Today, I saw Violet pass by the art department on her way to the break room and decided to ask her if she'd join me for lunch. I felt guilty even before I asked her. The guilt didn't stop me, though. I mean, it's just lunch, right?

I read an article once about "work spouses." It's a phenomenon that's been around for a long time, but psychologists have only recently come up with a name for it. The idea is that you find someone at your place of employment who you're attracted to and start treating them the way you'd treat your real husband or wife. It doesn't always lead to sex. In fact, sometimes the couples bicker the way real married couples do. According to the article's author, it's still considered a form of cheating. There are work spouses at my office. It's pretty obvious when two people pair up, and there are several pairs. I hadn't given it too much thought. Until Violet.

Her office is over in advertising. She's a sales associate, selling advertising space in our magazines. Her male clients love dropping in to see her at the office, even though they could easily conduct all their business by phone or email. She wears clingy dresses to show off her excellent figure. She has a slight drawl and a slow cadence in her speech that would sound cartoonish on anyone else. On her it sounds like pure sex. A client takes her to lunch at least once a week. She's married.

One day I looked up from my drawing board, and she was getting coffee from the pot in the art department. There's a coffee pot in the break room, too, but it's usually empty. Sometimes employees from other departments raid our coffee rather than make a fresh pot. Violet saw me looking at her and, realizing she'd been caught, raised a finger to her lips saying, "Shh. Don't tell on me." Then she smiled and tiptoed out of the room.

After that, I'd go out of my way to pass by the sales office or time my afternoon trips to the break room to coincide with hers.

I don't know if I would have behaved that way if Dana and I weren't such a mess. It's been months since we've had sex. I understand why, but that doesn't make it any easier. It also doesn't help that Dana has shut me out emotionally, as well. Her two dominant emotions are anger and frustration. Even if she isn't directly angry with me, I'm always in the blast zone. No matter how understanding I try to be, no matter how helpful— Well, I'm feeling very fucking unappreciated at home. A little attention at work couldn't hurt. After all, it's just lunch.

### Chapter 3 Hades

The Jaguar's battery died a while ago, but I'm still sitting here, lost in reverie. There's a patch of sweat at the base of my spine. I'm not a fan of leather seats. Jax bangs on the roof of the car, startling me.

"What the hell, man?"

"Wake up. I've got an idea."

"About getting out of here?" I open the car door and turn to face him. My head's still throbbing.

"No. We should start honking the horns again, though. Maybe set off some car alarms, too. Make a bunch of noise. This is something different. When you and your wife get divorced, who gets the house?"

"What are you talking about?"

"When you get divorced. You'll probably want to sell the house and split the profit, right? You'll need someone to sell it for you." He spreads his arms wide and smiles. "You'll need a realtor."

"There isn't any house. We rent a place in Hollywood. We're on a waiting list to rent in Santa Monica."

His smile disappears. "Fuck Santa Monica and their fucking rent control. I own an apartment building in Santa Monica. The income just barely covers the mortgage."

"Well, that's the only way we could afford to live there."

"Then go live in the valley with all the other lowlifes."

He stalks off into the dark. I take my tire iron and head out into the gloom to forage. I move carefully, feeling my way from car to car. At each one I break out a

window, turn on an interior light, and look under the seats, the glove compartment, the trunk. In one car I find a bundle of newspapers. They'll be a good source of reading material, kindling, and toilet paper. When I look back the way I've come I see that I've left the interior lights on in all the cars I ransacked. They glow in the dark like Christmas lights in the neighborhood where I grew up. I don't want to run down all my available batteries, so I go back and shut most of them off, but I can't help leaving a few lit. The glow is comforting.

I find bottled water and snack bars in a couple of cars, and in one car, a big cardboard box filled with dozens of individual serving pudding cups. Collecting supplies gives me the feeling of doing something. Preparing for a long siege. Having some say in my fate. I know it's an illusion, but it's comforting. I put a few items in my pockets, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, a cigarette lighter. The rest I stash in the front seat of an electric blue, mid-60s Mustang. Of all the cars I'm able to see, over half are vintage or expensive cars. The Trachis Tower is a classy place. The Mustang is beautiful, so I use a piece of stiff wire to open the door lock. It would be a shame to break a window. There's a collection of classic rock CDs in the glove box: Beatles, Hendrix, Joplin. It's parked next to a pickup truck I can crawl under in case there's another shockwave, and it's far enough away from the Hummer that I can avoid Jax and his shitty attitude.

There was a fifth of cranberry vodka under the driver's seat of a BMW convertible, which doesn't surprise me since I think BMW drivers are pretty much a menace. I take the vodka and go looking for Jax to mellow him out. We need to start the SOS campaign again. He's sitting on the hood of a silver Mercedes with an unlit cigarette in his mouth.



"Look at this," he says. "Same model and color as mine, and not a scratch on it. I like my upholstery better, though. This one's got cloth seats."

I sit on the hood next to him and point at the cigarette. "You smoke?"

He's ditched his coat and tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves to reveal massive forearms. He taps his shirt pocket. "I found a pack in a VW. No lighter, though."

I pull out my new lighter, light his cigarette, and hold up the vodka. "I found us a little libation. Cranberry vodka. Good for the kidneys, eh?" I take a swig. It's way too tart. Normally, I'd spit it out, but what the hell. I hand him the bottle. "Maybe we should start honking again."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Well, let's make a little more headway on this bottle, first."

We sit and drink in silence for a while. He doesn't offer me a cigarette, which pisses me off. I quit smoking a while back, but still— We polish off a little more than half the bottle, then Jax claps his big hands together.

"I got two kids," he says.

"Yeah?"

He fishes his phone out of a pants pocket, taps the screen a few times, and shows me a photo of a couple of teenagers. The boy wears a blue blazer with some kind of crest on the pocket. The girl has on a white dress. Both kids have Jax's dark hair and chunky features. The boy sports a unibrow. The girl, however, is quite attractive, but she has a patch over one eye. I look at Jax and point to my eye. "What happened?"

"She had astigmatism back then. Had to wear a patch for a couple of months to strengthen the weak eye. She's fine now, but she was a mess while she had to wear it."

Cried every day. Didn't want to go to school. They live with my second wife up in Santa Barbara. Smart kids. Private schools all the way. The boy plays football."

"That's great. How often do you get to see them?"

"Not often enough. They're busy with school and friends, and their mother and I don't get along."

"That's a shame. I bet you miss them."

Jax's affection for his kids makes me reassess my opinion of him. Maybe he isn't such a bad guy after all. Suddenly, everything seems complicated. I'm not tracking well. I hope it's the cranberry vodka and not a concussion. I slide down off the hood.

"Let's start honking, man. You wanna stay with the Mercedes? I'll go down by the far pillar and find a car with a nice loud horn." I point with the bottle.

He waves me away. "Do your thing, King Toot. I'll climb into the Mercedes and honk. Hey. Maybe if I put my license plates on this car I can drive it out when we get rescued."

"VIN number," I say.

"Shit. That's right. Fucking VIN number."

I walk back toward the Mustang, but I slide into the driver's seat of the BMW. I don't want to wear down the Mustang's battery. I'm looking forward to listening to some CDs. Jax has already started honking, and when I join in it makes quite a racket. Our SOSs aren't timed well. They overlap. I don't think they sound like car alarms, but they sure don't sound like Morris code. I honk for several hours, but then the BMW's horn starts to lose volume, and finally, the battery dies. When I stop honking I realize I don't

hear Jax's horn. My head still aches, but not as much, and my thinking is a little clearer. The vodka's wearing off.

I go back to the Mustang, toss the newspapers into the back seat, climb in, and use the screwdriver to strip the steering column. I experiment with the exposed ignition wires, connecting and disconnecting them until a dashboard light comes on. The Woodstock soundtrack CD starts playing Country Joe's "Fixin' To Die Rag." My head feels better, but my stomach is making unpleasant noises. Finally, I pull out one of the newspapers to use as toilet paper, a Wall Street Journal, which somehow seems appropriate, and make my way through the gloom to a little alcove behind some pillars. It's dark, so I survey the area with the light from my cell phone. It's empty. As good a place for a toilet as any. I take my pants and underwear off for freedom of movement and squat down to poop.

## Chapter 4 Violet

Violet and I ate at our regular spot again, a Thai restaurant just far enough away from the office that the chance of running into one of our coworkers was pretty slim. They serve a delicious soup made with coconut milk, tofu, and cilantro. Violet always makes a face when I order it. She hates cilantro. Says it tastes like soap. She sticks with the ginger chicken. I think I keep ordering the soup because I know Violet will make her disapproving face. I guess I'm purposely trying to irritate her. Abdicate the responsibility of ending our little office romance, such as it is. We haven't had sex, but we have been going to lunch together for a while, and there's a sexual tension between us. Our conversations are laced with innuendo. I don't know if I want it to happen or not. I don't want to cheat on Dana. I just want the expectation of sex. The idea that there's the possibility of sex in my future.

When the food came she said, "You must really like that soup."

I smiled. "I guess it's an acquired taste. How's yours?"

"Yummy."

Violet complains about her husband all the time. I've mentioned that Dana and I haven't had sex in months and that she refuses to tell me why. Dana's always depressed, but she refuses to talk about it. I've tried to get her to see someone. She won't do that either.

I think telling Violet about Dana's emotional problems would be a betrayal, as if these little lunch dates aren't. Dana's always on my mind, though. A presence, hovering just over my shoulder. Some days she's heartbroken, and some days she's mad as hell.

We finished lunch. I looked at my watch and signaled the waitress for the check while we sipped our Thai iced coffees. Violet pulled an envelope from her purse and slid it across the table.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Something I wrote. For you.”

“Should I read it now?”

“I’d be too embarrassed. Take it with you and read it later. Please.”

I slipped the envelope into my pocket.

## Chapter 5 Hades

The garage is eerily quiet. The only noise is the echoed shuffling of my footsteps as I make my way back to the Mustang from my bathroom corner. I stop to listen, and the silence has a quality to it like a large empty auditorium. If someone dropped a pin on the other side of the garage the sound would reverberate through the space. I can only describe it as acoustic potential, like something is about to happen. Then I hear something out in the dark, a quiet sound, soft, like crying and fairly close. I say, "Jax?" No answer. I take out my phone and turn on the screen for light, but it fades right away. The battery is drained, and I've left the flashlight in the car. There's some light from the overhead fluorescents, but I go back to the car for the flashlight anyway, tossing my leftover newspapers into the trunk along with all the drinks and snacks I've salvaged.

The noise is weak but consistent. I look in the windows of a few cars. There's a woman in the back seat of a Prius. She has short, dark hair and is wearing a white blouse and a grey skirt. The skirt is hiked up over her thighs, and she's holding her left leg above the knee. There are streaks of blood on her blouse and a bloodstain on the seat. She's trying to staunch the flow of blood from a gash on the inside of her leg. Her eyes are closed, but when I tap on the window they pop wide open. I can see the white part of her eyes all the way around the brown irises. Her makeup is smeared. She's been crying. I open the car door and lean in to get a better look at the cut. It's not gushing, but it's oozing steadily.

"We need to get a tourniquet on that," I say.

I set the flashlight on the floor next to the back seat and stand to unbuckle my belt and slide it out of the loops. I lean into the car again, kneel on the seat, and start to slip

the belt around her leg. She makes a panicky noise and picks up the flashlight from the floor.

