

FAIR TRADE

by Nathan Alderman

One

Declan kept a picture of the three of them on his fridge, from the better days. Him, Sarah, and Abigail — just a baby then, a little cloud of possibilities, but enough of her there in the eyes and the smile to show you the kid she'd become. The three of them happy and smiling, before the ponies got the better of him. Before that dumbass job he pulled over in Marsden to keep his bookie complacent and his own legs unbroken. Before the five-year ticket to Gatewell — three, as it ended up, with good behavior — the dumbass job had gotten him.

“Don't forget she's got that field trip,” Sarah said through the phone.

“I know,” Declan said. He'd stuck the permission slip next to the photo on the fridge.

“Did you sign the form yet?” she said. “I called Abby's teacher and she said she hadn't gotten it.”

Declan liked to think he had mostly gotten over his ex-wife by now. Enough to look at her picture and feel only the tiniest of little aches, way deep down in the meat of him, long buried over with scars. Couldn't blame her for meeting that guy, Steve or Simon or whatever his name was — Declan knew it damn well, but liked to pretend he didn't, so maybe he wasn't that

far over her after all — while he was inside. He always knew she deserved better than him.

Someone with a square job, no rap sheet, and white picket fence money.

“I’m gonna get the form in,” Declan said.

“Is it the money?” Sarah said. Not mean, not nagging. She never was. Even when she’d sat on the other side of the glass at Gatewell and told him about Simon or Sam or whoever, she’d been so damned sorry about it that he couldn’t hate her. He’d tried. But she always meant the best. Hadn’t raised a stink when he got out and wanted to share custody. Said all the nice things, and meant them, when he started the locksmith job.

“It’s not the money,” Declan said.

“I can mail you a check,” she said, after a moment’s long silence.

“I’m good,” Declan said. “I got it.” On the counter next to the microwave sat a stack of thick official-looking envelopes, some newer than others, that he was putting off opening as long as he could. Probably longer than he ought to.

From the quiet on the line, he knew that she knew he was lying. But she didn’t say it. She never did. Declan figured Steve — yeah, that was his name — didn’t pull that shit on her.

“OK,” she said at last. “Make sure she does her homework.”

“We did it tonight,” Declan said, a smile creasing his face. “You should see her do fractions. She got the brains from you.”

“Is it OK if I come early on Saturday to pick her up? I’ve got a thing at 9, so...”

“Early’s good,” Declan said. “Early as you like. I’ll put some coffee on.” He knew it was stupid as soon as he said it.

“That’s OK,” Sarah said, too quickly. Like he knew she would. “I’ve got that thing, and

there'll be traffic, so..."

"I know," Declan said. "Forget I said anything."

"Good night," she said. In the background he heard the murmur of a TV, heard Steve calling to her with some harmless domestic question.

"Good night," Declan said. He listened all through the fumbling and the click until the dial tone came on, and then he hung up the phone. The permission slip sat pinned on the fridge door with a magnet that looked like a milk carton, accusing him. And between his fingers he turned over the little card Mink had given him, and looked at the number on it.

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"I fucking love this place," Mink had said, between mouthfuls. "Best Reuben in town."

"Take your time, by all means," Declan said, ducking his head in the booth, looking out the window. "It's not like I'm breaking my parole just by talking to you."

"You want to leave," Mink said, "nobody's stopping you." With a napkin he wiped thousand island dressing and a bit of sauerkraut off the fine white whiskers on his thick, fleshy chin.

Declan stayed put.

The waitress came back in her generic diner uniform. "Another coffee?" she asked Declan, in the tone of voice she probably reserved for people she knew would be shitty tippers. He waved her off.

"I told you, Mink, I'm out of the life," Declan said after she was gone. "I got my little girl."

"Little girls are expensive," Mink said. "But you're out of the life. On the square. Tell

me, Declan — how *is* the locksmith business these days?”

Declan didn't meet his eyes.

“I thought so,” Mink said. He licked a little pastrami juice off his fingers, heavy gold rings glinting on each of them, then dug around a suspender strap into his shirt pocket, pulled out a card, and slid it across the table to Declan. “Relax, family man. The job is butter. You don't believe me, ask the client. She's expecting your call.”

Declan's hand hovered a moment, then closed over the card.

“Smart boy,” said Mink. “You want to double that money, you come see me after. I got a line on a sure thing in the fifth at Bennington Downs on Sunday.”

Declan felt his blood quicken just at the sound of it, and locked that shit down but quick. “Fuck off,” he said. “I'm done with that.”

Mink chuckled. “Just like you're out of the life, right?” he said, and took another bite of his sandwich.

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Declan opened the door to her room a crack and peeked inside. In the orange glow from the cartoon bear nightlight, he could see her messy hair sprawling across the pillow, an easy-reader book flat against the bed under her palm. He eased open the door and slipped inside, stepping carefully over one of her dolls, and listened to her breathing for a moment. Then he smiled.

“You are the best at pretending to sleep,” he said gently.

“I'm so the best,” she said, and rolled over, grinning like a little goon.

At the foot of the bed a shadow stirred and stretched and opened one reflective eye to

glare at Declan.

“Easy there, Trouble,” Declan said to the cat. It gave him a halfhearted little hiss, kneaded the bedcovers with its front paws near Abigail’s feet, and shut its eye again.

“I see you got Trouble on monster duty again, huh?” he said, pulling up the chair he kept by her bed for storytime.

“Trouble says he likes monsters,” Abigail smiled. “He says they’re yummy.” Declan could believe it. “You were talking to Mommy.”

“She loves you a whole bunch,” Declan said, smoothing back Abigail’s hair. “Can’t wait to see you this weekend.”

“We’re going to the planetarium,” Abigail said. “What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

Declan grinned. “Oh, nothing much. Gonna get a whole bunch of candy and cupcakes and eat it all. And watch every R-rated movie ever, especially the scary ones. And put different clothes on all of your dolls.”

She looked scandalized. “You are not!”

“I’m gonna eat so much candy, I’m gonna be like—” He puffed out his cheeks and mimed being spherically fat, rolling around. She giggled.

He bent over and kissed her on the forehead. “You go to sleep now, for real. Daddy’s got to go out for a little bit, do some work. Trouble’s here to eat any monsters dumb enough to show up. Got a glass of water here if you’re thirsty. And if you wake up and you need anything, what do you do?”

“Call Mommy,” she said, nodding solemnly at the old-fashioned pink phone by her bed.

“That’s right, you call Mommy,” he said. “Mommy’s the smart one. Daddy’s the ugly one.”

“So ugly,” she said, and threw her arms around him tight. “Are you going to help someone get into their house?” she said.

He kissed the top of her head again, and hugged her, and stared at the wall. “Something like that, baby.”

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He’d held out for a solid hour after meeting with Mink. Declan kept hoping he’d get another call — somebody with their keys shut in an SUV in some mall parking lot. As if one job would get him out of the hole and into the bank’s good graces.

Finally he broke down and dialed the number.

After two rings, a woman’s voice answered, measured, precise in its syllables. It sounded like money. She gave him an address — a shitty bar on the edge of the industrial park, the kind of place where “happy hour” was a lie. He didn’t think to ask how he’d recognize her. Turned out he didn’t need to.

She sat in a booth in the back, emerald green from head to toe. Green hat with a green lace veil, green dress, green gloves, tall green boots. She was staring into a nearly emptied glass of something clear and strong-smelling, tapping one bright emerald fingernail against it. When he slid into the booth opposite her, she lifted her head to acknowledge him. Between the veil and the shadow from the hat, he couldn’t see her eyes — just her lips, scarlet. Between her sleeve and her glove he saw a ribbon of pale, creamy skin, threaded with a single blue vein.

“What’s the job?” he asked.

“What are you drinking?” she replied, in that same steady voice.

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m working. Tell me about the job.” He glanced at his watch.

“In a hurry?” she said.

“I gotta pick my kid up from school, is all.” Through the veil he saw her lips twitch in the direction of a smile.

“Old house out in Waverly. Write this down.” She nodded to a wad of bar napkins on his side of the table, and gave him another address.

“What’s the take?” he nodded, looking up from the napkin.

“A box,” she said. “Inlaid wood. About—“ She roughed out dimensions with her hands.

“No money?” he asked. “Jewelry?”

“Just the box,” she said. She sat back against the booth’s shabby upholstery. “Are you going to ask me what’s in it?”

Declan shook his head. She nodded.

“Two rules,” she said. “First, you do this job exactly as I say. Exactly.” She gave him a list. None of it made any damn sense to Declan. But for the figure she’d quoted on the phone, it didn’t have to. He wrote it down and read it back to her. “Good,” she said. “No matter what you see in that house, no matter what you hear, you follow those steps exactly.”

“What happens if I don’t?” Declan shrugged. “I trip some kind of security system?”

He watched her hand involuntarily tighten around the glass, just for a second, and tremble. “Something like that,” she said.

He held his palms up. “All right, fine. You said two rules.”

“Second rule is, you don’t unlock the box. You don’t open the box. You don’t so much as

peek inside.”

“Lady,” Declan sighed. “I don’t care. I just want to get paid.”

She reached onto the seat beside her and picked up a clutch purse, green leather, and snapped it open. With long fingers, she fished out a hunk of gold the size of two candy bars side by side, and slid it across the table to him.

“Jesus Christ,” Declan said, just staring at it. He didn’t think to grab it and put it in his coat until the woman cleared her throat. The bar thumped against his ribs and made his inside jacket pocket sag dangerously.

“A down payment,” she said. “With plenty more to follow. Call me when you have the box. I’ll tell you where to meet.”

He saw her posture shift as he got up to leave. “What?” he asked.

“Your child,” the woman said. “How old is your child?”

“She’s in kindergarten,” Declan said.

The woman said nothing for a long time. “You’re very lucky,” she said at last.

Declan just nodded.

Two

Three hours now, sitting in his truck across the street, watching the house. No lights. No motion. Not even a dog barking.