I say, "Don't worry," and she hits me with the flashlight, right on the lump on my head. Startled, I slip off the seat onto the floor, my legs hanging out of the open door. She hits me again. And again. And—

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The rough texture of the carpet is digging into my cheek, and it smells awful. It's not wet, but it stinks. I push myself up from the floor and get the spins. The woman isn't in the car. I put one arm on the seat for leverage to pull myself up, and my hand comes down on the flashlight. I push the switch, and it lights up the inside of the car. The front seat's been pushed forward, so there's room for me to sit on the back seat and hang my head between my knees until the nausea passes. My head is messed up. Future archaeologists digging at this site will think I was entombed like an Egyptian pharaoh, only instead of donkeys and dancing girls I was buried with a bunch of cars and a giant realtor.

After a few minutes I climb out of the car and stand up, consciously standing straight to keep from falling over. The ground looks very far away. What I want to do is go back to the Mustang and lie down. Instead, I click on the flashlight and go looking for the woman. My belt is missing, so hopefully she's using it to control the bleeding. I don't see a trail of blood droplets, but the floor of the parking garage is covered with concrete dust, and there are some footprints near the car. Big footprints.

When I get to the Hummer, Jax is sitting in the front seat, and the woman is reclining in the back. She has my belt wrapped around her thigh, the strap pressed tight

into her flesh. My pants feel loose without it, and I hitch them up. Jax waves me over and smiles. This is a different Jax from the one I saw last night. He turns to the woman.

“Sandy, this is some guy. Guy, meet Sandy.”

The woman glares at Jax. “The name is Sandra. I hate the name ‘Sandy’ as you well know.”

I touch the lump on my forehead. “My name’s Hercule. What the fuck did you hit me for? I was trying to help you.”

“I was frightened. I’m sorry.”

Given our situation, I can’t really blame her.

“Sandra here works in the Trachis Tower, too,” Jax says. “She’s the exec assist for the guy who owns our firm. I asked her out once. She turned me down.” He turns his head to look at the woman. “But, that’s all water under the bridge, right Sandy? It’s a good thing I heard you two tussling. You might have bled to death.”

I point to the belt. “How long has the tourniquet been on your leg?”

Jax answers for her. “About twenty minutes. Maybe a half hour.”

“We’ll have to loosen it for a while so blood can flow to the lower leg. We don’t want you to get gangrene.”

“Won’t it just start bleeding again?” she asks.

“Probably. We can put direct pressure on the wound. Hopefully whatever clot has formed will hold. Have you got any clean cloth in your car? Some laundry or dry cleaning?”

She relaxes a little and says, "I've got a gym bag with a towel in it. Why?"

"I want to keep your cut as clean as possible when we put pressure on it."



I go back to her car for the gym bag and take a minute to get some water from the Mustang. When I get back Jax is hovering over her again.

"Can I take a look at your leg?" I ask her.

She stares at me for a moment, then slowly takes her hands away from her leg and moves her skirt above the wound. I take the towel from her gym bag.

"I'm going to put pressure on the wound and unbuckle the belt." I try to sound as matter-of-fact as possible. "I'll keep the pressure on for ten or fifteen minutes. Then we'll tighten the belt again. Okay?"

She nods, and I place the towel over the wound, clamp down with one hand, and loosen the belt. The towel gets damp, but the flow of blood is slow. I don't feel it pumping under my hand. I try to keep my eyes on the wound area, but her legs are shapely, and I let my gaze move up her thigh to the edge of her skirt. There's a small tattoo on the inside of her leg, a tiny stylized eye.

After a couple of minutes I ask, "Why were you hiding in your car? You must have heard us moving around. You could have called to us."

She doesn't answer, but she looks up at Jax. He smiles at her, shakes his head, and lumbers off. I can hear him moving around the twilight garage, occasionally thumping his big fist on a car hood. Neither of us speaks for a while. Then I say, "I'm going to tighten the belt again. Then I'll lift the towel, and we'll see if you're forming a clot."

I tighten the belt and she winces. "It's going to fall asleep again, isn't it? It really hurt before."

"Probably."

"It just tingled for a while, like when you sit with one leg folded under you. Then it moved up from my foot, and the whole leg felt like it was on fire."

"It'll probably start hurting again. We won't leave the belt on as long this time. You seemed to handle the pain pretty well, though." I lift the towel and bend down to look at the wound. "I can't tell if you're clotting yet, but the edges of the wound are clean. It's not a jagged tear. That's a good thing."

I smile, but she doesn't respond. She closes her eyes and leans back on the seat, finished talking. I decide to sit with her until Jax gets back. She seems frightened. I'm sure she's figured out that we're trapped down here.

It doesn't take long for her to fall asleep. She snores. Maybe she'll sleep through the discomfort when her leg starts to hurt. My head still hurts, and I think to catch a little nap myself, but just as I close my eyes I hear Jax coming back. He's grinning, and when he sees me he holds up a screwdriver.

"Check this out," he says. "I switched license plates."

"On the Mercedes?"

"Yep. I managed to pry off the little VIN number plates on the dashboard, too. I was going to swap seats, but my nice leathers are too fucked up. I'll just have to live with cloth seats for a while. The next step is to figure out how to change out the ignition switches. Get my key to work."

"So if we're rescued, you can drive right out."

"Damn right."

I lower my voice. "Sandra's sleeping. We have to wake her in a little while to loosen the belt again, but first, what's her deal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—" I consider my words carefully. "You work with her. You must know her at least a little. Why is she afraid of us?"

"She's not afraid of us."

"She was hiding in her car. She knew we were down here, that we could help her. But she didn't call out. She was hiding from us."

Jax's big brow furrows, as if there's something he can't quite get a handle on. Something just beyond his reach. He whispers to keep from raising his voice, but it's a harsh, angry whisper. "Maybe it's because she hates men."

"Hates men?"

"I didn't think it was a big deal, but when I asked her out she told me to fuck off."

"Were you married at the time?"

"Yeah."

"And she knew?"

"I suppose. That doesn't give her the right to call me a pig."

With her eyes still closed, Sandra says, "He hit me."

"I told you I was sorry," he says.

"We were alone in the elevator, and you hit me."

"I only meant to push you. I was angry."

She opens her eyes and sits up. "Yeah, well, you fucking hit me."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Christ, how many times do I have to say it?"

"Well, we're all in the same boat, now," I say. "And we're going to have to work together if we're going to survive."

"Survive?" she says. "You mean stay alive until, what? We starve to death? Suffocate?"

"No. Until a rescue team digs us out."

She laughs derisively. The laugh turns into a sob.

I pick up the gym towel. "Come on. Let's loosen that belt again."

## Chapter 6 Violet

I didn't open the envelope from Violet at work. I waited until the trip home to be sure I'd have some privacy. I stopped at a Starbucks, bought a coffee, and sat in my car. In the envelope was a sheet of pastel yellow stationary penned in a flowery script.

*Blue eyes. Not pale blue. Steel blue.*

*Gray blue. Piercing blue.*

*A blue that penetrates my defenses.*

*A blue that touches my soul.*

*The first thing I see in the morning,*

*and the last thing I see at night. Blue eyes.*

She hadn't addressed it to me or signed it. No names. Smart. I was flattered, of course. I folded the stationary, slipped it back into the envelope, and put it in my pocket. I should have thrown it away. I should have torn it up. But I have a box of papers at home with a couple of love letters from my ex. I hid it in there, figuring if Dana found it I could say my ex wrote it. Hiding something from my wife shouldn't have been that easy.

## Chapter 7 Hades

I've been lounging around listening to music for almost two hours. When the Mustang's battery started to run down, I cannibalized a few of the neighboring cars. Now I have a half-dozen batteries, and I can just swap them out when I need more power. Sandra went back to her Prius. She said she wanted to be alone for a while. Her wound has clotted, so thankfully, she doesn't need my belt. I don't know what Jax is doing. Truth is, I don't give a shit what either of them are doing. I gave them each a third of my pudding cups and a bottle of water. Then I went scavenging again and found a nice stash of blues CDs in a pickup truck, so I've been spending time with Lightnin' Hopkins, Little Walter, and Muddy Waters.

I also gathered all the half-full thermoses and drink cups I could find. When my phone died I lost track of time. I have a vague idea of how long we've been trapped, but I don't have any idea whether it's currently day or night. The odds of being rescued seem remote. I've given up on the SOS honking campaign.

There was a flashlight in the truck with the blues CDs. After this next song I'll get off my ass and have another look at the places along the walls where rubble is stacked to the ceiling. If I can find a place that looks like a rubble-filled stairway, I'm going to start digging out. I'd rather die from a cave in than starve to death. At least I will have been doing something, taking some action. Seeing me lying around listening to music and feeling sorry for myself would have upset my parents. My philosophic father would have been peppering me with quotes from Zeno or Marcus Aurelius. "Nothing happens to anybody which he is not fitted by nature to bear." Yeah, well, I'd like to see Marcus Aurelius dig his way out from under a twelve-story building.

In addition to my tire iron I've got a long, steel pipe I found in the bed of the pickup truck. It's sturdier than the lengths of rebar scattered around the garage. They bend if you put your weight on them. I take my tools and a bottle of water and start my reconnaissance, working my way over to the closest wall from my Mustang. There's a jumble of concrete piled up to a straight horizontal ridge about two feet below the ceiling here. If it's a stairway filled with rubble, maybe I can clear it.

I put the long pipe and flashlight down in a safe place and carefully climb the stack to the top. There's just enough light from the few remaining fluorescents. The first couple pieces of concrete come out easily, and I heave them down to shatter on the floor below. The noise is startlingly loud. I imagine Jax and Sandra are wondering what I'm up to. Work goes smoothly for a while. I feel up under the straight ridge, and it is, indeed, the lintel to a doorway. I only need to clear enough to slide through, see what's on the other side. I use the tire iron to pry out football and fist-size chunks, but I soon run across a slab too big to move. I climb back down and retrieve the long pipe. Wedging it into a hole on the side of the slab, and using the concrete doorframe as a fulcrum, I lean my weight against the pipe. The slab moves about two inches before an edge catches on the doorframe. I push with my hand to back the slab off a bit and put the end of the pipe under the front edge of the slab. This time I push down on the pipe, and the slab raises just enough to pass the doorjamb and slide forward. I repeat this move until the slab is clear and I can lever it out to tumble down the pile. I scrape away a few more chunks, and lying on my back, wiggle, head first, into the hole. A few pebbles rain down on my forehead, and I close my eyes to keep the dust out. When I open them again I slide the

flashlight in past my head. I can't tell if I'm looking at a stairway entrance or another room in the garage.

More pebbles pelt my forehead. I pull back just as a slew of loose concrete cascades down, filling the space. A dust cloud shoots out, catching me full in the face. I stumble blindly down the pile, sneezing and coughing, using the long pole for support. I wipe the dust out of my eyes, bend over and clench my fists. "Fucking hell!" There are twelve floors worth of concrete waiting to slide down and fill that doorway. Fuck it. Fuck Marcus Aurelius. This is bullshit. I'm going back to the Mustang.