The house looked like it came pre-haunted — one of those old ones with eaves slouching on top of each other, and a turret, and a goddamn *weathervane*, for crying out loud. Like in that TV show with the weirdo family that was all monsters. Wrought-iron gate around the outside, from back when they really knew how to make gates that said *fuck off* and meant it. Big lot, too. Plenty of tree coverage, tons of space between it and the neighbors. Not that it would have mattered on this street. Declan saw maybe one light on in a house way down the block. Weeds twining up through the beat-to-hell asphalt. Streetlights that gave up decades ago.

And still he'd sat in the truck for three hours, until he'd emptied the coffee in the silver thermos, waiting. He'd taken the locksmith decals off the truck's doors before he left, and switched out the plates, and not one damn car had gone past him the whole time he'd been parked. But he still found himself slouching low in the seat, waiting on edge for that wash of light through the truck windows, that high whoop of a siren.

Finally he said hell with it, and put his hand on the latch to get out and do the job. The sleeve of his jacket rode up, and on his inside wrist Declan saw the stupid-ass tattoo he'd gotten back when he was 18 and invincible. A horseshoe. Wasn't till years later he found out he'd gotten it inked on wrong way round. You have to have the ends pointing up, or all the luck falls out of it.

Just a little more luck. That was all he'd ever needed. If that horse had finished just a little faster. If the cashier had waited just a few more seconds before hitting that silent alarm. If the cops had come around that corner just a minute later. That much would have changed everything.

If the bank pulled his loan, repossessed the truck and the tools, shut him down, he'd lose custody. Might even lose his parole. Lose Abigail, again. And she was all the luck he had left.

Declan opened the door, climbed out, and eased it shut behind him. He waited. The night air felt heavy, ready to rain, but the air smelled wrong for that. He patted his pockets and around his waist — found the lockpick set, the pocket flash, then panicked for a blind acid second before his fingers touched the cocktail napkin with the woman's instructions on it. He felt his heart pound — he had never gotten this nervous before, had he? — and pulled garden gloves over his sweaty palms. A jump and a little scrambling got him over the fence, avoiding the pointy parts. Then he cut sideways into the shadows of the trees, and walked quick and quiet toward the house.

First thing the woman had made him write down: ENTER THROUGH BACK DOOR ONLY. The way she'd said "only" had made him underline it, twice. As he passed the front of the house, moving along the side, following the wraparound porch, a light wind ruffled the trees, and

he saw the front door yawn open. Christ. Either the place was abandoned, or whoever lived here was too old or stupid to even lock up. For a moment he thought about blowing off the instructions, just walking in through the front.

But he remembered how the woman had given him those directions — the way she said every word slowly and carefully. Like she was trying to keep her voice from shaking. Declan knew fear when he heard it.

The back door took a few seconds' jimmying with Declan's picks — old lock, easy to spring — before it clicked and swung back into darkness. Declan thumbed the button on the base of the little flashlight, cast the beam inside, and stepped in. In sweeps and segments, the light revealed a weird little parlor, taxidermied bird faces staring at him with their eyes glinting, casting long and ragged shadows on the walls. Owls and hawks and falcons. Hunting birds.

Second on the napkin: DOWN THE HALL, SECOND DOOR ON LEFT. Declan crept through the parlor, rolling his feet gently against the dusty wooden floor, and into the hallway beyond. He counted three doors on the right, two on the left, and some utterly dark space ahead; shining the beam into it just revealed more dark.

Light trickled from the keyhole of the first door on the left, and when he paused in front of it, and held his breath, he swore he could hear something behind it. A noise like someone laughing, or maybe sobbing. But in the quiet of the house his ears rang, and he couldn't be sure he heard anything else at all. He shivered, and walked on to the next door. It stuck at first, but he nudged it with his shoulder and it bumped open.

The flashlight beam showed a high-ceilinged room, empty save for a fireplace where embers still glowed faintly, and a spiral staircase in one back corner. No windows, which was

odd, because Declan had looked the place over from the outside, and he could have sworn there should be windows here. Forget it. He had a box to grab.

Third on the napkin: UP THE STAIRS. They creaked and swayed under Declan's boots. Dust fell off the railing in clumps where he clutched it for balance. He rose into another narrow hall under a sloping roof, suffocatingly black except for the cone of light from the flash. There was some kind of pattern on the wallpaper, gnarled and knotted, that seemed to move in the corner of his eye when he swung the beam around. Just an illusion.

Fourth on the napkin: STRAIGHT AHEAD, TWO LEFTS, A RIGHT, FIRST DOOR ON RIGHT. Declan felt the planks tremble softly under each footfall. He took the first left, and kept walking, and now something was really nagging at him, because the house — big as it was — shouldn't be this wide or this deep. He'd seen the second floor from the outside, and it was smaller than the first. So why did it feel larger inside?

He was just about to make the second left when he froze. No mistaking the sound — somewhere, back the way he'd came, there was a baby crying. Not just crying, wailing. Beyond tired, beyond hungry, that super-pissed-off or scared crying a kid only made when they were terrified or hurting.

No lights, no cars in the drive, nobody home, so why was there a baby? Who'd leave a kid alone in a place like this? Declan shifted his weight, made ready to turn. The crying got louder.

In his memory, the woman said again, "No matter what you see, no matter what you hear." The kid was practically screaming now.

Declan clenched his teeth, thought of Abigail, and took the second left.

Just like that, no crying. Not a sound, save the soft scuffle of his boots on the floor.

Declan felt sweat start to cool on his lower back. He kept walking and turned right at the next junction. It took him a second to stop his hand from shaking long enough to turn the doorknob.

It looked like someone's bedroom — a girl's, maybe. Too many frills on the quilt thrown over the four-poster bed. No pictures on the walls, no mirrors, but a chest of drawers against the far wall. And there on the chest, an inlaid wooden box with a little brass clasp gleaming on the front of it in the beam from the flashlight.

When he picked it up it felt a little warm, even through the gloves. Something inside seemed to slide around, dense and almost liquid. He thought of the big glass jar of mercury his high school science teacher kept in the locked storage cupboard. He tucked the box under his arm and checked the directions.

BACK OUT THE DOOR, A RIGHT, A LEFT, A RIGHT. That couldn't be correct. Declan remembered the hall dead-ending. But when he stepped out the door, the hall stretched away on both sides. Maybe he'd seen wrong — maybe his mind had just filled in the gaps his flashlight left. Didn't matter. Declan just wanted out of here.

The directions took him to the top of a tall, broad staircase leading down into what looked like a front hall. Declan could see the front door, still swinging idly in the night wind, a pale fan of light leaking in from the front porch. DOWN THE STAIRS, OUT THE FRONT, STRAIGHT TO THE GATE. End of the instructions.

Behind him, down the hallway, Declan heard footsteps. He moved forward, down the stairs, quick and quiet as he could. The footsteps seemed to multiply. At first it had been just one person. Now it sounded like two. No — three. The stairs were old. Felt shaky. If he went any

faster, he might trip, or a step might give way.

The footsteps seemed to come from below him now, too, from the back of the house. And other sounds. A rhythmic dragging. A rough scrabbling against the floorboards.

Declan reached the bottom of the stairs, the box under his arm. Upstairs he heard doors bang open.

He ran, out the front door and half-tumbling down the front porch steps from the mustiness of the old house into clean, sweet night air. He sprinted for the fence — goddamn it, the walk in here hadn't seemed this long! — and vaulted up and over it, gashing one side of his jacket on a spike, and collapsed in a pile on the other side of the gate. His heart thudded dumbly, hard enough to feel in his ears.

Not a light from the house. Not a sound. No commotion, no activity. Declan checked the box. Locked tight and undamaged, thank God.

He made it to the truck and drove away as fast as he thought he could manage without drawing attention. Maybe a little bit faster.

A phone call and twenty minutes later, his headlights swept over the woman in the shadow of an overpass, where the highway cut through the west side of the city. She didn't say anything when he got out of the car — just held out her hands for the box. He handed it over, and she inspected it, and made a little noise in the back of her throat, satisfied. Back in the weeds and the concrete pylons, he saw another car waiting for her, too dark to make out clearly. He could just see the shadow of another person stirring behind the wheel.

He looked back at her and saw her studying him — or at least that was his best guess, from the angle of the hat and the veil.

“You’ve seen some things,” she said.

Declan just scowled and held out a hand. “Not my payment.”

She picked up a gym bag that had been sitting by her ankles, dark blue with some workout chain’s logo on it, grunting a little as she handed it over. It was heavy as hell. Declan set it down, unzipped it, dug through the clinking contents until he was satisfied the whole thing was packed with legit gold bars.

“Holy shit,” he said again, and took the first gold bar he’d been given out of his jacket pocket to meet its new friends. “You and your box have a nice life, lady.”

“We will,” the woman said. Without another word, she turned and walked into the shadows, toward the other car.

Declan ran his fingers over the gold one more time, hearing the other car drive off, imagining Abigail’s face if she could only see it. Bad idea, making your six-year-old an accessory, and Abigail couldn’t keep secrets for crap. But still.

He checked his watch. Time to make it home, maybe grab a few hours’ sleep, and make her breakfast. He hauled the gold into his truck, stashed it under the seat, and turned onto the nearly empty streets toward home.

Three

There she was, fast asleep, little head turned to the wall. Declan exhaled, leaned against the doorframe. No Trouble, just an empty nest at the foot of the blankets, but sometimes he went off prowling in the small hours. Declan shut the door, gentle as a kiss, and padded back down the hall to the living room.

The bag sat on the coffee table; he needed someplace to hide it before he woke up, unless he wanted to explain where Daddy got all that gold from. Declan let himself sink onto the couch, just for a second, just to think of where to stash it, and

sat in a wooden chair in a big empty room that Declan knew, somehow, had to be the house from earlier. Ceilings too tall, room too bare, an expanse of warped floor between him and a wall, and somewhere behind him a fire — he could hear it crackle, and see his shadow sway and jitter out ahead of him. Everything felt wrapped in cotton, thick, inexact, so he knew he was dreaming. OK, good. Didn't matter so much, then, that he couldn't move, couldn't turn his head, just sat in the chair and listened to the old house creak.