#

I'm feeling sorry for myself. Self-pity, in general, disgusts me, and my own self-pity is insufferable. It leads to self-loathing, which leads back to self-pity. I spend the next hour or so listening to CDs and blowing dust out of my nose. I dedicate the Sunday comics section of the Los Angeles Times to this task. Reading the comic strips cheers me up a little. I open a pudding cup and settle back to snack while listening to music. My car battery is starting to wear down, though. BB King's "Night Life" sounds more like a slow yodel than a blues tune. I turn off the CD player, get out of the car, and walk around to the front where I've stacked the spare batteries. I pop the hood, and while I'm disconnecting the battery terminals, I see a movement under the car. I step back a few feet. If it's a rat, I don't want it biting my ankle or climbing up my leg. I bend down to look under the car, and there's the biggest cockroach I've ever seen. It's also the most assured. It doesn't scurry like other insects. It walks deliberately toward me, and when I lift my foot to squash it, it just stops and looks at me. I change my mind. Instead of squashing it, I get down on my hands and knees to catch it. It takes off, running back



under the car. It turns to the right, so I move around to the driver's side and slap my hand over it just as it comes out from behind the tire. I manage to pick it up by cupping my hands together. Its wiggling tickles my palm. I've got a plastic bag in the Mustang, and I put the roach in the bag and fold the top over. This frees up my hands so I can unravel a long thread from the ripped hem of my shirt. I fashion a slipknot in the thread and manage to get the loop around one of the roach's back legs. I place the roach on the dashboard and tie the other end of the thread to the rear view mirror above the roach's head. The roach tries the limits of his tether, and then stops to look at me.

"Your name is Gregor," I tell it. "Get used to it."

I go back out to the front of the car and finish hooking up the new battery. When I get back I cue up Muddy's version of "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and settle back. My mind is numb. My eyelids feel heavy. I don't want to think anymore. I finish off the pudding, except for a few dabs at the bottom of the cup, which I give to Gregor. A friend of mine once told me, "Eat alone, die alone." As long as I'm going to die, I might as well share my meager rations with my new best friend. The cockroach feels around the rim of the cup then crawls inside to dine. I think about Dana. I really miss her. It worries me that she doesn't have anyone here in LA to take care of her.

Gregor finishes his pudding and saunters back out of the cup.

"That's it, buddy. We're on rations."

An engine starts up back by the Hummer. I guess Jax has figured out how to hot-wire a car. Then there's the squeal of tires and a crash.

## Chapter 8 Violet

I've been avoiding Violet at work since our last lunch together. I had driven us to the restaurant, and on the way back to the office I turned at La Brea, pulled onto a yucca-lined residential street, and parked. We faced one another, not saying a word. Then I leaned across and kissed her. It was our first kiss—a furious kiss, passionate. And it lasted a long time. For days after, I experienced a confusing mix of emotions—exhilaration, guilt, and fear. I frightened myself.

The article I read about work spouses said having a crush on someone outside of your marriage was perfectly normal. It said a survey had determined that seventy percent of married women have work crushes. The figure for men was even higher. It also said that acting on a crush was foolish and risky and could destroy your marriage.

## Chapter 9 Hades

There's almost a half bottle of cranberry vodka left. I take it and a couple of pudding cups and go looking for Jax. The lights from a few car headlights send long shadows up the walls and across the chunks of concrete and pieces of rebar that litter the floor. As I move through the wreckage, I peer into the cars that haven't been cracked open yet. There's a bottle of water and a flashlight in one of them. I smash a window with my tire iron to get them. The noise of the breaking glass is especially loud.

Jax is lounging in the back seat of a minivan with a mashed front end. It looks like he drove it into a pillar. Obviously, the pillar won. As I slide into the driver's seat, he holds his hand out for the vodka, but I give him a pudding cup instead.

“Get a little nutrition, first,” I say.

He gives me a look but peels off the foil anyway.

“What am I supposed to eat this with?”

I hadn't thought of that. There weren't any spoons in the car with the pudding. I peel the foil away from my cup, lick the pudding off the back of the foil, and fold it in half and in half again. It's just sturdy enough to act as a little spoon. I scoop out some of the pudding and hold it up. “Try this.”

I watch Jax fold his foil in quarters and try to scoop pudding from his cup. His fingers are too big to manipulate the foil, and he spills the pudding. After two more unsuccessful attempts he hurls the pudding cup out the open door to splat against the side of a yellow Jeep. Jax holds out his hand again and says, “Give me the fucking vodka.”

I hand it over, and we sit in silence for a bit. Each lost in his own world. *Has Dana noticed that I'm missing? Does she care that I'm missing?*

Jax hands me the vodka and says, "Well, I guess my office is kaput. I hope my executive assistant wasn't killed in the collapse."

"You have a secretary?"

"Oh yeah. I had the firm's highest GCI three years running."

"What's GCI?"

"Gross Commissionable Income. I'm the best fucking closer this company ever saw. I'm the fucking king of south county real estate. I've won awards, trophies." He closes his eyes. I think he's through talking when he says, "I guess they're buried, now. Just like us." He's quiet for a minute, then says, "I'm hungry as hell."

"I've got some more pudding cups stashed in my new domicile. I'll go get a couple if you can fashion a spoon for yourself." I open the minivan's glove compartment.

"There's some cardboard in here you could use."

"Nah. Pudding isn't going to do it. What I need is a nice pastitsio."

"What's that?"

"Noodle casserole with meat and cheese. Very filling. I make it according to my mother's recipe, with lamb instead of ground beef."

"Sounds good. You like to cook?"

"Yeah well, I have to. Everything my wife cooks tastes like crap. Another reason I liked wife number two better. She was a good cook." He makes a noise that sounds like a cross between a laugh and a snort. "We cooked together when the kids were little. We'd each prepare a dish. Back then we had a house with a small kitchen, so we'd have to jockey for counter space while we cooked. It was fun. Reminded me of when I was a kid learning to cook from my mother."

"I'm not a very good cook, but I can bake. My grandmother taught me. Her house always smelled like baking bread. My wife and I used to bake together, too. I guess I associate the smell of baking with home." I see Dana in the kitchen. I imagine sifted flour spreading out across the board in a little cloud, then kneading and rolling out the dough, every step a small meditation. "Baking helps me relax."

"You know what else does that? Fucking."

"Yeah. Sex is a great way to relax."

"Let me tell you about the first time I got laid."

"Really? You want to talk about sex while we're trapped underground? Pick a different topic."

"Nah. We'll be dead in a week if not sooner. Anyway, my dad took me to a hooker to get my dick sucked when I turned eighteen, but I didn't get laid 'till my first year in college. I was on the wrestling team, and this girl, Helen, would come to the matches. She had red hair and big tits. I think her brother was on the team. I always won, and I guess that turned her on because she asked me out. I was living in a house off-campus with some other guys, and on our very first date I took her back to my room. Since it was my first time, I was a little nervous, but she was experienced. She talked through the whole thing, telling me what to do. She must have fucked a lot of guys before because when I put my dick inside her it was like opening a window and fucking the world." He thumps his chest with one hand and adds, "And you know I haven't got a small dick. We fucked after every tournament for the rest of the season. Sometimes she'd come over during the week, and we'd do it. I lost track of her after that semester. I think

she dropped out, married some guy, and moved to Ohio.” He’s quiet for a moment, remembering. “All right. What about you?”

I don’t want to tell him about my first time. I had been so excited I came right away. It was humiliating. And everything with this guy is a competition. He’s probably one of those guys who measure the length of his dick. Telling him about my first time would definitely be a losing strategy. Instead, I decide to tell him about the first time I had sex with Dana.

Jax kicks the back of my seat. “Well?”

“Okay. I didn’t go to college. After high school I got a job apprenticing for a design studio. My girlfriend went away to the University of Illinois, a hundred and fifty miles south of Chicago. Every Friday I’d drive down after work and spend the weekend. She had some deal worked out with her roommate so we could have the room to ourselves. Despite humans having had sex for the last two hundred thousand years, we acted like we had just discovered it. We were explorers, learning about each other’s bodies. She’d always burn sandalwood incense. She also had a little black kitten, which was just as much against the rules as having a man in the dorm, but the R.A. on her floor was easily bought off with a couple of joints.”

Jax kicks the back of my seat again. “Yeah, yeah, you were a couple of little hippies. What did she look like?”

“She had long brown hair and wore glasses, but she always took them off when we were kissing. Anyway, the time I remember most vividly we had spent the day driving around the back roads in the surrounding farm country, just talking and listening to music. We brought a pizza back to the room, but we were both too horny to eat. We

stripped and climbed into her bunk.” I close my eyes and remember. “I moved on top of her and buried my face in her hair. She smelled like cigarettes and almond soap. After a few minutes I could feel her starting to come. I raised myself up on my forearms so I could see her face. Her eyelids were half closed, and her mouth was half open. Her breathing was quick and throaty. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I wanted to freeze that image of her, to burn it into my retinas so I’d always have it.”

I realize I don’t want to share this experience. It’s one of my most cherished memories. To this day, the scent of almond soap takes me right back there. Turning it into locker room talk has tainted it, maybe ruined it. I slide out of my seat and stand next to the mini-van. “I’m sorry, man. I’m really tired. Must be the vodka. I’m going back to my Mustang to lie down.”

He sits up. “Hey. You’ve got to finish the story.”

“That’s pretty much it. I’ll see you later.” I turn to go and hear him climbing out of the mini-van. He sounds angry, snorting and stomping around.

“Fuck you,” he says and hurls the empty vodka bottle in my direction. It whizzes past my head, shattering against the side of the Jeep.

I point at the glass shards. “What the hell, man!”

He gives me the finger, and walks back to the Hummer.

## Chapter 10 Violet

Violet brought her teenaged daughter to work. The girl, Eva, was suspended from school. Smoking in the bathroom or something. Violet didn't want to leave her at home alone, and thought maybe seeing people doing actual work might have an effect on her. It had an effect on me. It made me realize that Violet and I are playing with more people's lives than our own. Dana, Violet's husband, her daughter—their happiness was in jeopardy because of us. Because of me.

One day she opened up about the trouble Eva is having at school.

“Honestly Hercule, I don't know what to do. The girl is hanging out with the slacker kids, the pot smokers and class ditchers, and her grades reflect the change. Punishing her has no effect. I've tried giving her incentives to improve her grades. You know, shopping trips and such. She won't even talk to her father, and when I try to talk to her she sighs and rolls her eyes. We were so close when she was little. It just breaks my heart.”

Violet and I haven't had sex, but we've been pretty close to it. Last week we started taking Violet's SUV to go to lunch. We weren't technically going to lunch. Violet found a more secluded spot than the residential street off La Brea, a parking lot behind an abandoned bakery. She drove us straight there. The seats in her SUV are roomier than in my little car. She shimmied across the center console to share my seat. We made out for a while, but then she wanted to talk about her husband.

Violet's husband, Brett, isn't physically abusive. The way she describes him he seems like a pretty normal guy. The trouble with Brett is that he's a guy's guy. He prefers hanging out with his friends to spending time with Violet. He and the guys get together a



couple times a week to play poker or watch a game at a bar. They go on trips to Vegas, leaving their wives at home to take care of the kids. Violet's lonely. She feels abandoned by both her husband and her daughter.

## Chapter 11 Hades

It's dark in the Mustang when I open my eyes. My hands are folded across my chest, the flashlight perched on my stomach. I imagine this is what I'll look like lying in a coffin. I pick up the flash and shine the light on the dashboard. The cockroach is sitting in the empty pudding cup, which is lying on its side. He doesn't seem startled by the sudden light, and I can't tell if he's awake or asleep. I lean forward.

“Hello, Gregor.”

He gives me a glance. I click off the light and sit up. My neck is killing me. I must have slept with my head jammed against the door. There's a glow off in the distance, but the area around my Mustang is pretty dark. I guess the few headlights I left lit finally drained their car's batteries. There's a strange smell in the air. It takes me a second to identify it, engine exhaust. Jax must be driving around again. I spend a couple of minutes massaging my neck, then get out of the car and stretch. I do a few toe touches and deep knee bends, and even though I'm reluctant to touch the concrete floor, I get down and do some push-ups. Then I hook my toes on either side of the Mustang's front left tire to do sit-ups. Just as I'm struggling to make sit up number fifty, I hear a rumbling noise. It's louder than Jax's other excursions, and for one brief moment I imagine it's the sound of digging. I think maybe we're going to be rescued, but as I listen I realize it's just a car, and all the energy is sucked out of my body.

*Fuck. C'mon Hercule, use your head. Don't let your circumstance dictate your emotions. Be the boss of you.*

I get up, grab my flashlight and tire iron, and make my way toward the noise. When I get closer I can see that Jax has pulled some of the cars into a circle around the

Hummer. He finishes backing a Volkswagen into the circle, slamming the car's rear bumper into the front end of a minivan. I wave to him and he climbs out of the VW, his big frame barely squeezing through the door.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Just marking my territory. Not trying to be a dick or anything, but I think it’s a good idea if we establish some boundaries. You know, just to avoid any confusion, any unnecessary arguments.”

“Sure, but we’re all trapped down here together.”

“Yes we are, and if you two were smart you’d elect me the leader. I’ve got the qualifications. You know, I had the firm’s highest GCI three years in a row.”

“I know. What makes you think we need a leader?”

“Somebody has to keep order down here.”

“Can’t we just cooperate with one another? There are only three of us.”

“That’s exactly the sort of pussy thing I expected you to say. Look, I’m claiming this area as my territory. As long as you recognize that, we won’t have any arguments.”

“What kind of arguments do you think we might have?”

He looks at me like I’ve asked a stupid question. “Turf, property, ownership arguments, that sort of thing. You’ve got the Mustang, and I’m claiming this area as my domain.” He gives me a stern look. “So, we’re clear, right?”

“Sure.” I look across the ring of cars to the Hummer in the center. “You want me to knock when I come over to visit?”

“I want you to respect my authority.” Like a shadow boxer, he throws a few punches at the air. “I’ll let you know if it’s okay to come in.”

I decide not to push it. I also decide not to mention the stench of the exhaust fumes. The air in the garage is stale as it is, and the last thing we need is to burn up oxygen and pollute our remaining air with hydrocarbons, but Jax has got a bug up his ass, and I don't want to set him off. Instead I ask, "Seen Sandra today?"

Jax says, "I went over to her car to see how she was doing, but she chased me off."

"Chased you off?"

"Yeah. She wouldn't talk to me. She was sitting in the back seat, so I bent down and stuck my head in to say hello, and she just turned away. Wouldn't say a word. I walked around to the other side of her car, and she threw a bottle at me."

"Sorry, man. She's probably pretty frightened. You know, I guess we all are."

"Yeah, well, fuck her. I'm through trying to be nice to that bitch."

"I'll look in on her later, make sure her leg's okay. I want to do a little more scrounging, first. I'm almost out of pudding cups, and I'm starving." I point to the other side of the garage, past Jax's ring of cars. "Have you gone through the cars by that far wall, yet? Anything edible in them?"

"I haven't looked, but now that you mention it, I'm fuckin' hungry. Let's go take a look."

Jax picks up a piece of clean rebar to bust windows with, and we walk past his enclave to the far row of cars. A few of them have already been cracked open by falling concrete. We move from car to car, checking the trunks and glove compartments and looking under the seats. We come up with a couple more flashlights and a few cans of energy drink. In the third car, a mini-van, we strike it rich. Jax pops the back open and

there are two big boxes of candy bars, Snickers and Almond Joy. Each box contains twelve smaller boxes, and each smaller box contains twelve candy bars.

"This is awesome, man. There are two hundred and eighty-eight bars here. That's— Hang on." I do a little quick math. "Ninety-six candy bars each."

"Ninety-six. How do you figure?"

"Divide two eighty-eight by three."

"Oh yeah, the bitch."

I dump out the contents of a gym bag and load up the energy drinks, flashlights and tools we've found. Then we move down the line and search the rest of the cars, munching candy as we go. It takes us a couple of hours, but when we finish we've got a pretty good stash of supplies. There are even a couple of first aid kits, one with disinfectant wipes.

I get to the last car just before Jax, and when I bust open the back window, I'm glad I do. There's a shopping bag on the seat containing four bottles of red wine, the perfect thing to pair with pudding cups and Snickers bars. I start to turn, looking for Jax to tell him about the wine, when I notice something protruding from under the front seat. I snatch it up and slide it into my gym bag, shoving it under the energy drinks, then look to make sure Jax didn't notice. It's a handgun, a Glock. Seems like every fashion-conscious gun guy has to have a Glock. I zip up the bag and sling it over my shoulder. I decide to give Jax two of the four bottles of wine. I hope it'll distract him so he won't ask to see in the gym bag. I'm nervous enough being around this guy with his volatile temper. Giving him access to a gun would scare the hell out of me. I hold up the wine bottles.

"Check this out. We've got us a little more alcohol."

"What is it?"

"Red wine. Two bottles, each."

"Thanks. Hey, I thought you wanted to share all our foraging with the bitch."

"I'll give her some of mine if she wants it."

"Gonna put the moves on her, huh. That is one good-looking piece of ass."

I figure it's easier to go along with his bullshit than start another argument.

*Be one of the guys, Hercule.* "Damn right," I say.

We continue moving along the row of cars to the end. When we get to the last car in the line I see it. A nightmare. A body. A man in a business suit lying face down, his arms thrown out to the sides, his head flattened beneath a rectangular concrete slab. He must have fallen or been knocked down just as the ceiling— It's funny, the little details one notices. The man's suit is covered with concrete dust, so much dust that I can't tell if the material is gray or blue, and it looks limp, as though there's no one in it. But his expensive-looking shoes are perfectly clean. The tops, the soles, there's not a speck of dirt on them. I keep my flashlight beam trained on his shoes. I don't want to look at his head. I don't want to, but I have to. I move the light to shine on his shoulders and the area where his head should be, and when I do, I hear Jax gag. He's standing behind me. I don't take my eyes off the dead man, but I hear Jax leaving, walking back the way we came. This could have been me. It still could be. A falling slab could crush one of us at any moment.

There's not as much blood as I would have thought, at least not visible blood. There's probably more under the concrete slab. I start to click off my flashlight when another detail catches my eye. His necktie is lying across his shoulder. It must have

flipped up and over when he fell. It's one of those clever novelty neckties, an eye chart with the big capital E on top and subsequent rows of letters below it, each row smaller in size. Maybe the guy was an optometrist. I have a dark thought, "I guess he didn't see this coming," and then I start to laugh. It takes all my will to turn off the flashlight and move away from the dead man, and as I head back to the Mustang my horrible uncontrollable laughing is interspersed with horrible uncontrollable sobbing.

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I pull myself together and go looking for Sandra. She's sitting in the back seat of her car when I approach. I decide not to mention the corpse. I don't want to frighten her any more than she already is. I tap on a back fender, then circle around to a side window, standing well back so she can see me.

"Don't throw anything," I say, "I've got some stuff for you."

She turns to look at me, and I can tell right away she's been crying. Her eyes are red and her face is puffy. She wipes her cheeks with a t-shirt.

"Been talking to Jax?" she asks.

"Yeah. You really hate that guy, don't you?"

"I told you. He hit me. He's a narcissist with no self-control. He wants what he wants when he wants it, and if he doesn't get it—look out. Other women in the office have had trouble with him, too. Some of them call him The Bug. I want nothing to do with him. You need to be careful around him, too. He'll hurt you if you piss him off."

"Got it. So, how's the leg?"

"Better, I think. I've stopped using the tourniquet. There's still a little seepage, but for the most part the bleeding has stopped."

I dig into my gym bag and pull out one of the first aid kits. "We were scrounging around in some of the cars and came up with this. It's got alcohol wipes in it, so you can clean the wound." I hand her the box through the window. "Actually, you should just clean around the wound. Maybe pat the wound itself but do it gently. You don't want to dislodge the clot."

She takes the kit. "Thanks."

I dig into the bag again, and come up with a bottle of wine and her third of the candy bars. "Here's some sugar and alcohol. You're not diabetic, are you?"

"No."

I hand her the bottle and the candy. "This'll keep you going, but don't eat too much. It'll spike your blood sugar and give you a headache."

"Does Jax know you're giving me this stuff?"

"Yeah. We're sharing. I split it up into thirds." I turn to go, but she calls me back. "Stay and talk for a bit. Why don't you sit up front?"

I toss the gym bag into the front seat and slide in after it. I say, "So, you work for a real estate firm in Century City. That must be interesting."

"Multi-million dollar properties, both commercial and residential. International clients. Lots of wheeling and dealing. It's boring as hell."

"That's too bad. What would you rather do?"

"I like kids, especially toddlers. I've thought about teaching, maybe pre-school or kindergarten."

"Why don't you do it?"



"Mostly because of the money. It's shit pay. I'm saving to buy a house. Only jerks pay rent, especially in L.A."

"I pay rent."

She shrugs.

"So, you're going to keep working at a job you don't like? That sounds like a drag."

"Yeah, well, what do you do?"

"Commercial art. Mostly design, but some illustration."

"Do you like it?"

"Touché. What I'd really like to do, of course, is paint."

"And you don't paint because—?"

"My wife is a magazine editor, and the money isn't that great, so I need to have an income. You know, you could go to night school for your teaching certificate while you're working at the real estate company. That way, when you buy your house, you'll be all set to change careers."

"That's not a bad idea, and I've got plenty of time. I've given up on the dating scene. Every guy I've been out with in the last year has been an asshole. Face it, man. Your sex is messed up. I went out with one guy who ended our first date early so he could meet another woman he'd made a date with for the same evening. The next guy spent the whole date complaining that it was the fault of the feminists that he couldn't get laid. When I pointed out that his embrace of victimhood might have something to do with it, he called me a bitch and stormed out of the restaurant. Stuck me with the check, too."

"I'd apologize for my fellow men, but we're not all like that. There are still a few sane men roaming around."

"Yeah, well, I haven't met 'em. My college boyfriend came close, but he hooked up with his French teacher, 'Chantal.' The last I heard they were eating cheese and banging each other's brains out in the Marais. It took me a long time to get over that guy. I cried myself to sleep every night for six months. I went into therapy. I didn't think I'd ever get over him. Hell, I'd switch to dating women, but they're even crazier."

"So, you've got time to go to night school. My dad is a really practical guy, not inclined toward sentiment, but chock full of fatherly advice. One of his favorites is, 'All roads lead nowhere, so choose one with heart.' I think what he means is, do something with your life that makes a difference for someone other than yourself."

"And subsequently you'll feel better about yourself. My yaya used to say stuff like that."

She smiles for the first time. It animates her face, giving it a warmth it otherwise lacks. I open the car door to go back to the Mustang, but stop when I hear shouting. Jax is raging at the top of his lungs, swearing punctuated with the sound of breaking glass. Sandra stiffens when she hears it.

"That guy scares me," she says.

## Chapter 12 Violet

I don't know why, but I expected Violet to agree when I said, "We should stop this." We were huddled together in the passenger seat of her car again, parked behind the bakery. The only other car was a beater with a handful of tickets on the windshield.

Violet said, "You mean *this*?" She ran her hand up the inside of my thigh. Kissed my neck.

I picked her hand off my leg and held it. "Seeing each other, I mean. Seeing each other."

"We can't stop. I don't want to stop. You obviously don't want to stop." She looked down at my crotch to emphasize her point.