A second shadow appeared on the wall in front of him. Too tall, too thin, the angles all

wrong. It moved with the ponderous grace of a stork, long limbs bending and unbending, and behind him he heard the creaks as it stalked back and forth.

“Long ago, they called us the Fair Folk,” it said. Voice like paper on paper, syllables heavy and warped on a tongue that didn’t own them, but condescended to shape them. “Do you know why?”

Declan tried to speak, but the impulse drifted through him and away, and his jaw stayed shut as if it were wired so.

“Many assume that ‘fair’ meant beautiful,” the shadow continued. “We are beautiful, yes. Our beholding would crush your heart like a rotted apple under its weight, and boil away your thin little blood to steam.” The creaking behind him drew closer, one loping step at a time. This should have made the second shadow smaller, but somehow it loomed larger, seemed to warp around and over Declan’s. “But no. We are the Fair because we are exactly that. We honor every bargain struck. We take payment for payment. We do exactly as we say we will. And we expect the same.”

Declan felt breath on his ear, cold as the exercise yard in February. He tried to flinch, tried to shudder, but his body stayed locked. He wanted to wake up now. Any second now. Wake up.

“You ssssstole from us,” the voice said, dragging out the syllable as it might a sword along a stone floor. “Oh, you were ignorant. We understand that. It has made us merciful. But only just. Do you remember the box? If you do, cringe inwardly, and wish desperately that you could move.” The voice waited a second. Declan realized he could not feel his own heart beating, or breath in his lungs, and it terrified him like nothing ever had.

“Good,” the voice said, satisfied. “You took from us. We have taken something precious from you. If you want her back — and you will — you will return what you stole. Our—” and here Declan couldn’t tell whether the voice said *vessel* or *vassal* — “will tell you where. Leave the box there by the next dawning, and what you love will be yours again. Fail, and she is ours, forever. To do with however we wish.”

The voice in his ear chuckled softly, and the chuckle seemed to spread and multiply until the whole room was laughing, uproariously, high animal howls of aristocratic mirth, and Declan heard Abigail’s voice calling, “Daddy, Daddy,

Daddy, wake up!” and his head snapped neatly up and off the couch to see her there in the early light, oh thank God, in her Batman pajamas, close enough to smell toothpaste breath on her. He had his arms wrapped around her before he even realized he could move. Bad dream. Nothing more.

“Hey, baby girl,” he said into her little shoulder. “Sorry ‘bout that. Daddy fell asleep.”

“Were you out late?” she asked, hugging him tight, her knees knobbing into the tops of his thighs, all ten bare toes brushing his knees.

“Yeah, kiddo,” he said. Looked up and behind her. Oh, shit. The bag with the gold, right there on the coffee table. And her like a dead weight pinning his weary bones to the couch. “Yeah, I had to help a nice lady. You go get dressed now, and I’ll tell you all about it over pancakes, OK?”

Instead, she hugged him tighter. “I had a bad dream,” Abigail said. Declan felt a pang of guilt, thought of her alone in the dark — thought of himself as a kid, waking up in the night scared out of his mind, and hearing nothing, not even his old man snoring, all the way down that

long dark hallway to the living room.

“Did Trouble chase it away?” he asked. He felt her head shake against his shoulder.

“Too big,” she said.

He heard the cat hiss then, and after a few moments spotted Trouble, just a shadow and two yellow eyes on the very top of the bookcase in the corner of the room. The cat hissed again, hunched into himself as if he were trying to invert, and showed full fangs.

“Kiddo, what’s the matter with Trouble?” he asked. But she just hugged him even tighter, tight enough to squeeze the breath out of him. When did she get this strong?

“I dreamed you met a lady in green,” Abigail said. “And I dreamed you went to a spooky old house. And I dreamed you took a box. A box that didn’t belong to you.” She leaned close and whispered in his ear, and for a moment it felt just like his own dream again.

“I dreamed you fucked up, Daddy,” she said, and her voice became ragged and rusted. “I dreamed you fucked up big time.”

And when he jolted back he saw her face grinning at him, but not her face, and not the right grin, the mouth too wide, the teeth too sharp, and something that wasn’t Abigail peeking out where the light in her eyes should have been.

His feet scrambled, kicking over the coffee table. He tried to shove her off him, but suddenly she weighed a ton and he couldn’t move. She clamped two tiny hands hard against the sides of his head and smacked it back against the top of the couch, just hard enough to hurt, an iron taste blooming inside the bridge of his nose.

“Jesus God,” he blurted, and it bounced his head off the sofa again.

“Listen the fuck up, numbnuts,” not-his-daughter said. “I figure by now you got the spiel

from Himself, so you know the score. I'm here to make sure you follow through on your end of the bargain. I look like her. I talk like her. I keep any heat off you long enough so's you can do your job. You want to tell anyone how the fairies took your daughter, be my fucking guest. But they're not gonna believe you, and I'm gonna make sure of that. Now, I sure as shit got better things to do than mud it up with you fucking apes all day, so for your sake and her sake, you better damn well find that box fast. And you!" It turned to the cat, and Declan swore its arm stretched out just a few inches longer than any arm ever should. "Shut the fuck up!"

Trouble stopped hissing and glared.

"The gold," Declan said, the idea seizing him like an electric shock. "I can give you the gold she paid me with."

The thing on top of him laughed so hard that its eyes and nose briefly jittered out of place. "Oh, you can give me the gold, huh?" It hopped off him, terrifyingly Abigail-like in its lightness now, and swept an arm out to the bag by the overturned coffee table. "Be my guest."

Declan lunged off the couch and unzipped the bag — and found it full of sand. He swore, digging through it, grit flying across the carpet. Not a trace of the gold bars.

Not-Abigail laughed — again, sounding just enough like her to be wrong. "Nice move, shit-for-brains," it said. "You let her pay you in fairy gold. Oldest trick in the book. Like, several literal, actual, very old books."

The pit of Declan's stomach fell out of him, far, far away now, racing toward the center of the earth. Shit, shit, shit. His little girl. Never mind the rest of it, forget whether he was going out of his mind. He couldn't lose her. His last bit of luck.

"Wouldn't have worked anyway," he heard not-Abigail say. "The price is the price. They

want what's in the box. Nothing else.”

He wheeled on it now, fists clenched, memories from the joint of all the ways you could hurt a person unfurling behind him like big black wings. But the thing read him somehow, in a glance, and then it was Abigail. It just *was* her. And all the violence fell out of him, and goddammit, he wanted to hug her and tell her sorry for scaring her. And by the time that thought hit him, it had wandered away.

“Where do you keep the booze?” it asked. “Also, your cable package is for shit.”

He opened his mouth to say something — he wasn't even sure what — when the doorbell rang. And from the other side of it, calling his name, he heard Sarah's voice.

Four

“Hey,” she said, and it was all she needed to say to snap him in two. Just that one syllable, and her standing on the front step with her shoulders hunched and a cup of coffee in her hand, shaking her hair out of her eyes with a toss of her head. For an endless second he was going to tell her everything, beg her forgiveness, beg her help. Maybe just beg.

“Hey,” he heard himself say from far back, in the passenger seat of his own life. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said. “I just — is everything OK? You look rough.”

“It’s Abigail,” he said, without thinking. “She’s—” Then he stopped, and looked at her, so completely sincere like she always was. Probably thinking about some report she had to do for work, or where she and Abigail would go on Saturday, and all that normal wonderful shit that he now missed with the keenness of a severed limb. “She’s sick.” He saw her face tighten and course-corrected quickly. “She’s fine, she’s fine, just a bad fever. I was up all night reading stories to her.”

“I can take her to the doctor,” Sarah said, digging in her purse for the phone. “I can, I can

call Dr. Richards and see if he's got an early appointment—"

"Hey, hey," he said, and held up a hand, almost touching her arm, but not. Not quite. "It's OK. Fever's down now. She's sleeping."

"Can I see her?" Sarah asked. "Just for a minute."

Declan tried to think of whatever bullshit excuse would work for a no without breaking her heart. But then behind him came his little girl's voice, calling for Mommy. And even though his stomach lurched he somehow stepped back and let Sarah in past him.

"She's a little weird," Declan said as he shadowed her down the hall, painfully aware of how lame that sounded even before the look Sarah gave him, as if Abigail weren't the only one that description fit. "The fever. I think it cooked her brain a bit. Just — you know, don't get worried if she's —"

"Hi Mommy," said the thing with his daughter's face, wearing it expertly, covers tucked up to its little phony chin. Goddammit, how did it even *know* the way she sounded when she was sick? How did it get the paleness of her skin just right?

Sarah knelt down and put a hand to Not-Abigail's forehead. "Hi, baby," she said softly. "You're all right, huh? How are you feeling?"

"Better," Not-Abigail said, and turned her head away and coughed a few times. "Daddy kept the bad dreams away."

The look Sarah gave Declan then would have made any other day for him. Somehow it just made this one worse. "Yeah," she said, turning back to her fake daughter. "Daddy's gotten good at that." She kissed the top of the thing's head and ruffled its hair. "You get some sleep now, OK? Daddy'll be here if you need anything. Call me whenever you want. And if you're too

sleepy, I'll call you tomorrow morning to see how you're feeling. OK, baby?"

"OK, Mommy," Not-Abigail said, and threw her little arms around her not-mother's neck. Over Sarah's shoulder, Declan saw the creature roll its eyes exaggeratedly. Then it let go, all sweetness again, and rolled over to pretend to sleep.

Sarah tucked the covers up around the thing in the bed, and stood up, and brushed her hands on the sides of her jeans the way she always did when she just needed a moment to think. Declan hung back, stepping away from the doorframe as Sarah moved through it and shut the door behind her.