"It's more than just us. I realized that when I saw your daughter at the office. We're gambling with our families' happiness."

"What about our happiness? Don't we have a right to be happy?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. I like being with you, but I'm constantly worried that we'll slip up. What would that do to your husband and daughter? What would that do to my wife?"

"Brett wouldn't even notice. And Eva? It would just confirm her opinion that her mother's an asshole. I need us. I don't have anyone else."

"And Dana?"

"You said it yourself. Your wife won't even touch you." She put her hand back on my thigh. "We have the right to be happy."

"Maybe, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm worried. I worry about everything, all the time."

“Well, don’t. It’s that simple. Just don’t.”

## Chapter 13 Hades

I've lengthened the string on Gregor's leash so I can take him for a walk. He's pretty smart for a bug. I was worried that, with the leash tied to one of his legs, the pull on that side would cause him to walk around in circles. He learned to compensate almost immediately. The leash is tied to the hind leg on his right side, so when he wants to walk from point A to point B he angles a little bit left. We've been walking for almost an hour, now. At least it feels like an hour. My ability to gauge time is pretty much shot. I thought maybe he'd lead me to some food or an unblocked exit, but mostly he's just gone under cars to hide. I keep dragging him out, and he keeps running under. I just hope we don't run into another dead body. I'll never be able to unsee that poor guy and the look of his empty, deflated suit.

It's as hard to tell distance down here as it is to tell time. Despite the large area, the low ceiling makes it feel like we're trapped in a very small space. I've had several bouts of claustrophobia. Not panic attacks, per se, but that feeling like the walls are closing in on me. I used to get a similar feeling the first time I worked in an office. They called the floor I worked on "the cubicle farm." Most of the employees were able to lose themselves in their work. I couldn't do it. I was constantly aware of being in a little box, my life ticking away while I designed ads to sell barbecue tongs, beer can cozies, and other useless detritus of a society driven mad by consumerism. Some days it was difficult for me to breath. I imagined that if I died, I'd just stay sitting at my desk, and the cool filtered air coming in through the vent over my cubicle would mummify my corpse, and the cleaning crew would dust me off and move on to the next cubicle.

I feel like that now, so I stop to take deep breaths. There's still dust in the air, which stings my nostrils, but I no longer smell the exhaust fumes from Jax's fort construction. Gregor's tugging at his leash. He's found something to eat, an empty Snickers wrapper with a few crumbs left inside. Probably dropped by Jax or Sandra. I give Gregor some slack, and he disappears inside the wrapper. Why don't I smell the exhaust fumes? We're near the pile of rubble that I tried to clear out of the doorway. The air here smells fresher than the air over by my Mustang. I tie Gregor's leash to a concrete block and scoop up a handful of dust. I climb up on the hood of an Audi and toss the dust up in the air. Most of it floats straight down, but a small plume swirls into a curly cue as it descends. There's an air current, and it's coming from below one of the concrete slabs blocking the doorway. Air's flowing in from the other room. I need to get into that room. I scoop up the candy wrapper with Gregor still inside it and hurry back to get the pry bar.

The concrete slab is covered with debris, so I start clearing away the loose stones and gravel. There are a couple of big chunks with rebar sticking out, which makes them easier to grip. I start tugging at the chunk on top of the pile, and a streamer of dust and pebbles rains down from the ceiling. This is going to take some thought. Everything I know about tunneling comes from watching old movies. Charles Bronson would have shored up the doorframe.

There's a smashed Escalade just a couple of cars over. One of its doors is hanging loose, attached by one hinge. I twist it off and use my tire iron to bust off the window frame, then spend the next hour or so scraping a horizontal channel into the debris filling the doorway, about halfway between the floor and the lintel. The car door fits into the channel perfectly. Now I can scrape away at the dust and pebbles just above and behind

the door, fashioning a slot and pushing the door into it an inch at a time. I remove just enough of the debris to slide my arm in past the car door. It's slow going, but soon I get into a rhythm—scrape away debris, push the door in farther, scrape, push, scrape, push. When the car door is about a foot into the doorway, my back and shoulder muscles cramp. The plan is to dig out the space below the car door but stick to the middle of the doorway, leaving a shelf of debris on either side supporting the car door and preventing a cave in.

Sandra wanders over and asks if she can help. I have her stand on a slab next to me, enlarging the space behind the car door that's shoring up the debris. While she scrapes, I sit in front of the doorway and pull gravel and chunks of concrete from under the car door. I could probably work just as fast by myself, but maybe having something to do will improve Sandra's mood. Besides, from down here there's an excellent view of her excellent legs.

I stop digging to check Sandra's progress. She's cleared about three inches more, so I shove the car door deeper into the slot, then go back to working on the hole. I'm concentrating on breaking up a large chunk of concrete with the flat edge of my tire iron, so I don't hear Jax behind me until he speaks.

"Hey, Mister Mole-man, you gonna dig us out of here?"

He's standing, shirtless, with one hand on his hip and the other holding what looks like a can of beer. He must have done some more scrounging. Despite his belly, his bulk is impressive. He looks like a mountain, and his biceps and forearms are huge. Sandra is still working, refusing to look at him.

"That's the plan," I say. "But I don't know where this doorway leads, so don't get your hopes up just yet."

"That's a pretty small hole you're digging. A skinny little shit like you could squeeze through it, but not me. You weren't planning on leaving your old buddy behind, were you?"

I look at the hole. He's right. I hadn't even thought about getting him out with us. It'll barely be large enough for Sandra or me. Jax could never get through it.

"I'll extend it from top to bottom once I get through to the other side. You'll have to lie on your side to crawl through. I can't widen the hole because I need the debris on the sides to keep the car door in place to prevent a cave-in."

"And how about you, pretty lady? You weren't going to leave me behind, were you?"

Sandra turns to look at Jax, but can't hold his gaze.

She mumbles, "I don't give a fuck what you do."

"I guess your father didn't teach you any manners, eh bitch?"

"Fuck off."

Jax addresses me, but keeps looking at Sandra. "What about it, Herk? Think her millionaire father was flying around the world on business trips when he should have been home raising his little girl?"

"Millionaire?"

"She didn't tell you? God, that's all she ever talked about at work. Daddy's rich, but she's mad at him. Isn't that right, Missy? Gonna be independent to teach him a lesson. Well, maybe I ought to teach you some manners."



"I don't see how," I say. You've got her beat in the rudeness department. In fact, I'd say that down here in the underworld, you're the king of bad manners."

It takes a second for my insult to register. Jax slowly shifts his attention to me.

"So, that's how it is. You and Miss Bitch have teamed up. What? Did she slobber on your knob?"

"Look man, we're all trapped down here together. We shouldn't be fighting. We should be working together to get out." I look at Sandra. "At the very least we should try to be civil."

Jax says, "Spare me the kumbaya speeches. If you get your hole dug and find a way out, come and get me. Otherwise, you can both go to hell."

He turns on his heel, raises his middle finger over his head, and marches off into the gloom, heading back to his circle of cars.

Sandra's visibly shaken. "I don't trust that guy," she says. "He's dangerous."

We work in silence for the next hour or so. Then she says, "I don't think you should enlarge the hole for Jax. I need to get away from him."

"You obviously hit a sore spot."

"I didn't hit anything. I just didn't want to go out with him, and now he's got it in for me."

"Don't worry." I give her hand a squeeze and try to redirect the conversation. "So, what about your parents? Won't they be wondering what happened to you?"

"My father probably is. We usually talk at least once a week. He likes to give me stock tips. Thinks it makes him sound smart. My mother and I don't talk as much as we used to. She has some very old world ideas about how women should behave. I'm a

constant disappointment to her. With a name like Sandra, you'd think she'd have been prepared for a free-thinking daughter."

"What's your name have to do with it?"

"My father named me Cassandra after a woman from an old Greek play. The god Apollo was in love with her, but she turned him down. I like the idea of being so independent you can tell a god to piss off."

## Chapter 14 Violet

Dana has agreed to go with me to counseling. We're still not having sex, and she's still defensive and bitter, but it's a step in the right direction. She's at least willing to admit that we have a problem. I love her. I want her to be happy. I want us to be happy. This is the first glimmer of hope I've had. Maybe there is a future for us.

Of course, this makes my relationship with Violet a liability. Whatever progress Dana and I make with counseling will be blown to hell if she finds out about Violet. Despite not having had actual sex with Violet I feel guilty. I am guilty. The real betrayal for both of us has been our emotional infidelity. I've shared my feelings about Dana with Violet, and she's told me all about her relationship with Brett. I guess we've used one another to let off steam. Lend a sympathetic ear. We've kind of been each other's therapists. You don't kiss your therapist, though. You don't fondle your therapist's breasts, and she doesn't rub your thigh.

Today, I insisted we go to the restaurant at lunch. Neither of us spoke as we passed the bakery parking lot on our way to the Thai joint. She knew what I was going to say. Her ginger chicken sat there, getting cold, while I talked. No more kissing. No more parking. No more sneaking around. I tried to be gentle but firm. Matter of fact. I don't know how I expected her to react. I didn't expect her to start crying. She covered her face with her napkin. She sobbed for a minute, then tossed her napkin on the table.

"Fuck you," she said.

She grabbed her purse, got up from the table, and stormed out of the restaurant. I paid the check and followed her out. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and stood on the sidewalk, smoking. I'd never seen her smoke before. I'd never even smelled

cigarettes on her breath. The cigarette was long and thin, and she held it between splayed fingers.

“Don’t be upset. We knew this couldn’t last.”

She exhaled a cloud of white smoke. “You know what I do most afternoons? Instead of making calls to my clients, I look at travel brochures. I daydream about the two of us at a ski lodge in the Swiss Alps or going to the opera in Vienna.”

“I didn’t know you liked opera.”

“I don’t know whether I like it or not. I’ve never been. That’s not the point. The point is that I had something. Something better than Brett and his idiot friends sitting in front of the television rooting for millionaires running around trying to hit a ball or catch a ball or toss a ball through a hoop.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” She snapped her cigarette butt into the street. “Maybe it was never going to happen, but imagining that you and I had a future helped me get through the day. I loved you, Hercule.”

I reached out to give her a hug. She put her hands on my chest and pushed me away. She said, “Let’s just go.” and marched back to the car.

## Chapter 15 Hades

Sandra's gone back to her Prius. I was exhausted and came back to the Mustang. I'm eating a candy bar and talking to Gregor. He's a good listener. Sometimes, when I address him directly, he looks right at me. At least that's the way it appears. Cockroach eyes have over two thousand lenses, so I guess he could be looking anywhere.

"My friend," I say, "That Sandra is hot."

Gregor leans a little to one side, which I interpret as the cockroach version of a head tilt. He turns his back on me and saunters into his pudding cup. I finish the candy bar and close my eyes, but soon I hear shouting. I sit up and lean my head out of the window. I can't tell whether the shouts are coming from Sandra's car or Jax's domain, but they sound angry, so I get up to go see what the hassle is. As I make my way through the debris, I can make out some of the words.

"Stay in your hole, you fucking scum!"

"Screw you, bitch! I was just trying to be nice."

"Nice my ass. You've been sniffing around me for months. Well, guess what? I'm not interested. Not now. Not ever."

"We're going to die down here, stupid. Why not make our last days on earth a little more, you know, friendly? You might enjoy— What the hell?"

This last is followed by the sound of glass breaking and a flurry of swearing. Sandra's standing outside Jax's ring of cars. Her stance is defiant, feet apart, one fist on her hip, the other clutching a bottle. Jax is standing behind the Hummer looking down at the shattered remains of an empty wine bottle. I call out to avoid startling them. I don't want them to start throwing stuff at me. "Hey guys. Everything all right here?"

Sandra turns to look at me, and the ferocity of her glare stops me in my tracks. Jax shouts over her head, "Mind your business. This is between me and Miss Bitch."

Sandra chimes in. "Go back to your car, Hercule. This doesn't concern you." Of course it concerns me. Down here I make up one third of the population. I say, "If you kill one another who's going to help me dig?" As the words leave my mouth, I know this is the wrong thing to say.

"Oh my god," Sandra says. "No wonder your wife is divorcing your ass." "What's that supposed to mean?"

Jax shouts, "Hey! What are you two talking about?"

Sandra holds up the unbroken wine bottle and shouts back, "Hercule's just convinced me that I should smash this bottle over his head instead of yours."

"Be reasonable," I say. "Let's all just calm down."

Jax comes out from behind the Hummer. "Why? What did he do?"

"He's one of those passive-aggressive guys. They're afraid to raise their voices. Instead, they pick away at you with disapproving little comments. They whittle away your confidence to build themselves up, and when you confront them they act all hurt and surprised."

"That's not me," I say, but she goes on.

"I've seen how these guys operate. They're too afraid to have a good old-fashioned fight, so they sneak in a jab when you don't expect it, and when you call them on it they tell you you're being 'unreasonable'."

"I don't do that," I repeat.

“Sure you do. Hell. At least with a Neanderthal like Jax you know what you’re getting. You know to get out of his way when he gets mad, or you’ll wind up with a fat lip. A guy like you just eats away a little piece of a woman's soul at a time.” She looks at the bottle in her hand and laughs. “One of you is a head-on collision and the other is rust.” She hurls the bottle past Jax, to shatter against the side of the Hummer, then walks back to her car without looking at either of us.

#

It seems like I've been working on this hole forever. Sandra isn't helping anymore. I have to continually stop digging to stand up, scrape out space behind the car door, and push it deeper into the slot. My back is killing me. I brought Gregor along for company. We've been talking to each other quite a bit. He's sitting on a waist-high slab of concrete that's leaning against the wall. I've wrapped his leash around a protruding corner. I know the idea that a cockroach can communicate with a human is crazy. I'm not that far gone, but still— Anyway, I don't think Gregor's too happy with me lately. We're almost out of pudding cups, so I've reduced our rations to two a day. I would have gone down to one a day, but as long as I'm digging I need the energy. I've got one candy bar left. I'll split it with him when I break through to the other room. Or when I finally give up hope.

The debris on the far side of the doorway is deeper than the doorway itself. I think a lot of this stuff piled up when I had that first cave-in. The concrete right in front of me has a length of rebar sticking out of it horizontally that's preventing me from pulling it through the hole. I'm afraid if I push it farther into the hole I'll wedge it in even tighter. I back out of the hole and sit for a minute to gather my thoughts. I can't tell if Gregor is awake or napping. I actually don't know if cockroaches sleep.

"Hey Gregor. Guess what? I can't go back, and I'm afraid to go forward. Is that an appropriate metaphor or what?"

I wedge my longest pipe between the top of the slab and the debris covering it. Then I pick up a piece of concrete and give the end of the pipe a whack. The bar moves in a couple of inches. I tap it a few more times to get it set, then tee off and really smack it. The pipe slides in about a foot, and it feels like the end has broken through the rubble. I grip the pipe and start to pull it back out. I'm really putting my back into it when I hear some commotion from the other side of the garage. Jax and Sandra are shouting at one another again, but I can't make out what they're saying.

The pipe comes loose, and I reposition it so I can push the slab clear of the hole. It's hard to get any purchase on the floor, and I push on the pipe until my hands cramp up without moving the slab more than an inch. There must be a lot of debris stacked on top of it. I decide to try to clear some of that first. I pull the pipe out again just as Sandra screams. It's not an angry scream. This is a scream of fear. She sounds panicked. I pick up the pipe and go, making my way toward them through the rubble and cars, moving as fast as I can without a flashlight.

As I get closer to Jax's ring of cars, I see that he's got Sandra on the ground. He's pinned one of her arms with his right hand and is working to catch the other while she flails at him. His pants are down around his ankles, and her underpants are lying on the floor near her head. I shout as I come across the hood of a little Fiat.

"Hey, man! Get off her!"

He doesn't even look up. He's breathing hard, his raspy breath mingling with Sandra's screams. As I come up behind him, his hips raise up, and I can see that he hasn't



penetrated her yet. I shout again and smack him on the back of the head with my open palm. He doesn't even flinch. He gets a hold of Sandra's other hand and pins it, too. I tap him lightly on the head with the pipe, and he looks up. He turns toward me, but I'm not sure he sees me. His eyes are glazed, unfocused. Sandra sees me and stops screaming.

"Get this motherfucker off me!" she shouts.

I try to sound stern and authoritative. "Jax! Stop! Get off!"

He ignores me. This time I smack him harder, twice, right over his ear. The third time I hit him he lets go of Sandra's arm to grab the pipe. He's off balance, so, when I pull the pipe away, he lurches to one side. He releases the pipe just in time to catch himself before he topples over, and when he does I give him one more smack. Sandra manages to slide out from under him and jerk her other arm free. She runs off, and Jax rolls over onto his back. He lies there holding his head and panting, his chest heaving, his dick flaccid. His eyes are still closed. I'm worried that I might have hit him too hard. I bend over him and say, "Jax?"

That's all I get out. His eyes snap open, and he backhands me across the mouth. Even though he's still lying down, the force of the blow knocks me over. I scramble up, grab my pipe, and get out of there.

## Chapter 16 Violet

I hate office parties. I've only been to a few, but they always seem like minefields. The office sycophants compete for the boss's attention. The employees who resent management huddle together and make disparaging remarks while the managers try not to fraternize with the enemy. And if the owner or CEO attends, he or she flits from group to group tossing off greetings and insincere compliments. The danger is trying to figure out how to engage in conversation in a way that won't come back to haunt you later.

Our holiday office party was right after work on a Friday afternoon. I hadn't planned to go, but Dana had been especially sharp-tongued lately, finding fault with the smallest transgressions. *Can't you, at least, put your goddamn glass in the sink? If you interrupt me again, I'm going to stop talking to you. Etc.* Going to the holiday party seemed slightly less stressful.

So I went. And I drank. The party was in the lounge of a hotel on Sunset. I found a spot at the end of the bar, perched on a stool, and had the bartender "keep 'em coming." Most of my coworkers were too busy chatting with other people to talk with me. Violet was holding court on the other side of the room. She was surrounded by men, including the big boss himself. Every once in awhile she'd glance over in my direction, but her eyes would sweep the bar, passing over me and returning to her cadre. She never acknowledged me.

After my fourth Manhattan, I figured it was time to leave. It was a cash bar, so I paid my tab, pulled on my jacket, and headed for the door. I decided it would make more sense to say my thank you's on Monday, when I would be sober and less likely to say

something stupid. I was crossing the lobby when Violet came up behind me and grabbed my arm.

“About time,” she said. “I thought you were going to sit at the bar drinking all night.”

“I didn’t think you were talking to me, so I tried to stay out of your way.”

“And left me at the mercy of those leches. It’s amazing how many ways men can find to sneak a look at your boobs while pretending to have a conversation with you.”

“So, you’re not mad at me?”

“Of course I’m mad at you. I’m furious. But I miss you, too. And Brett’s off on one of his bro-cations. Reno this time.”

“So it’s just you and Eva.”

“She’s spending the weekend with my in-laws. It’s just me.” She leaned closer to avoid being overheard. She smelled faintly of peppermint. “I have a room upstairs. Number three-oh-seven. Give me five minutes, then come up.”

#

When I knocked she answered the door so quickly, she must have been standing right behind it. She pulled me into an embrace as the door clicked shut behind me.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“I don’t like the way we left things,” I said. “We should talk.”

We both looked at the bed. It was an overwhelming presence in the room. I held her at arms length, my hands on her shoulders.

“I care about you. A lot. I just don’t want to hurt anyone. We’re adults. We should behave like adults.”

“So you want us to be friends.”

“I really do.”

“Okay, but let me tell you what it’s like being me.” She sat on the bed. “Most men disgust me. There’s a constant parade of leering jerks filing through the office. Looking me over. Giving me little approving nods. The brave ones like to touch my knee or give my hand a little pat. I’m sure they think it turns me on. Don’t get me wrong; I enjoy being pretty. I don’t try to hide behind baggy shirts or sweat pants. But sometimes the constant attention gets to me. Last week the bag boy at the grocery store told me I have a nice ass. The fucking bag boy! Meanwhile, I’m married to a man who pays less attention to me than he does his fantasy football league. My daughter hates me. All my college friends live in other states. I wasn’t happy before you and I started going to lunch, but I was coping. Then, for a while, you were the best part of my day. Now I’m acutely aware of how fucking lonely I am.”

“I’m sorry.” I sat next to her on the bed and took her hand.

“I know you’re sorry. And I know we should think about our families. I don’t know if Brett cheats on me when he goes out of town. I don’t think he does, but I’ve come to realize lately that I don’t know my husband very well. And he doesn’t really know me. The worst part is, I don’t think it bothers him that he doesn’t know me. We got married right out of high school. All this time and we’re just used to one another.” She turned to face me. “And the clock keeps ticking. Every morning I look in the mirror and there’s another little crease at the corner of my eyes. Life keeps whizzing past. Everything seemed clear when Eva was a little girl. I knew who I was then. I was someone’s mother. I don’t know who I am anymore. Look, I know you’re worried about

your wife. I don't want to cause you any unnecessary stress. I just—I mean—we don't have to make love. I just really need a friend right now.”

Five minutes later we were in the bed. It was the saddest sex. Violet grasping and sighing and, finally, her tears staining my chest as she collapsed onto me in a release more emotional than physical.

I drove home in a state of depression and self-loathing. I had taken advantage of a sad lonely lady and risked my marriage in the process. When I got home I undressed as quietly as possible and prayed that Dana wouldn't wake up as I slid into bed.

## Chapter 17 Hades

Looking for Sandra is problematic. I doubt that she'd hide near Jax's territory, but she's not anywhere near the Mustang or the tunnel. Of course, she may be trying to outsmart him, figuring he wouldn't expect her to hide near his circle of cars. I head over to the Jaguar. It's a little closer to Jax's domain than I'd like, so I move slowly, trying to be stealthy. There's a row of cars in front of me. The last car in that row, way down close to a wall, is where the man with the eye chart tie and crushed head is lying. Just as I'm hoping she didn't wander down that way I hear her shriek. She's found the corpse. I head toward the noise. This time I'm prepared. I'm so drained of emotion that seeing a man with his head flattened shouldn't have much effect. I look at him quickly, just long enough to get the impression of emptiness. His suit no longer holds the remains of a man. He looks more like a lawn bag, half-filled with leaves.

Sandra's not there. Probably run off, traumatized by having seen my optometrist friend right after her encounter with Jax. I take one more look at the dead man. Gregor's moving around in my pocket, tickling my chest, telling me it's time to move along. I turn to go and hear a grating noise above me. A fluorescent light fixture breaks loose from the ceiling and swings down, still attached by its wires. It arcs past, just missing my head. Streamers of dust pour down from the ceiling. I run and a concrete slab crashes down behind me. I trip over something, fall forward, and crawl. I crawl as fast as I can, clear down the row of cars, afraid to look up, certain I'm about to be crushed. More concrete rains down behind me. There's a patch of skin tingling at the small of my back, waiting for a slab to hit. I crawl all the way back to the Jaguar and turn to sit on the floor, pressing my back against the passenger door. I hug my knees to my chest. My muscles

are rigid, and I can't stop shivering. The sound of my heart is pounding in my ears. When my breathing starts to slow, I feel Gregor squirming in my pocket. I take a look. He's okay, just shaken up. There are little chips of stone and glass stuck in my palms. I wipe my hands on my pants and push up to my feet, and there's Jax. He's standing in front of me, his face white with dust, his eyes hidden by shadows.