"Thank you," Sarah said.

"Don't," Declan waved it off. "It's not — she's gonna be all right." Awkward silence. He looked away, as if that kept him from smelling the perfume she wore, or just feeling her there, displacing the air, close enough to touch. "It was kind of a long night, so..."

"Right, right," Sarah said, and fumbled in her purse. She came up with a folded piece of paper for him, and he knew before he took it that it was a check.

"For the field trip," she said.

"I told you, I don't need it," he replied, trying to hand it back. Didn't know how to tell her that it might be a moot point anyway. And then he cursed the part of himself that found that just the slightest bit funny.

"You keep forgetting that I know when you're lying," she said, with just enough of a smile to soften the blow. "It's OK. I know you're trying your best. We can be on the same team."

"What did Steve say?" he asked her. She looked away.

"It's my money," she said. "Just take it, OK?"

He held it out to her for a second or two more, just to be sure. Then he stuck it in his own pocket. “Thanks. I owe you. Again.”

“You’re right,” she said, and swayed a little toward him, and then away toward the front door. “Call me if she gets worse, or needs to see a doctor, or ... you know. Anything.”

“I will,” Declan lied. *You would never forgive me if you knew. I wouldn’t blame you.*

He watched her get into her car and drive away without looking at him, pointedly. Then he shut the door, turned around, and about jumped out of his skin to see not-his-daughter there, slow-clapping.

“Hell of an actor, you,” it said.

“Fuck off.” Declan sank back down on the couch. The thing came and plopped itself on the coffee table in front of him.

“Hey, I could have made everything a whole lot harder for you,” it said. “But did I? Hey. Look at me. Did I?”

Declan shook his head.

“All right, then,” the thing said. “Now. I did you a favor. You gotta return it. The rules and all. So. Where do we start?”

In the back of his mind, Declan realized, he had already been turning this over. The lady in green was a ghost. No telephone, no address. Car at the meet too far away to even make the plate.

But he knew one person who’d know where to find her.

Five

“Where is she?”

Not-Abigail gave him a tiny pink upraised middle finger, right in his face, waving around. He fought the urge to toss the thing out of the car.

On this little sleep, the whole world seemed muffled, blurred around the edges. Declan kept his hands tight on the steering wheel, 10 and 2, and forced himself to watch the speedometer and the traffic signs.

Not-Abigail fidgeted beside him in the passenger seat. It had insisted on wearing blue jeans with cowboy boots, a pink tutu, and a long-sleeved shirt with cartoon ponies on it — “Because fuck you, that’s why” — and Declan didn’t care enough to argue. Not when it was somehow already three hours since dawn. He’d managed to get it to wear a seat belt, which was victory enough.

“Is she safe?” he asked.

“She’s the guest of honor,” Not-Abigail said with a little shrug, slouching down in its seat. “For as long as they feel like they’re bound by their deal.”

“And when they stop feeling that way?”

Not-Abigail folded its little arms across its chest. “She’s the main course.”

Declan’s stomach lurched again, and for a moment he thought he was going to puke. He skated through a yellow-turning-red-light by the seat of his pants and kept driving, his breathing rough and shallow until the hot, prickling wave of nausea passed. *Don’t scream. Hold it in. You start screaming and you might never stop. She’s counting on you.*

“Are you one of them?” Declan asked. “Like the ones in my dream?”

Not-Abigail snorted, with a weariness like she’d heard the same thing a million times before. “I’m not one of you fucking muds, if that’s what you’re asking. But if you’re wondering whether they care about me, well, I wouldn’t be here if they did. Breathing your shit air full of half-assed alchemy, smelling your shit food with its blood all wrong and poisoned. Every time they send me out here I wonder how you can stand it.”

“And yet,” Declan muttered, “here you are.”

“You ain’t the only one owes a debt,” Not-Abigail said, staring out the window.

They pulled into the diner parking lot. Declan could see Mink through the windows at his usual booth, downing a coffee while he looked over the sports section. He turned to not-Abigail.

“Stay in the car while I talk to him, OK?”

“Yeah, because a guy locks his little girl in a car while he goes inside to eat, that’s not gonna draw any attention,” Not-Abigail said. It put on its biggest, best puppy-dog face, and Declan got a little angry to realize it was working on him.

“Fine,” he said, unhooking his seat belt. “But you keep your mouth shut and just look adorable.”

“I want pancakes,” Not-Abigail said.

Declan smeared a hand across his own face, trying to brush away any lingering cobwebs.

“You literally just said our food was shit.”

“I still want pancakes,” it said, and hopped out of the passenger-side door.

“The hell is this?” Mink furrowed his brow as Declan slid into the booth opposite him, Not-Abigail in tow. “Bring your kid to work day?”

“She’s having a sick day,” Declan said, and took a small grim pleasure in watching Mink slide his half-eaten steak and eggs away from the girl-shaped thing as it very convincingly coughed. “Relax, it ain’t the black plague.”

Mink eyed Not-Abigail like someone had let a raccoon into his booth. “You get to be my age, you look after your health,” he said.

The waitress came by, a different one this time — young, pretty, but the same tacky uniform. She favored Mink with a dazzling smile that actually seemed sincere. “How’s everything, Mr. Mink?”

He made a little kissing motion with his lips and the expanding fingers of one ring-laden hand. “Lucy, you tell Pablo he’s never been better with these eggs. How’s your brother?”

“He’s good,” Lucy said. “Sailing out of the Philippines back to San Diego, he says.” Her eyes slid right over Declan to land on Not-Abigail, and her smile got even wider. “Is this your little niece? Granddaughter?”

“Pancakes!” Not-Abigail grinned, banging its tiny fists on the table.

“Business associate of mine,” Mink smiled, and threw in a wink. “And her papa. You think you could fix her up with those pancakes?”

“For you? Not a problem,” Lucy said, and finally acknowledged Declan. “Anything for you?”

“Coffee,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. She made a completely unsurprised face and nodded flatly.

“Thank you, sugar,” Mink called out after her. Declan traced his stare all the way to her ass, and then quickly looked back at Mink.

“Got yourself a little slice of paradise here, huh?” Declan said.

Mink chuckled. “Little slice of something. So what brings you back here? You wanna take me up on that sure thing in the fifth?”

“The job you set me up with,” Declan said, knotting his fingers in front of him. “The client stiffed me on the payout.”

Mink shook his head sadly. “The state of people these days.”

“It’s not just that, Mink,” Declan said. “There are—“ he caught a warning glower from Not-Abigail out of the corner of his eye — “others involved. They’ve got a lot of muscle. And they’re not happy.”

“What a terrible shame for you,” Mink said, from the depths of the sports section. He licked one thumb and turned the page.

“I need to know where I can find her, Mink,” Declan said. “It’s important.”

Mink looked up from the box scores long enough to give Declan a do-I-look-stupid-to-you face. “Wish I could help you,” he said flatly. “But I ain’t so young anymore. My memory comes and goes.”

“I can pay you,” Declan said, feeling his gut tighten. “I, I can find you the money. Name

your price.”

Mink shook his head pityingly. “You know this business of mine, kid. Word gets around that I’ll just start violating my clients’ confidentiality willy-nilly, my income dries up like that. Gotta think of my retirement fund here.”

Declan felt his hands tighten into fists. He leaned forward, spoke lower. “So maybe I put these other folks on to you. Maybe I let them pay you a visit. I promise you, Mink, I swear to God, you’re liking this conversation with me a whole hell of a lot more than you’ll like that one.”

Mink’s eyes narrowed, and all the joviality bled out of his voice. “And maybe I make an anonymous phone call to your parole officer, Ms. Nayland, over at the county building on Crenmore Street, and tell her exactly whom you’ve been associating with.” He looked hard at Not-Abigail, then back at Declan. “Maybe that pretty ex-wife of yours can bring your girl around to see you through the glass once a month or so. How you like the sound of that, you fucking ingrate?”

“I swear to God, Mink—” Declan said, and reached forward. Mink’s hand shot out and grabbed Declan’s around the wrist, hard, surprising strength for such an old man. Declan grimaced as the rings on Mink’s fingers dug into his arm, pinning it to the table.

“That is not the tone you want to take with me,” Mink said. “Not here, kid. Not anywhere. Now. You need some money, I can lay that bet for you. Otherwise, I cannot help you. Understood?”

He let go all at once, and Declan jerked his hand back, rubbing his wrist, seething. This was why he never carried guns, never touched them, not even on the Marsden job. Because he knew that if he had one now, he’d be emptying it into this fat fuck’s chest and feeling just great

about it. And even now, in his anger, that wasn't anyone Declan wanted to be.

"Daddy," Not-Abigail said, poking him lightly in the arm. "Daddy. Daddy Daddy Daddy."

"What?" he said through clenched teeth. It stuck its little arm toward the counter.

"I want a peppermint," it said. Way at the end of the counter, near the restrooms and the booth where the pay phone had been, sat a big glass bowl of individually wrapped candies.

"Nobody's stopping you," he said, stifling the urge to strangle the thing.

"I want you to get it, Daddy," Not-Abigail said, and just for a moment the eyes stopped being big and adorable and said *Move your ass already, you idiot*.

Declan had exactly zero time for this. But he didn't know what the thing would do if he refused, and he didn't need it making a scene. "All right, fine," he said. "Scootch over." Not-Abigail bounced out of the booth and let him pass. He walked the length of the counter, past a young tattooed couple feeding each other french toast, and Lucy the waitress refilling the coffee machine, and some guy in the kitchen who might've been Pablo taking another paper order down from the rack. He'd just stuck his hand in the candy jar when he heard the scream.

Abigail had made that sound last year, when the neighbor's dog bit her. Declan's heart still bore the scar of it, the worst thing he'd ever heard. The dog hadn't even broken the skin, thank God, but she'd been so scared in that moment, and so had he, vaulting over the front step railing, flying across the yard.