"What did I tell you about invading my territory?" he says.

He smashes me in the nose, and I feel the cartilage give. The pain blinds me, bends me over. He grabs a handful of my shirt at the shoulder, but I yank it free and hurry to the other side of the car. He seems disoriented, moving slowly as he comes after me. I hurry back to the Mustang, leaving a trail of blood as I go.

#

It's all-out war, now. After I got the bleeding stopped, I went to work on my tunnel, but an hour into it I heard the sound of glass breaking. When I got back to the Mustang all the windows were broken, and the seats were covered with glass shards. I had taken Gregor to dig with me, so he's okay, but I know I can't protect him. If I leave him in the Mustang, Jax will be sure to squash him.

I take him over by my bathroom alcove and put him on the ground in a clean section near the wall. I imagine it smells awful back here, but my nose is so swollen that I have to breathe through my mouth. I take out my last candy bar, break it in half, and set Gregor's half down next to him. He pounces on it. I raise my half in a salute and say, "Happy trails, little friend." Then I cut the string, close to the roach's hind leg. I'd like to think he looked up at me as I walked away, but it's dark back here. Probably just wishful thinking.

On the way back to the Mustang I remember the Glock. I hid it in the Mustang's engine compartment to keep Jax from getting his hands on it. I pop the Mustang's hood, stick my hand down behind the radiator, and root around until I feel its checkered grip. A gun adds a new variable to our predicament. I don't want to shoot Jax, but he's become a danger. He could attack Sandra again. He could decide to take me out first so I can't stop him from raping her. And he's a big guy. If I have the gun when he attacks me, I'll probably have to use it. I may be afraid of him, but I don't want to kill him. I eject the clip and rack the slide to make sure there's nothing in the chamber. Then I flick all the bullets out of the clip and slap it back into the gun. I try putting the Glock in the waistband of my pants, but it's really uncomfortable. I'm sure it'll fall out when I sit down or if I have to run. I switch it to the waistband at my back, but that's even worse. It rubs when I walk. It'd probably give me a blister. I don't know how movie and TV detectives carry a gun without a holster. I feel like I've been lied to all these years.

I turn my right front pants pocket inside out, cut a little hole in the end, and push the pocket back in. Now I can put the gun in my pocket with the barrel sticking through the hole. That way it's in far enough that it won't fall out. Kind of a built-in holster. I try drawing the gun, and the front sight catches on the fabric, pulling the pocket inside out again. Oh, well. Since I can't fire the thing, I won't need to do a cowboy quick draw. I put the gun back in my pocket and retrieve my tire iron from the back of the Mustang. Then I go looking for Sandra.

I'm pretty sure I would have heard her scream if Jax had gotten his hands on her again. Except for the cars, there aren't many places to hide down here. I start checking cars, peering in the windows, trying to penetrate the darkness. As I'm looking in the



window of a little Volvo, I hear a "psst" from across the aisle. I can just make out Sandra waving at me from the back seat of a hatchback. I cross over and climb into the front seat.

"I heard him prowling around last night," she says. "I was worried he'd find me, so I switched cars three times."

It's dark, and her eyes seem to glow. I can see the whites all the way around the irises. She looks a little crazy, but with my swollen nose, I imagine I do too. She's sitting cross-legged on the back seat. Her skirt is gone, and she's wearing some kind of shorts. The wound on her thigh and her tattoo stand out against her skin. She notices me looking at her legs.

"I grabbed my gym bag out of my car. These are my gym shorts. I should have changed out of my skirt before. It would have made it harder for that asshole to tear my underpants off."

"It wouldn't have mattered. He's a strong guy."

We both get quiet for a bit. I want to tell her it'll be okay, that Jax won't hurt her, but I can't promise that. It'll be tough to stop him if he decides to try again.

She breaks the silence first: "Hercule?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about that stuff I said before. About you being passive-aggressive and all."

"That's okay."

"Thank you for getting Jax off me."

"No problem."

She asks, "How's the digging coming?"

"I've made some progress. I wouldn't be surprised if one more day of work cleared the doorway enough for us to get through to the next room."

"How much digging would it take for just you and me to squeeze through? For us to get through and leave Jax here?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a few hours."

"Well, let's get going."

With the two of us working again, it takes less time than I had estimated. The thought that Jax might show up while we're working motivates us. I crawl into the tunnel to estimate how much is left to dig. As I wiggle back out, the gun handle protruding from my pocket catches on a chunk of concrete, so I take it out of my pocket and set it on a slab at the hole's entrance. Sandra sees it and asks, "Where'd you get the gun?"

"I found it in one of the cars."

"And you had it all this time?" She shakes her head.

"If Jax comes by while I'm in the tunnel, pick it up and point it at him. Maybe you can scare him away."

I've dug far enough into the mound that I can crawl in and start passing concrete back out to Sandra, who pulls it clear of the entrance. It's dark, and hot, and dirty, and I'm scared I'll be buried alive. I finally get to a big immovable chunk. It's too heavy to push and too big to pull. I back out, turn around, and go in feet first. Now, I can get some muscle behind it. I plant my feet on the concrete, brace myself, and push. It takes three tries, but it moves, and I'm through to the other room. I wiggle back out and stand up. I take the gun from Sandra, slip it into my pocket, slide my tire iron in my belt, and crawl back into the tunnel. I squirm through on my stomach, pulling myself along with my

elbows. I imagine the building over me collapsing, crushing, burying me. Sandra scrambles through behind me.

"Your hand," she says. "Hurry."

I reach back into the tunnel, find her outstretched hand, and pull her the rest of the way through.

"That scared the shit out of me," she says.

It's dark. I stand up slowly. The only light is a faint glow from the hole we just crawled through. I feel Sandra's hand on my leg and reach to help her up. We need to figure this room out. I keep my grip on her hand and start inching forward, away from the hole.

"Slowly," I say. "Stay with me."

"Where the hell else am I gonna go?"

I can't judge distance in the dark. Shuffling along the floor it feels like we're walking through dust that's a couple of inches deep. I stumble over small chunks of concrete a few times, but finally my leg bumps up against something large. I run my hand over the smooth surface. A car.

I let go of Sandra's hand, place it on the side of the car, and feel my way over to a door. It's locked. I reach for the gun in my pocket to use as a hammer, but the gun is gone, and the hole in my pocket is bigger than it had been.

*Hercule, you idiot.*

I take the tire iron from my belt and smash the window with the first blow. When I open the door, the interior light comes on. I slide into the driver's seat and unlock all the doors. Sandra slides in next to me. I find the switch for the headlights and turn them on.

Out in front of us are several dozen cars. I feel like a kid at Christmas. I must be smiling because Sandra says, "What are you so happy about?"

I gesture at all the cars.

"So what?" she says. "We're trapped in a shitty little room, just like the last one."

"A room full of unexplored cars. We have hope again. We have light, and probably food and water."

We explore the cars as a team. Each time we ransack a car we turn its headlights on and turn off the lights in the previous car to save battery power. After the first five cars we've already gathered two water bottles, a Pepsi, a cup of black coffee, two flashlights, and another tire iron. Sandra takes a flashlight and the tire iron and starts smashing windows on her own. We each take a row of cars and work our way across the room. This room is smaller than the other. There are four rows of cars visible, with about a dozen cars per row. In addition to the drinks, I've found several packs of gum and a small pocket flashlight. No food, but I'm only halfway through my first row of cars. I walk over to Sandra's side to see how she's doing, but before I get there I hear a scream. No, not a scream. A howl.

## Chapter 18 Violet

It's a cruel jest that the things we know we shouldn't want are often the things we want the most. I go home every night to see the woman I love struggling with depression and anger. What I *should* want is to figure out how to help her. What I *should* want is to be the best husband I can be. But what I want right now is to be back in Violet's car. That's what I desire.

If desire is passion and passion is irrational and irrationality is the enemy of virtue—ah, hell.

I went almost a week without talking to Violet. In part, I was ashamed of myself, but mostly I was worried that she would interpret our sexual encounter as a sign that I wanted to start up the work spouse thing again. I thought avoiding her would be an indication that I didn't. And maybe I was afraid of a confrontation. Okay, I definitely was afraid of a confrontation. Avoiding her only made it worse, though. By the time I finally did talk to her she was ready to pop. She cornered me in the break room as I was refreshing my morning coffee. The coffee pot in the art department was empty.

“So Hercule, what the hell? You've stopped speaking to me?”

“No. I mean—how are you?”

“Unhappy. How are you?”

“Busy. You know, deadlines. I'm sorry I haven't—

“Save it. I get it. I fucking get it.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You said that.”

I glanced at a couple of people standing by the vending machines. “Can we discuss this at lunch or something?”

“There’s nothing to discuss. You’ve got your bitch wife, and I’ve got Brett. Everything’s fine. Good old Brett, the Bro King. Hah! Bro King. Broking. Broken.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a long low sigh. “That’s it, isn’t it, Hercule? Everything’s broken.”

Before I could answer she turned on her heel and walked back to her office, her spine erect, her head held high.

## Chapter 19 Hades

The howl is coming from behind me, back by the hole to the other room. It's Jax, sounding like a wounded animal. I take one of the flashlights and my tire iron and head back over there. His head and one arm are protruding from the entrance to the hole. He's waving the arm wildly and twisting his shoulders back and forth. Finally, he stops to rest. Stuck. Face down in the dust. I sit cross-legged in front of him, out of reach of that giant hand. I'm feeling pretty good about our respective positions right now.

"Howdy, Jax," I say.

He screams, "You smart ass. You little shit. I'll break your fucking neck when I get out of here. I'll rip your fucking head off."

I smile and waggle my tire iron at him. "Now, now. Be nice. Are you stuck in there?"

He howls again and thrashes around some more. When he stops he looks exhausted. "Yes, I'm fucking stuck. Your tunnel collapsed on my legs. Come on, dig me out."

"So you can punch me again? No thanks. Maybe if you'd calm down a little—"

He rests his forehead on the ground and sighs. When he looks up again, he's smiling. I'm sure he means it to be a reassuring smile, but it's frightening.

"I'm sorry, Herk. It's Herk, right? I promise I won't hurt you. I was just upset. You can understand that, can't you?" He attempts a light-hearted chuckle. "I mean, look at me. I'm stuck in a hole. Give me a hand?"

He sounds like a teenager trying to explain to his father why he got drunk and wrecked the family car.

“Seriously, man? You broke my nose. You tried to rape Sandra. I don’t trust you.”

“I’m sorry about your nose,” he says. “But wanting to screw Miss Bitch? You can’t blame me for that. You want to screw her, too. You probably already have. Hell. When it comes to chicks, you and I are exactly alike.”

“I am not like you!” I get up and pace back and forth in front of him, shaking the tire iron in his face. “That’s a fucking lie. I’m nothing like you!”

“All right. All right. You’re nothing like me. Calm down and dig me out of here.” He puts his head down again. “Please?”