And now the thing in his daughter's skin was making it, and he didn't think, just moved, turned running back toward the booth where Mink had launched himself across the table at her. The old man's face was slack, fleshy, eyes glassy, lips parted in a leer, his hands octopus-

reaching for Declan's little girl — no, not his little girl, but still *that scream* — and he was grunting something horrible under his breath and Declan swore to God —

He got a hand on Mink's shoulder and tried to tear the old man away, but Mink was thickly made and strong, and the little girl was screaming and trying to shrink under the table but Mink had his hand around her upper arm and the other one reaching for her, and Jesus God the things coming out of his mouth now, and Declan raised a fist to knock the fat old fuck through the plate glass window when he saw it, quick as a wink, Not-Abigail darting a hand up to Mink's ear and pulling something out, sizzling and glimmering just for an instant and then gone.

And Mink let go and Declan shoved him back to his end of the booth and there was silence, awful silence everywhere, except for Not-Abigail's soft whimpering. He felt her lock her arms around his waist and bury her face against his stomach, and God help him, he wanted to scoop her up and tell her it would be all right. (Not *her*. *It*. He knew that. And still.)

Mink looked pale and sick, his eyes unfocused, one hand over his mouth now. "I — I — I don't know what — I never would —"

Declan turned and saw everyone in the diner staring at them, staring at Mink. He saw the way Lucy the waitress and maybe-that-was-Pablo the cook were looking at the old man, the shock and the slow poison trickling in.

"I don't think they know that, Mink," Declan said, leaning in close to him, speaking low. "So do I make a scene here? Do I ask you, very loudly, exactly what you were trying to do to my daughter just now? Or do you give me an address where I can find this woman, and let me and my sweet, innocent little girl walk out of here quietly?"

Mink's hand fumbled for one of the pens in the caddy next to the sugar dispenser, as if it

had a life entirely independent of the rest of him, and scribbled an address on the edge of the newspaper page. Declan tore it off and stuck it in his pocket. Mink just kept looking through him, lips moving, trying to spit out some terrible lingering taste.

“Declan, I swear, I swear,” he said, “I never would, I don’t know —”

“Come on, sweetheart,” Declan said, loud enough for everyone else to hear. He hoisted Not-Abigail up to drape against one of his shoulders. “Your Uncle Mink’s jokes aren’t always funny, are they?”

“Took you fucking long enough to catch on,” Not-Abigail hissed in his ear as he carried her out into the parking lot.

“What did you do to him?” Declan murmured.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” it said, and kicked one tiny heel into his ribs hard enough to make him wince.

He glanced back through the diner windows and saw Lucy the waitress pass by Mink’s table without stopping, without smiling, laying down a check from her little notebook as if it were a final judgement. Mink was still staring at that check, all alone in his booth, when Declan backed the truck out and drove away.

Six

Declan tried not to look at the clock in the dashboard. He knew the address Mink had written down, at least mostly; the kind of nice part of town even Sarah and Steve couldn't afford. It'd take him longer than he wanted to get there, especially now, with the early lunch traffic starting to clog up the roads.

Somehow having the Abigail-shaped thing here, right here, in the seat next to him didn't make him feel any better. It just made him feel the knife-edge of her absence, all the fears of where she was and what they might do to her, all the more keenly. Right now it was bored, maybe, bending back its fingers in directions fingers shouldn't bend.

"Why'd you do that back there?" Declan asked it.

"Do what? Put the whammy on your friend?"

"He's not my friend," Declan said. Mink had put him on to the Marsden job, back when. Declan always wondered if he hadn't put the cops onto it, too. "The prick had it coming. I meant, why did you help me get the address?"

"That's my job, dumbass," it said, looking at him like he was the world's biggest idiot.

Abigail gave him that same look whenever he said something that her child brain found absurd. Which was a lot.

“I thought your job was to be a pain in my ass,” Declan said. “Like a talking ankle monitor or something.”

It looked at him funny when he said “ankle monitor,” like it didn’t know the term. Then it tugged at the skin of its face; Declan could see it slide around a little, masklike, and a shiver skittered down his spine. “You think it’s fun wearing this, this, this meat garment?” Not-Abigail said. “The way you mums stink? You think I’m this size all the time? Like Himself and the rest of them didn’t fold me in, tear my flesh, crack my bones, to get me to fit in this? Oh, yeah, I’m having a fine old time.”

It dug around in its little mouth, pulled out a blood-slick tooth, and murmured, “I *knew* they put that one in wrong.” Then it stuck the tooth back in, made some adjustments that sounded to Declan like a dog trying to eat gristle, and let out a little satisfied sigh. It turned and gave him a punkass little grin. “Helping you get the address gets me done with it, and you, faster. Being a pain in your ass is how I get what little kicks I can in this shit job.”

“How long you been doing this?” Declan asked.

“The fuck do you care?”

Declan raised his fingers off the steering wheel, keeping his palms on it. “You want me calm and copacetic and on task, then I need to be distracted from the fact that your asshole buddies took my little girl. You want me losing my damn mind and *not* getting their box back, feel free to let me sit here and think real hard about where my daughter is, and the fifteen impossible things I’ve seen since last night, while you do circus-freak shit over there.”

“Fine, fine.” It folded its little arms across its chest, and kicked its cowboy-booted feet off the edge of the seat. “How long is tricky. Time goes so fast out here. But as long as you been walking around upright, and smart enough to make stupid deals, there’s always been some poor dickhead like you who did Himself or one of the court dirty. Believe it or not, I’m the *good* option. You’re having a damn fantastic day if I show up. Because it means they want leverage, instead of, you know, your beating heart on a silver dish.”

“And how many —“ Declan’s voice got rough and he had to swallow the thought down and start again. “How many times does it work out? How many times do they return what they take?”

Not-Abigail didn’t look at Declan. “Sometimes,” it said.

Deep in his gut he felt this wild, flailing panic trying to get out, same as the moment those years back when he knew, positively knew, that he was going to prison. He clenched his jaw and bit down hard and held it in.

“So what’s the play here?” Not-Abigail asked, quickly, as if it remembered what Declan had said about losing his shit. “When we get to the house?”

“The play is that you stay in the car,” Declan said. “And I get the box back.”

“And what if she’s there, genius?” it asked.

“She’ll wish she wasn’t.” Declan turned off the main drag. The road began to wind uphill, the houses getting farther apart, brighter flowers blooming in the front yards. “Not far now. Another right up here, I think. We’ll circle the block, case it out, and then —“

When they rounded the corner Declan saw all the cop cars. The ambulance. The big black county meat wagon. He counted house numbers up the block to where they sat parked and —

“Shit,” he said, pulling over to the curb as quick as possible. “Shit, shit, shit.” Not-Abigail undid her seatbelt and hauled herself up with the dashboard to see out the windshield.

“So,” it said, “*you’re* fucked.”

The morgue guys were wheeling out a body under a sheet blotched heavily with a dark rusty brown. Declan saw an arm dangling limp over the edge of the gurney. A woman’s, wearing a long green glove.

And trailing after, grim and serious as McGruff the goddamn crime dog, came a clean-cut plainclothes cop in a crisp dark suit, carrying a big clear plastic evidence bag with a dark wooden box inside. Holding onto it like it was his badge, or his wife, or his child.

“Sooooo fucked,” Not-Abigail added.

Declan sat there staring. The worst plan ever, worse even than the Marsden job, was slowly taking shape in his brain. He tried very hard to talk his brain out of it. He failed.

“Not yet,” Declan admitted. “But pretty soon, yeah.”

Seven

“You just sit tight,” the sweet-faced mom-looking desk sergeant said, and pulled a couple of cheap plastic chairs out from the interview room table. “Detective Serwer will be right with you. Sorry to make you wait in here, but it’s probably more comfortable than the squad room.”

“That’s all right, ma’am,” Declan said. “Thank you.” All fatherly, he picked up Not-Abigail and the little green backpack they’d bought at a thrift store an hour ago, and swung the girl-shaped thing into one of the chairs.

“And here you go, sweetie,” the sergeant said to Not-Abigail, handing her a cheap coloring book about safety and an even cheaper pack of sad little crayons. “You have a good time coloring while you wait. Maybe your daddy can help you.”

“He’s real good at coloring,” Not-Abigail said, laying it on thick. The desk sergeant shut the door with one last smile, and Not-Abigail wasted no time flipping the book open. “I’m gonna draw, like, a million dicks in here.”

Declan snapped his fingers in front of its little face. “Hey. Focus.” He lifted his head and did a quick sweep of the room. “No cameras in here. There might be one behind the glass—“ he

nodded toward the not-even-trying-to-hide-it two-way mirror — “but since this isn’t an interrogation, it’s probably not running if there is.” He saw a clock on the wall. Christ, almost 7:30 at night already. Planning this out had taken way too long.

From the back of his pants, Declan fished out the flat leather bundle he’d unearthed at the bottom of his toolbox under the passenger seat in the truck. He brushed the last of the dust off it and laid it open flat on the table. His lockpicks, ranked and filed, glimmered up at him like old friends with bad baggage. He slid it across the table to Not-Abigail, who made a face at them.

“Are they iron?” it asked, hovering one small hand over them. “I ... have a problem with iron.”

“Stainless steel,” Declan said. “Does that count?”

Not-Abigail poked at one experimentally, then touched it longer. “Guess not,” it said. “You really know how to use all this crap?”

“They’re not crap,” Declan said, feeling a protective twinge. “This is the good shit. Industrial-grade, compared to the legit stuff I use. So be careful with them. Don’t, you know, stick them anywhere disgusting.”

“Wasn’t going to,” the girl-shaped thing said, “but now—“ Declan shot it a look, and it put its little hands up in appeasement.

Declan shifted his weight away from it, scratching at the side of his neck with one hand. “So how does this work, this thing you were talking about? It’s not gonna make me like Mink, is it?”