The alternative to digging him out is leaving him there, which is what I’d like to do. Then I’d know right where he is. But if he starts thrashing around again, he’ll dislodge the concrete holding up the car door, and the whole thing will collapse, suffocating him. I don’t see that I have a choice. I have to dig him out and hope he can control his temper.

"All right, Jax. Let me see if I can clear the stuff pinning your other arm, first."

I set my tire iron down out of his reach and move closer to the hole, being careful to avoid his free arm. The debris is piled up precariously, like that game where you try to remove blocks of wood without collapsing the stack. If I pull out the wrong piece of concrete, the whole thing will come down and bury him. I decide to work from the top.

I turn on the nearest car's headlights, grab the passenger side floor mat, take it back to Jax and lay it over his head.

"Here. This'll keep dust and stones off you while I dig."

There's plenty of dust, and I stop every few minutes to shake off Jax's mat. Somehow, it's worse than digging the tunnel. I clear the debris in layers, starting from



about five feet off the floor, and working my way down. I pull enough off the pile to clear Jax's head, then move back to the top and start again. I'm about halfway through this second pass when Sandra shows up. Jax still has the floor mat over his head, so she doesn't see him right away. She's holding her tire iron and something else.

"Look what I found!" She holds up a phone. She's so excited it takes her a moment to see what I'm doing. She looks at the partially excavated pile, then down at Jax's arm, still holding the floor mat in place. "What are you doing?"

"Jax tried crawling through the tunnel and got stuck. I'm digging him out."

Jax pulls the mat off his head and smiles up at her. Sandra screams and raises the tire iron over her head. Before she can bash his brains in, I grab her arm and twist the bar out of her hand. She tries to bite my hand, and when I yank it out of the way, she kicks me in the shin.

"What the hell is wrong with you? The guy's a maniac," she shouts. "If you let him into this room, he'll kill us both."

"And if I leave him here, the tunnel will cave in and kill him. I'm not a murderer."

"You're an idiot. I'm telling you, you can't trust him. Do not trust him."

Jax tries his smile out again and says, "Come on, baby. I won't hurt you. You know I love you."

Sandra shudders with revulsion. She gets up and retrieves her tire iron. "You come anywhere near me, Jax, and I'll splatter your brains across the floor." Then she walks back toward the far end of the garage.

The car headlights cast eerie shadows, adding to my anxiety about letting Jax loose. I get the debris cleared past his shoulders, and he twists back and forth until he

works the trapped arm free and turns onto his stomach. Then he plants his palms on the floor and starts to push. It looks like he's trying to do a push-up with the entire building on his back. Dust is pouring down the stack and running off his shoulders in streams. The pile shifts slightly, and I'm afraid the whole thing's going to cave in on him.

"Hold up, Jax. Let me clear some of the big pieces away, first."

He shakes his head and continues to push. His face is dark red, and the muscles in his neck bulge like steel cables. He lowers his head and howls again. Then he arches his back and heaves. Concrete rains down around him, but he continues to push, working to bend one leg and get it under him. He's still howling when the whole thing collapses. The sound of the falling concrete drowns out his voice, and a cloud of dust mushrooms out from the doorway. I step back a few feet and throw my arm across my eyes. When I lower it, Jax is standing, knee deep in debris, with his head thrown back and his arms spread wide.

## Chapter 20 Violet

I walked through the sales office on my way in this morning. Violet's desk was empty. Folders, pens, pictures, coffee mug, everything was gone. I asked the salesman at the desk across from hers what had happened. He said, "She just split, man. Didn't say anything. Just tossed all her shit in a cardboard box and walked out."

When I got to my desk there was a note taped to my computer monitor. It was unsigned, but I recognized her handwriting. The note was short and to the point.

*Fuck you, Hercule. Fuck. You.*

## Chapter 21 Hades

Sandra and I are working our way up and down the room. She has the cell phone, looking for a signal, and I'm breaking into cars, collecting supplies. We're working opposite sides of the room. Jax is sitting back by the hole, exhausted. Sandra's mumbling as she moves along the wall on the other side of the room, talking to her phone, begging it to find a signal.

I reach the far wall and start to move toward the center of the room, expecting to meet Sandra coming from the other direction, but when I look across the rows of cars I see the glow from her phone still halfway down the room. She's crying and laughing and shouting something in Greek. Then she drops the phone on the ground and shouts, "Gamimeni kolasi."

"What's up?" I yell. "Did you get a signal?"

"I did! It was weak, but I got out. I called my father on his private line, and he picked up. I told him what happened, but the damn phone died before he could answer."

"So, you're not sure he knows where we are?"

"No, but he knows it was me. He knows I'm alive and need help. He'll look for me."

I don't know how long it's been since we crawled in from the other room. Sandra is pumped from getting through to her dad, but I'm exhausted. I slide into the back seat of a Prius, brush the fragments of broken window glass onto the floor, and lay down to take a nap. As I fade out I hear Sandra talking to herself. I can't tell what she's saying, but she sounds happy.

#

I'm not sure if the scream is real or part of a dream, and I struggle to crank my eyes open. Then she screams again, and I'm wide-awake. I grab my flashlight and tire iron and jump out of the car. The screaming is coming from the other end of the room, back by the collapsed tunnel. I start to run toward the noise and immediately turn my ankle on a piece of concrete. The ankle hurts, but I can put my weight on it. I move quickly, but more cautiously.

Jax's legs are sticking out of the back door of a big Cadillac. I shine my light in the window, and there's Sandra, backed up against the far door, her legs pulled up to her chest. Jax has her feet and is trying to pull her toward him.

"Get the fuck off her!" I shout and bang on the car's roof. I whack the back of his leg with the tire iron. He doesn't respond. I hobble around to the other side of the car and pull on the door handle. It's locked. Sandra's screaming at the top of her lungs. She's wrenched one foot free and is kicking Jax in the face. I smash the front window, reach in, and unlock the doors. Then I yank the back door open, grab Sandra under the arms, and drag her out of the car. One of her shoes is missing, and she winces as she steps on broken glass.

Jax backs out of the other door and comes around the front of the car. I put Sandra behind me and hold the tire iron up for him to see.

"Back off, motherfucker!" I try to sound menacing, but it comes out in a squeak, like a mouse trying to intimidate a lion. He shakes his head to clear his vision. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the Glock.

"Y'know, buddy," he says, "I've had just about enough of you."

“The gun’s empty, Jax. I got rid of the bullets. Let’s just settle down, okay? Talk this out.”

“If the gun’s empty, you won’t mind if I do this.”

He points the gun at my chest and pulls the trigger. Despite knowing the gun won’t fire, I flinch.

Jax tosses the gun away and rushes me. I swing, getting in one solid blow to his forehead. It starts to bleed, but it doesn't slow him down. He brushes aside my second swing and hits me. It's an open-handed slap, but it sends me staggering. The tire iron flies out of my hand. I trip over something and fall. Jax is on top of me before I can get up. He wraps his giant hands clear around my neck and slams my head onto the concrete floor. I punch him in the face and try to shout, but his thumbs close off my windpipe. He leans down to look me in the eyes, and through my blurred vision I see him smile. I hit him again. Nothing. Again. Nothing. I can't breath. There’s a roaring in my ears. I can just make out Sandra, blurry, standing behind him, holding the tire iron. Then all I can see is Jax’s giant gleeful smirk. Then I can't see anything.

## Chapter 22 Dana

I open my eyes to see an attractive, dark-haired woman dressed in a pastel smock covered with pink and blue hearts. I try to tell her I'm thirsty, but my voice won't work. My throat hurts. There's a tube in my arm. The woman looks at the machine the tube is attached to. When she walks past my line of sight, I turn my head to follow her. My head hurts. I pick up my hand to motion to her. My hand looks small and far away. There's a bad smell here. It smells like someone pooped in a swimming pool. I can't keep my eyes open.

#

People are talking. I'm trying to sleep, and they just keep talking.

*Get the hell out of my bedroom, people.*

I try to roll over, but something's holding my arm. My head still hurts. I open my eyes and sit up. The room is filled with people. The first person I see is Dana, and I start crying. I turn my head so she won't see and say, "I'm sorry." I don't recognize my voice. It's a guttural croak.

Dana smiles at me. She says, "Welcome back." She's sitting in a chair at the end of my bed. It's a hospital bed. My parents are standing behind Dana's chair.

My mother says, "Oh, thank God."

I wipe my eyes on the edge of the sheet. My father comes around the other side of the bed and sidles past the machines and tubes. He bends down and kisses my forehead. I look at his usually stoic face, and it looks like he's going to cry, too. He starts to say something, but stops, rubs his eyes, and backs out past the machines to let my mother get closer. She doesn't say anything, either. She just wraps her arms around me and holds her

cheek against mine. Then she lifts her head and crinkles up her nose. "Whew. Honey, you stink."

The woman in the pastel smock comes back. The dry erase board next to my bed says Nurse Hebe. I say, "Hi, Nurse Hebe." She tells me they x-rayed my head this morning, and tomorrow they want to send me for an MRI. She says I have a concussion, and they want to check my brain for bleeding. I try to make a joke about checking to see if my brain is still in my head, but I can't come up with the words. There's an awkward silence. Nurse Hebe fiddles with the machines again. Then she puts her hand on my forehead. Her palm is soft and cool. I'm sorry when she takes it away.

#

Everyone has gone except Dana. It's late. She's still sitting next to my bed. My eyelids are heavy, but I don't want to sleep. I'm afraid Dana will leave if I fall asleep.

"I saw you being rescued on the news," she says. "What were you doing at Trachis Tower? That was Dr. Weiss' building."

"I had an appointment with her," I croak. It hurts my throat to talk.

"Why?"

Her voice is calm. She doesn't sound angry. I expect her to be angry.

"You stopped talking to me. I thought maybe Dr. Weiss could convince you to come back to counseling. Maybe help us find a solution. One that isn't divorce?"

"That woman from the garage came by while you were sleeping," she says, ignoring my question.

"What woman?"

"The one who was trapped with you. She left something."



Dana hands me an envelope. I try to open it, but my hands are shaky, and I can't get a good grip on it. I ask her to read it to me. She opens it and reads:

*Hercule,*

*Thanks for helping me stay sane in that fucking hell. And thanks for getting that pig off me. Hey, guess what? I saved your life, so we're even. I'm going to take your advice and enroll in night classes. Maybe I'll get my teaching credentials. Money isn't everything, right? I hope your wife takes you back. Here's some helpful advice for you—stop being a dick.*

*Good luck,*

*Sandra*

Dana doesn't say anything, so I break the silence.

"I'm sorry, Dana. Sorry about everything. You know what the worst part of being trapped under that building was?"

"What?"

"That I might never see you again. We can work things out. I know we can. Will you go back to Dr. Weiss with me?"

"I'm really glad you're going to be okay," she says.

She stands up, lays Sandra's note on my bed, and turns to go.

Nurse Hebe comes in to check on me as Dana leaves. I smooth down my hair with my free hand and smile.

"Nurse Hebe, I say. "How nice to see you again."

###

Tim Chapman is a former forensic scientist for the Chicago Police Department and English instructor at Malcolm X College. His fiction has been published in The Southeast Review, the Chicago Reader, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Palooka, and the anthology, *The Rich and the Dead*. His first novel, *Bright and Yellow, Hard and Cold*, (re-released as *A Trace of Gold*) was a finalist in Shelf Unbound's 2013 Best Indie Book competition. His short stories have been collected under the title, *Kiddieland and other misfortunes*. His latest novel is *The Blue Silence*. In his spare time he teaches martial arts and paints pretty pictures.

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