Not-Abigail shook its head and prodded at the assortment of picks. “You could use these things to stab a guy, right? But that’s not what they’re specifically for.” When it saw Declan’s

hesitation, it grabbed his free wrist and tugged. “Come on, come on. Your constable’s gonna be here any minute. You want to go through with this, we should do it quick.”

Declan exhaled, feeling a little shaky. He nodded, swallowed, and at Not-Abigail’s prompting, sat down in the crappy plastic chair next to her.

“Just relax,” it said. “Close your eyes.” In the dark behind his eyelids, he heard it moving, felt its hand reach toward his ear and touch the cartilage there gently and slide something in, like a little gust of air and dust —

— *Musk and scales and fur and oh, God, what was that flapping, meaty noise* —

Declan’s eyes jerked open and he damn near fell out of his chair. Not-Abigail laughed, a perfect replica of his daughter’s giggle when someone fell down or split their pants in a movie or something else she found unstoppably funny. “What the hell?” Declan spat. “What the hell was that?”

“Your face!” Not-Abigail said, trying to catch its breath. “Oh, man. Beautiful. Relax. That was just a little piece of a three-way I had one time with a satyr and a naiad.” Declan turned his head to glower at her and — it was almost like refocusing your eyes from something close to something far away — suddenly got a flash of himself, stubble on his chin and dark bags under his eyes, as if from the other creature’s view.

“Damn,” he said, wonder sweeping away most of his aggravation. “That’s — that’s something.” He tried it out a few times, shifting focus.

“It works both ways,” Not-Abigail said, and then, with its mouth shut, added *And like this, too*, clear as a bell in Declan’s brain as if he’d thought it himself.

Okay, hold up three fingers, Declan thought back, and Not-Abigail complied — and then

lowered the flanking ones until only her middle finger remained upraised.

“If you’re done screwing around, boost me up,” it said, clambering on the table. Declan stood, hefted it — Abigail’s weight, familiar and comforting — to the drop ceiling, where it pushed up one of the white acoustic tiles and crawled up into the space above. “You sure you know where I should go?”

“Not exactly,” Declan said. “But it’s gonna be near the center of the building. Look for cables for security cameras. You’ll have to do some kind of whammy on them.”

“Heh,” it snorted. “Cameras. Don’t worry about cameras. They don’t bother with me.”

“Lucky you,” Declan grimaced. Not-Abigail started to crawl off into the dark and he shot a hand up and grabbed its ankle. “You’re not gonna get the box, take it back, and leave me here, are you?”

“And how would you stop me if I did?” it shot back. Then, after a beat, it grinned at him. “Relax. It has to be you giving it back. The rules and all. So you’re stuck with me.”

Declan nodded. “All right. Just hurry your ass up and get back soon.” He wedged the tile back into place, sat back down, and dusted the crumbs of white tile off the tabletop and into his jacket pocket. The faintest of scuffing noises moved across the ceiling above and out of earshot.

When he shifted focus, he could see through Not-Abigail’s eyes as it moved through the dark of the drop ceiling, the surroundings seeming to glimmer strangely despite the absence of light. For a moment, he got so lost in this that he didn’t quite hear the door to the interview room open. Someone called him by name, and he snapped back to his own eyes and turned to see the detective from earlier, the crime dog in the dark suit, standing in front of the closing door, an open manila file in his hands.

Up close he looked the part even more: face clean shaven as if he'd sandpapered it, hair trimmed neatly to the contours of his scalp, every angle of his face as clean and sharp as a chef's set of knives. "Sorry to startle you," Detective Serwer said. He looked around the room, saw the green backpack. "Dolores said you had a little girl in here."

"I couldn't get a sitter," Declan said, "My daughter said she had to go to the bathroom. I told her to stop by the vending machine on the way back, so, you know, that could take a while. Is that all right, Detective?"

A little smile quirked the corner of Serwer's mouth, as if that much of an expression were all the regulations allowed. "In a police station? I think she'll be pretty safe."

Locker room. Jackpot! came the thing's voice in Declan's head, along with a feeling of glee that seemed to tickle the back of his skull.

Quit fucking around and keep looking, he thought back, rubbing his fingers over his forehead to disguise the twitching in his face.

"Let's talk about you for a little while, Declan." He waved the file a little before setting it gently down on the table, and perching himself on the edge beside it. "I hope you don't mind that I pulled your jacket."

Declan shrugged. "I'd be surprised if you didn't. Hope you had a good laugh over all the stupid shit I pulled back in the day."

Another almost-smile from Serwer. "I'll confess I didn't make you for a master criminal." He sat up a little straighter, pulled a notebook from his jacket pocket. Small talk over. "So you say you have information in the homicide on Palmdale Avenue?"

"Not much," Declan said. "But maybe it'll help you."

He changed focus for a second and smelled dust in his nose, saw a little hand pushing aside the corner of an acoustic tile to peer down into a gray, fluorescent-lit concrete room, metal industrial shelves stretching to the ceiling. *There you go*, he thought, and felt the responding *No shit, Sherlock*, settle around his shoulders like a piss-soaked blanket.

“You were saying?” Serwer cut in, and Declan blinked back to the inside of his own head. The detective frowned at him. “You look rough.”

“Just thinking about my little girl,” Declan said. “I know she’s safe, like you said, but I let her out of my sight and I get ... I dunno, distracted. Worried. You got any kids?”

Serwer’s mouth tightened a little, and his eyes flitted to the cinderblock wall. “Not yet,” he said, distant just for a moment, as if he’d stepped out of his skin and left it sitting there. “Hoping to, though.” Then he stepped back in. “So. About the homicide.”

“I think I knew the victim,” Declan said. He nodded at the file on the table. “You know I used to be in the life. She reached out to me through an old acquaintance. Wanted me to do a job for her.”

Problem, the thing spoke in his head. Declan got a flash of a wire cage over the front of a shelf. Behind it, the box, tantalizing, in a plastic evidence bag. Attached to the door, a massive fuck-you sort of padlock.

Declan had to force himself not to smile. *OK, get out the picks*, he thought.

“She give you a name?” Serwer asked, scribbling earnestly.

Declan shook his head. “She was smarter than that. Total confidentiality.”

“Then how’d you know to come here? How do you know she’s the victim?” Serwer’s keen gaze seemed to poke him hard in the breastbone.

“She offered me the job in person,” Declan said. “I got a kid, my business isn’t doing great, I figured it couldn’t hurt to listen. Maybe the job was legal enough to take without getting me in,” and here he paused, lifting his hands, “all of this. Anyway, she had this green getup on. Strangest thing I ever saw. TV news showed the gurney coming out of the house, I saw the hand under the sheet. Same weird-ass lace Madonna glove she had.”

Server nodded, as if that checked out, and fixed Declan with a dry, stonefaced gaze. “And you figured it was your civic duty to come running to us, with your kid, and report it?”

Declan deliberately looked away. Let the detective feel like the alpha male. “Like I said, my business could use a boost. I figured maybe there might be a reward or something.”

Server waited a half-second, until apparently what Declan said cleared his internal bullshit detector. Then he nodded, and lifted his pencil over the notepad again. “What was this job she offered you?”

I can’t fucking do this, Not-Abigail thought at him, steel-wool frustration bristling and scratching around the thought. He saw tiny hands fumbling with the picks, jammed awkwardly into the lock.

Calm down, he thought back. *Press down along the bottom with the flat one. Press up with the curved one against the top until you feel each tumbler click. Here. I’ll help you.*

“She wanted a box,” Declan said. “A carved wooden box in some old wreck of a house.” His hands rested on the table, but he could feel the picks in his fingers, felt the first tumbler click. Server asked for the address, and Declan gave it to him, fingers twitching slightly, working the second tumbler like a bra clasp on a high school date.

“Did she say why she wanted the box?” Server asked, pencil scratching.

“She barely said that she wanted it at all,” Declan said.

“And you, good citizen that you are, turned down this job, of course?” Serwer said dryly.

“I have a kid,” Declan replied. “She needs me. That’s why I went legit in the first place. I’m not exactly itching to go back inside.”

“Mmmhmm,” Server grunted, skeptically, as Declan felt the third tumbler give, through phantom fingertips. “So this contact who set you up with the job, you feel like sharing anything about him?”

“Sure,” Declan said. “He’s an asshole.” Declan told him about Mink and the diner and the phone number on Mink’s card. Let that fucking bridge burn. See him call Ms. Nayland now, with all those people in the diner ready to talk about what they saw him do.

“One last thing,” Serwer said, setting down the notepad on the table, and slipping the pencil back in his inside jacket pocket. Declan popped the fourth tumbler and looked up. “Have you discussed this with anyone else we might need to interview? The girl’s mother, anyone?”

Declan shook his head no, and there went the fifth tumbler. His eyes landed on the detective’s notebook, resting on the table.

It read: EGGS MILK BREAD COFFEE KALE TOFU(?) WINE

“Oh,” said Declan quietly. “Oh, shit.”

Then Serwer’s fist smashed him in the ribs, and he crashed sideways to the cold concrete floor, cheap plastic chair clattering, the noise echoing off the walls.

Eight

Hey! Not-Abigail popped in his head. *What the shit?* Serwer's foot dug into Declan's solar plexus and Declan doubled around it, the whole world reduced to a blooming pain from his midsection, and the soft leather and nubby stitching on the heel of Serwer's shoe.

Forget it, Declan thought around the pain. *The lock. Get the lock.*

Serwer tugged his foot free and paced away, leaving Declan gasping, all but paralyzed by the gut kick. "I've met some really stupid shitbirds in my day," he heard the detective say, far away, as he heard the bolt on the interview room door lock, "but you are the absolute dumbest. I feel sorry for you, I actually do."

"You and her," Declan managed to bleat out, remembering the other car waiting back in the shadows at the meet. "You and her." His phantom fingers struggled with the sixth tumbler. Felt like the last one. So close.

"I actually have to thank you," Serwer's voice said, moving closer. "You made our lives a lot easier. Unsolved homicides, they leave a loose end. But when a guy with armed robbery on his rap sheet walks right into the fucking precinct, sits down in an interview room, and says he

knew the victim and she hired him for a job?” Hands grabbed Declan’s jacket, lifted him up, then slammed him hard against the concrete wall, fresh pain lancing through him from head to toe.

“It’s practically Christmas.”

Declan balled a fist, managed to lift it trembling, looked up to see Serwer smiling at him. The detective cocked his head, pushing a spot on the side of his jaw toward Declan. “Oh, please. Do it. Right here on the jaw. I can add assaulting an officer. It’ll look magnificent.” Declan’s fist dropped, and Serwer’s knee rammed up and into his stomach, doubling Declan over.

He sagged against the wall and back down to the floor, knees and one shoulder and the side of his face against the concrete. “You love her,” he said through lips mashed against the floor, his whole midsection barbed with pains with each small movement he made. Keep him talking. Just a little longer. Through Not-Abigail’s fingers he felt that last tumbler just about to give.

“I do,” Serwer said. “Just like you love that little girl of yours. And maybe that ex-wife you’ve got listed in the interview sheets from your record. She seems nice.” He nudged Declan’s ribs with the toe of his shoe, and even that tiny motion was enough to send Declan spasming to the floor. *Goddammit lost the feel of the tumbler come on you bastard open.* “Which is why I’m going to sit you up now, give you a pad and paper, and you’re going to write out a full confession to our victim’s murder. Don’t worry, it’ll be easy. I’ll give you all the details. We worked them out together. She’s got a hell of an imagination.”

Deep in his mind, under layer upon layer of pain, and through the air up into the ceiling and down into the evidence room and through the fingers of the thing wearing his daughter’s skin, Declan felt the inside of the lock move. Just one last motion. Just —

It's open! Not-Abigail's excitement skittered through him, a chain reaction of popping corn. *Sit tight*, it thought to him. *I got the box. I'm coming back.*

"No," said Declan. He only realized he'd said it aloud when Serwer gave him another kick. He lolled onto his back, clutching his stomach.

"You don't get to say no, shitbird." The detective loomed over him, a dark shape, a distant voice.

No, Declan thought instead. *Get out. Take the box back. Get her back for her mother. Just go.*

The rules — Not-Abigail said in his head, and he blocked the rest of the thought with a spike of urgency.

You tell them, Declan said. *Talk to them. Tell them I made you do it. This fucker's going to kill me* —

Another kick lurched his organs halfway out of his guts, and he felt something trickle away out of his ear. Now he was alone in his own head again, feeling strangely small.

"Okay," he gasped, holding up one hand. "Okay." Serwer's shadow retreated. Declan rolled over, slowly, one hand around his midsection, and put the other hand under him to rise. He looked up and made his eyes focus. The detective was straightening his collar, sweat glistening on his forehead. "They have my little girl," Declan said. "They took her. The ones I stole the box from."

Serwer's face softened a little. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I actually am. I — wait, wait. Your little girl?" The detective picked up the little green backpack from the table and shook it toward Declan. "So who came in with—"

A snowfall of white acoustic tile broke over his head, and Declan saw Not-Abigail drop onto his shoulders, limbs too long, fingers too sharp, tendons creaking as it got him in a chokehold. Even as he struggled, Not-Abigail breathed out a little cloud of dancing light, caught it between two fingers, and jammed it in Serwer's ear.

The detective couldn't quite scream out loud, not through the hand Not-Abigail clamped over his mouth. He did it with his whole body instead, his torso jolt-stiffening, limbs seeming to scramble in independent directions. He sagged against the wall, rubber, staggered cartoonishly away, and dropped in a pile on the floor in front of Declan. When Not-Abigail climbed off him, Declan saw Serwer's eyes wide and glassy, his lips moving, terrified whimpers trickling out of him.

"Jesus," Declan said, as Not-Abigail popped its elbow joint back into proper little-girl dimensions. He sucked air through his teeth, every breath feeling like a fresh round of bruises. "What was that?"

"The worst thing I ever saw," Not-Abigail said, gazing at the detective for a long second. Then it came and helped Declan up, stronger than it looked. "Crap, you're heavy. Come on, stand up straight. Try not to look like you had the shit kicked out of you." When it had him upright again, it climbed back onto the table, hopped up to the hole in the ceiling tile, and brought down the evidence bag with the box inside it. It stuffed both into the green backpack, then shouldered the bag and put on its best innocent Abigail face.

"You didn't have to come back," Declan said, measuring the words out between breaths. On the floor, Serwer twitched. Declan could smell piss coming from him.

"Did so," Not-Abigail said. "You may not care about the rules, but Himself does. And he

doesn't give a shit about heroic gestures. Now tell me you can walk."

On the way out, one slow step at a time, Declan saw the desk sergeant, Dolores. "Hey, your detective needs help," he said. "He took my statement, said I could go, and then he just — I dunno, he had like some kinda seizure. He looks bad off. I've been trying to find someone to—"

But she was already off and running, too alarmed to notice the man whose little girl seemed to not so much be clinging to him out of shyness as holding him upright.

Nine

The woods seemed to swallow Declan's headlights whole — just a narrow pool of dirt path and thick tree limbs sliding by out the windshield, and occasionally the luminescent eyes of something that dashed back into the trees.

"How much farther?" Declan asked. The dashboard clock read just past 3 a.m. Declan didn't know when sunrise was, and he didn't want to find out.

"Just keep going," Not-Abigail said in the passenger seat, toying with his thermos, waving it around like a sword. "We'll make it."

"I've been to this park before," Declan said. "It's not this big. Like, five blocks across at the most. We should've come out the other side hours ago." He'd been keeping an eye on the gauges. The clock had kept running, but the gas needle and the odometer hadn't budged since they'd turned from the park's parking lot onto a road marked RESTRICTED, over a fallen chain that someone had unlatched between the gateposts.

"Do you want to get there or not?" Not-Abigail replied. It held the thermos out at an angle from its lap and snickered, pivoting it around.

Declan grimaced and looked away, at the box resting between the seats of the truck. Even from here, it gave off warmth — gentle, like a fresh-baked loaf of bread. He didn't mind; the heat felt good against his side, as if it were soothing his bruises. He'd taken a beating or two like this in prison, enough to know what he'd feel like in the morning, when the last of the adrenalin and the endorphins were gone. That was OK. He could take that. Just as long as he got her back.

The blue-white light from the dash outlined the inlays and channels on the box and glimmered off the clasp. "Doesn't look like much," Declan said, looking up from it to check the road. "Not worth my daughter."

"The box doesn't matter," Not-Abigail said, tapping out a beat on its lid. "I mean, sure, Himself likes the look of it. But he really wants what's in it."

"Which is?" Declan asked. Not-Abigail gave him a do-I-look-stupid face.

"See?" it frowned, smacking him on the arm hard enough to send pain rippling through Declan's blows and bruises. "Every time I start to think you're not a total asshat, you pull some shit like that."

"Not a total asshat, huh?" Declan almost laughed in spite of himself, and the pain. "I'll put that in my Christmas card."

The thing in his daughter's skin fell silent for a moment, still tapping on the box lid. "I mean it," Not-Abigail said. "You didn't snivel. Didn't try to cheat. Didn't try to shoot me or stab me or toss me in a fireplace. I swear, one guy. Actual fucking lit fireplace."

"Would it have worked?" Declan snorted.

"No," Not-Abigail said indignantly. "But it still hurts. The way you mudds smell when you're burning — when your *hair* is burning. Fucking disgusting. Anyway, I'm saying you're —

the term doesn't translate, and if I tried to speak the Proper Tongue your sad little tissue-paper brain would probably start bleeding. Best equivalent for it is, you stand up."

Declan didn't know what to say at first. "I shouldn't have even fucking listened to Mink. Gone and met with the woman. I knew it was dumbass and desperate and I did it anyway." He clenched and unclenched his fingers on the steering wheel, feeling the knuckles pop. "Just wish they'd taken me and left her out of it."

Not-Abigail chortled, amused. "The fuck would Himself do with your sorry ass? I get sad just looking at you. Besides, he takes you, how does that get him his box back? Himself — how do I put this — he cares less about the story's told, and more about how it ends." Then it sat up straight, sniffed the air. It punched Declan hard in the arm, enough to make him yelp. "Hey. Hey hey hey. Do the thing, mash the foot thing, stop the wagon."

Declan jammed on the brakes, lurching forward against his seatbelt in a fresh tide of pain that he barely noticed. "Is this it? Are we here?"

"We're close," it said. "Sit tight. I gotta check it's the right path. We're in the old woods now. These things get iffy." It opened the door, letting in wet green night air, unbuckled its seatbelt and climbed down out of the cab, leaving the thermos on the seat.

Declan killed the motor and sat there, looking at the dirt and pebbles in the headlights. The drone of insects filled the cab, and here and there in the distance, some night bird called out. His stomach felt tight, his heart pounding. He thought of Abigail asleep in a forest like this, curled up on a moss-bed in a hollow log, and flowers all around her.

Then a little girl's scream came out of the darkness. "Declan *look out*—"

A swift sharp crack like a breaking branch rang out, and the windshield and his driver's

side window spangled into constellation cracks. As Declan ducked he saw the glistening outline of the hole where the bullet had gone through. He fell over the box, shielding it with his body, the warmth of it spreading up through his shirt. Way down deep inside it, it seemed to be throbbing gently, like a heartbeat.

Silence again, just Declan's own breathing. Then a voice, familiar: "That was just a warning. I don't want to hurt you. I just want the box."

Slowly, Declan raised his head, peered through the ruined windshield. He saw the splintered image of the woman in green in his headlights, about twenty feet from the truck. In one hand, ungloved, she held a fat snub-nosed revolver toward him, the barrel lightly wisping in the cool night air. With her other arm, she had Not-Abigail in a chokehold, something half-round and rust-brown held up by its face.

"Just fucking run!" Not-Abigail shouted, struggling.

"This deep in the woods," the woman called out, "you start running, you might never stop."

"How's your boyfriend?" Declan shouted back. "The detective?"

"I can fix him," she said, her voice cool and level, refusing to take the bait. "Given enough time. I know some things. More than you."

"Don't listen to this stupid —" Not-Abigail began, and then a scream cut off the rest of the words. Declan saw it now — the woman held a horseshoe, old and weathered, and where she pressed it to Not-Abigail's face, the skin sizzled and began to blister. Cold iron.

"Listen to me," the woman said. "These are your fates. One: You stay there until the sun rises. Your little girl's gone forever. And sooner or later I shoot you anyway and take the box."

Two: You run for it. Maybe I shoot you. Maybe I don't, and you somehow figure out where to go, and you give back the box. But this thing right here—“

She held the horseshoe to Not-Abigail's cheek again, and it wailed in a register that started at human and climbed beyond it, his daughter's face distorting in pain, the features individually trying to crawl away from the iron across the contours of skin and bone.

“This thing is their property, too, just like the box,” the woman continued. “They'll want it back, just like the box. And what do you think happens to your little girl if you fail to return every last scrap of their property? Who do you think they'll take from you this time, in recompense?”

“These are pretty shitty options,” Declan shouted.

“I haven't gotten to three yet,” the woman said. “Three is you get out of that truck and you walk over to me very slowly, and you give me that box. And then I disappear and you go live your life. That is the very best deal you're going to get.”

“Run, you stupid piece of—!” This time the scream from Not-Abigail sounded even worse, and when the woman took the horseshoe away, Declan saw the little thing go limp in her arms.

He felt the box beneath him, felt whatever was inside it ripple gently, tidally.

“Well?” came the woman's voice, after a long, impatient silence. “Time is not exactly on your side here.”

“All right!” Declan shouted. “All right, goddammit, I'm coming out! Don't shoot!”

He opened the driver's door slowly, moved by inches out of the truck, holding out the box first, then his arm, then his head — bracing for the shot but it didn't come — and finally set

his boots on the dirt track. She stood bright emerald in the truck's lights, the soft night breeze billowing her dress and the veil on her hat.

Not-Abigail dangled in her arms, an ugly U-shape of blisters slowly fading from its cheek. "Stupid," it wheezed at him, its eyes sad and angry. "Fucking stupid."

With his free hand he adjusted the bulk of his jacket where he'd zipped it up. "You knew," he said to the woman. "You knew if I stole this for you that they'd take something from me."

"Better you than me," she said flatly, and beckoned with the gun.

"Did you know they'd take my little girl?" he asked. "Six years old. Looks sort of like that thing you've got there." He stopped, his voice breaking, and forced himself to keep speaking. "She's a great kid. She's amazing. You got any kids?"

The pistol wavered, but only just. "I will," the woman said. "Once I have the box I will."

The idea crept over Declan in a slow, frigid tide. "What did you trade them for? That's what this is, right?" He shook the box gently, watched her muscles twitch reflexively. "This is ... what? Your future?"

"It's a possibility," the woman said, more softly. "I didn't know. I was young and I didn't think — I had prosperity in return and it was enough, for a while."

"And then you met Serwer," Declan said.

The hat, the veil, the woman nodded. "And that wasn't enough anymore," she said. "I had to get it back."

"No matter who got hurt," Declan said. He stopped about ten feet from her and slowly, slowly put down the box, then stepped away from it with his hands raised.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “I really am. I just need this. You’re a father. You know.”

“Let it go,” Declan said, motioning to Not-Abigail. “Come on, Jesus, let it go! Look at it. You hurt it enough. It can barely move.”

The woman let Not-Abigail slide from her arms, and still Declan’s heart lurched when it tumbled to the ground like a bag of sticks.

They did a dance then, him and the woman, each moving one slow sideways step at a time toward the things they’d traded. Declan knelt down and scooped up Not-Abigail in his arms. It looked up at him through half-closed eyes; Declan could see red lines, like infection, blooming from the U-mark on its cheek, only now starting to retreat back to the source.

“Fucking idiot,” it rasped to him.

“Where’s the path?” he breathed to it, lower than a whisper. “Show me with your eyes. Where do we have to go?”

The woman crouched, her gun still on Declan, and turned the box toward her with her other hand. She reached for the clasp.

Not-Abigail’s arm flopped against the front of Declan’s jacket, and through the fabric struck something that made a dull metal *tang*. Its eyes widened, and then flitted over toward a hollow in the thick stand of the trees off the main road.

The woman opened the box.

Declan ran into the woods, Not-Abigail in his arms, pursued by a scream of pure heartbreak.

Somewhere behind him, gunshots. Bark exploding off a tree just to his right. Not-Abigail heavy in his arms, all his aches and pains pecking at him in a swarm, digging deep into the

muscle. And inside his jacket the thermos, filled with what he'd emptied out of the box from the concealment of the car — warm and golden and singing softly like a lullaby, so strange to behold that even now he was only half-sure he hadn't dreamed it.

"Which way?" he panted, stumbling through the dark. He could hear the woman crashing through the brush behind him, cursing as the branches tore and snagged at her dress.

"There," Not-Abigail rasped, and ahead in the moonlight he saw a clearing and a ring of something in the grass and the dead leaves. Mushrooms, sprouting in a circle. He leapt over the edge of it and tumbled into the center, blind to the pain, holding Not-Abigail tight as the ground knocked the breath from him.

He lay there, panting, Not-Abigail sprawled out beside him and the thermos softly keeping time against his chest, and in the pale silver light saw the woman in green stumble into the clearing, matted and ragged. She raised the gun to end him.

Behind her the trees began to move. No, not the trees, but tall shadows like them, moving in graceful cadence, stealing up to her. The night plucked the gun from her hand. The deep of the woods twined around her ankles and she turned and her mouth opened wide. The forest pulled her back into itself, and Declan heard her calling out, begging, asking to strike a deal. And as the last of her screams died out, Declan saw yellow eyes glancing back at him from the dark, cold and incurious, before they looked away and vanished.

He lay back against the soft grass and took the thermos from his jacket and planted it on the earth like a flag of conquest. Beside him he heard Not-Abigail breathing softly, in the cadence of his daughter's own sleep, and he shut his eyes just for one

Dew on his face. Declan opened his eyes to a sky gray-blue and pink at the edges, just

enough light to see by. He sat up from the grass, stiff and cold. No Not-Abigail. His thermos, empty, the cap unscrewed and yawning toward the sky. When he moved he felt no pain; he lifted his shirt and saw no bloom of bruises on his stomach or sides. The inside of his wrist itched, and he pulled back the sleeve of his jacket. His tattoo had changed; the horseshoe pointed the other way around. Holding the luck in.

When he stood up Declan could see his truck just a little ways through the trees, on the dirt path. It had seemed farther in the darkness. And as he reached the truck, he saw the gate with the chain, the parking lot, the picnic area, maybe a quarter-mile distant down the private road. His windshield was still a wreck; grimacing, he knocked out the safety glass and set it down in the truck bed. He went back to open the driver's door and brush the busted glass off the seat and in the shattered window he saw a reflection move.

He turned and saw her there, off in the woods in the crepuscular light, seeming to appear and vanish as she wandered between one tree and the next. Her hat sat crookedly, her gown torn, the lace of her one last glove unraveled.

"I know it was here," she kept saying, walking behind the trunk of one tree and emerging from behind another ten feet distant. "Two rights, then a left, then a — no, it was two lefts, then a right — I know it was here." The words stumbled, descended into a sob. "I know it was. I know I knew the path." She didn't seem to see Declan. She passed behind another tree, and then she was gone, unless he held himself very still. Then he could hear someone shouting, shouting, far off in the woods.

Declan climbed into the truck, started the engine, and threw it into reverse.

Ten

He stood in the doorway to her bedroom and hesitated, heart hammering at his chest. That was her little head sleeping, turned to the wall. And there was Trouble at the foot of the bed, tail-tip twitching. But what if—

“Daddy?” She stirred and rolled over, same pajamas she’d worn the night he lost her.

“Daddy, I had a bad dream.”

He walked over and sat on the edge of her bed, smoothing away her mussed hair, and kissed her on the forehead. “You were sick for a little while. But you’re better now. You’re gonna be OK.” She sat up and put her arms around his neck, and it felt better than anything Declan had ever known.

“Monsters are real, Daddy,” she whispered into his shoulder — the whole and the last of what she would ever say about where she’d gone or what she’d done in that missing day and night.

“Yeah, baby girl,” Declan said, and squeezed her tightly. “But some of them aren’t so bad.”

After that, things went along pretty much like they had. Declan didn't win the lottery or find out he had a rich uncle or any stupid shit like that. But it seemed like he had just a little more luck. Just the last bit he'd needed. Business picked up. Started getting regular customers. He had enough, finally, to cut Sarah a check for all those loans she'd never been expecting to get back. Enough to get comfortably off the bank's spit list, at least.

Sarah called him over early one morning. Asked him to change the locks. He saw men's clothes in a cardboard box by the door, empty spaces where pictures had hung, a fist-sized hole in the plaster of the wall. Not a mark on her, thank God. He finished up in half an hour, told her it was no charge, gave her two sets of keys for the front and the back.

As he was putting his tools back in the truck she came out the front door. He thought maybe he'd forgotten something inside. But she put one set of the new keys in his palm and closed his fingers around them, and then stood back with her arms folded, looking a little uncertain.

"Hang on to those," she said. "Just in case."

And Abigail? Abigail was fine. Normal, healthy, happy kid.

But some nights, for years after, passing by her door on his way to bed, Declan would hear her singing in her sleep — high, strange, melancholy tunes like none he'd ever heard before.

And all the rest of those nights, toss and turn though he might, Declan wouldn't sleep a wink.

* * *